How Spending Time in Nature Can Improve Pain and Stress

by KATARINA ZULAK

Forest Bathing and Chronic Pain: Benefits of a Green Prescription

Sometimes it all gets to be too much. Your pain flares up just as you try to fall asleep, night after night, and by the end of the week, you are an exhausted, emotional muddle.

Or you carefully plan ahead and pace yourself so you'll be able to attend an event, just have to cancel *again* because of a flare-up. Or you wait months to see a specialist, have your appointment canceled and rebooked three times, only to find out they know less about your condition than you do!

The reality is that living with chronic pain can sometimes be overwhelming.

There are lots of ways to de-stress, some better than others – from binge-watching to meditation. Recently, I was surprised to learn that one of the most effective and healthful techniques is to get out into nature and go *forest bathing.*

"Forest bathing" is the English translation of the Japanese term 'Shinrin-yoku,' which refers to the practice of immersing yourself in the sensory experience of being in a forest. It's the opposite of walking along while glued to your smartphone, oblivious to everything around you.

There are physical benefits derived from being surrounded by trees, and psychological rewards that come from de-stressing in nature.

What Does Science Say About Forest Bathing?

People with widespread chronic pain that participated in a two-day nature therapy program reported a significant increase in pain, along with improvements in immune function, stress levels, and mood.

The mental health benefits that come from forest bathing are similar to the improvement seen from mindfulness meditation. That's because both are practices that focus on staying present, rather than analyzing, worrying or dwelling on the past or future.

Participants of traditional Japanese forest bathing direct their attention towards the sights, sounds, smells and feeling of being in nature.

Studies have found that a measurable increase in relaxation occurs after spending time in the woods, either while walking or sitting: reduction in levels of the stress hormone cortisol, lower pulse rate, and lower blood pressure. But the benefits the people experience go beyond just relaxation.

Immune function has been found to improve after spending time in nature. Living in areas with accessible green spaces also increases the longevity of senior citizens, and reduces the prevalence of chronic diseases.

In fact, you may not even need to go outside to experience the benefits of nature: "gazing at a garden can sometimes speed healing from surgery, infections and other ailments."

Just spending three to five minutes looking at green views with trees, flowers or water can reduce anger, anxiety, and pain, according to studies using healthy participants.

Putting a Green Prescription Into Practice

At one point in my illness journey, fatigue prevented me from leaving the house very often. I began to get a serious case of cabin fever. My husband suggested going for a car ride to a nearby park. When we got there, we just opened the car doors and sat back.

Looking out at all the greenery, listening to the birds singing and the wind in the trees, and feeling the sun on my skin was incredibly restorative. It was a much better place to rest than the couch in my living room.

This has become my go-to strategy. On better days, we look up parks and pathways that are accessible (paved and relatively flat) to walk along. Parks with gardens, easy trails through woodlands, and the nearby beach are all great spots.

In fact, sitting in the backyard is a great practice for anyone who lives in a house. Looking out at a tree during break time is more calming than looking out over a concrete jungle for people in workplaces.

Sitting in a chair by the window, and soaking in the sensory experience of paying attention to the out-of-doors is a great meditation practice: the smells, sounds, and sights.