

Why is walking in the forest so good for you?

The image is a screenshot of a website. At the top right, there is a "Login" button. Below it is a search bar with the text "Autos Homes Careers Classified Obituaries Postmedia" and a magnifying glass icon. The date "Friday, November 25, 2016" is displayed. A weather widget for "Drayton Valley, AB" shows a temperature of "-2°" and a small icon with a question mark. A blue navigation bar contains the following links: HOME, NEWS, SPORTS, ENTERTAINMENT, and LIFE. Below the navigation bar, there is a link for "Editorial Letters Column" and a large grey box containing the text "OPINION COLUMN" and "Why is walking".

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HOME NEWS SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT LIFE

Editorial Letters Column

OPINION
COLUMN

Why is
walking

in the
forest so
good for
you?

Submitted by
Peter
Lee

Tuesday, November
15, 2016 10:46:24
MST AM

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Near Drayton Valley
are a number of
fantastic walking
trails in Eagle Point
Provincial Park.



These trails traverse



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the many kinds of forests that cover the park. Wildlife is abundant. There is lots to see. But why not just go for a walk in the forest for the sake of walking in the woods?

Why is just walking in the forest so good for you?

In Japan, they call it shinrin-yoku – literally, “forest bathing.” People around the world have an intuitive sense of the restorative power of natural environments. The question is: Why?

Scientists have advanced a wide range of theories about the specific physical and mental benefits walking in forests can provide, ranging from clean air and lack of noise pollution to the

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apparent immune-boosting effects of a fine mist of “wood essential oils.” But the most powerful benefits may result from the way trees and birds and sunsets gently tug – but rarely grab – at our attention.

In one study the researchers found that volunteers suffering from depression who took a 50-minute walk in a woodland park improved their cognition, meaning our attention, memory, judgement and ability to reason, compared to those who took a walk through city streets.

The explanation lies in the distinction between two types of attention: “voluntary,” in which we consciously focus on something; and “involuntary,” in which something grabs our attention.

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The ability to direct voluntary attention is crucial in daily life but it's easily fatigued. Going for a walk in the forest gives voluntary attention a break, since your mind has a chance to wander aimlessly and be engaged – involuntarily but gently – by your surroundings.

In a forest, you're away from loud noises and distractions and air pollution. It tends to be less crowded and it also has interesting stimulation to look at, which captures your attention automatically. Walking in the forest reduces stress and helps with depression.

Another suggested but unusual benefit is that trees emit a fine mist of health-giving "wood

essential oils.” In a series of shinrin-yoku studies in Japan, the researchers have reported that walking for two hours in a forest enhances immune function, reduces levels of stress hormones and lowers blood pressure, compared to similar walks in downtown Tokyo.

There are other health benefits of going for a walk in a forest. It can make your brain work better. Walking through a forest or green area with trees has been found to aid memory and learning. Children who regularly play in forests are better at many cognitive skills but also have better manual dexterity and can assess risks better than those kids educated in an enclosed space.

And walking in a forest can help us get in shape.

Four hundred fifty-five years ago, Shakespeare was well aware of the benefits of walking for health when Prospero said in *The Tempest*: “A turn or two I’ll walk To still my beating mind.”

The Father of National Parks, John Muir, wrote of hiking in nature: “Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.”

So, what are you waiting for? That trail through the forest in Eagle Point Provincial Park is just crying out for a visit from you!

By Peter Lee,
Executive Director,
Eagle Point/Blue
Rapids Provincial
Park (Thanks to Alex
Hutchinson of the
Global and Mail)



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