



Nature Connection — The Pathway to Rediscovering Our True Nature

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On a warm and fresh spring day in 2014 I went for a long wander in nature looking for answers to the question — How can I bring the 'me' I am in nature back into my day-to-day life?

I was approaching my 53rd birthday. I had remarried four years earlier after finding love again. For the first time in my life I had financial security and the freedom to live my life my way. But what was my way? I had no idea.

For years I had been living a life based on the expectations of others. I had been a dutiful son, an older brother, a loving husband, a responsible father, an efficient employee, a good friend, a helpful neighbour and many more roles that forced me to be the person others needed and wanted me to be.

That spring morning in 2014 I was feeling lost, unfulfilled, stressed, irritable and disillusioned. My wife suggested I go for a long walk in nature, with no destination in mind, offering to come and pick me up when I had walked-off my mood. She knows that

when I immerse myself in nature, it not only helps me recharge my energy levels, but also enables me to tap into what we refer to as 'Cosmic Google.'

Connecting with nature is like having my smart phone constantly plugged into a power source with full bars of superfast WiFi on tap. I am at my best. My body is energised and my mind is sharp. I get all my best ideas when I am walking in nature. It is as if I can plug into Cosmic Google and download brilliant ideas and solutions to improve my life. Have you noticed how smart phones are not very 'smart' when they have low battery life and no WiFi signal? Many people in today's busy world seem to be operating on less than 10% battery-life and poor or no WiFi signal.

When I am in nature I am the me I want to be.

Most of my earliest memories are of being outdoors playing in the natural world. I have never felt vulnerable or afraid in the wilderness. For me, being lost in the woods or immersed in nature feels very natural. After leaving school, like most people, I was encouraged to get a job and earn money. I got married and we bought a house. We both worked hard to pay our bills. We had a baby boy, then a baby girl and then another baby girl. So, we moved to a bigger house. We got a larger mortgage. We worked harder, sacrificing our needs for the needs of our growing family.



The next ten years ticked by and I had grown numb. I rarely enjoyed time in nature unless it was with the family. Even when we did pack a picnic and go, we would also pack all the stresses, strains and worries with us too.

All through my early life nature had been my sanctuary. It gave me the clarity, balance and the connection that I often felt was missing from my life. I always felt better and re-energised after a spell in the wilderness. As an adult I had lost sight of this. I had also lost touch with my true self — the intuitive and instinctive parts of my nature. I had been programmed like

reveals some amazing health benefits associated with nature connection. There is now clear evidence suggesting that people who appreciate nature and make the effort to invest time in it are happier, healthier and more creative.

Nature Is a Powerful Antidepressant² – Studies show that walking in nature helps to balance levels of feel-good brain chemicals. Levels of oxygen in the brain are connected to levels of serotonin, the neurotransmitter that affects mood. Too much serotonin makes us irritable and tense; too little serotonin makes us feel depressed. Do you remember a parent

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many people to live in a manufactured world and look for logical and rational solutions for emotional and psychological life problems.

The combination of walking with mindfulness in a natural environment gives me a clarity of thought with which to contemplate the most important questions in my life. On a nature walk I frequently receive insights and guidance in the form of metaphorical life-lessons. These life-lessons in nature are all around us and become more apparent the more present and in tune with nature we become.

Indigenous people know, and many of us in Western culture intuitively sense, that nature is good for us. We should not need scientific evidence to prove it. However, in the modern world, where so many of us are disconnected from the natural world, it is refreshing to find science backing up the importance of nature connection and its positive effects on our modern lifestyle.¹ Science is now helping to confirm what generations of humans have sensed for thousands of years — that forests and natural landscapes heal us. Over the last 10 to 15 years scientists, mainly in Japan and South Korea, have been accumulating data that

saying “chin up” when they caught you feeling down? Or recall a sports coach encouraging players to lift their heads up when they felt they were losing the game? Well new scientific evidence is proving there was something in this notion of raising the head and face. When we are out in a forest and lift our heads and chins up toward the light and cathedral-like canopy of green trees above us, mood-enhancing brain chemicals are released.³ An opportunity is missed when we have our heads down looking at our phones. Recent research has also identified a link between forest soil and levels of serotonin.⁴ New research has also discovered harmless bacteria in woodland soil that act as a natural antidepressant too. So, it looks like getting soil on our hands and faces might cheer us up too.

Nature Can Prevent Heart Disease, Diabetes and Obesity – Walking is one of the healthiest activities around. A couple of hours walking mindfully in nature can burn over 500 calories. It is also much easier on our bodies than running, which puts a lot of pressure on the joints. Walking has been proven to reduce blood pressure and build up levels of fitness, helping to prevent cardio-vascular disease, strengthening our



core, improving stability and aiding weight loss.^{5,6}

Nature Helps Us Recover More Quickly and Feel Less Pain – Looking at nature out of your window can have a beneficial effect on well-being too. A study in Pennsylvania was conducted on patients recovering from a surgical procedure. Some were given a room that looked out onto the wall of a building, while others had a view of nature. The patients looking at nature recovered more quickly and used less painkillers than those looking at a wall.^{7,8}

Nature Gives the Brain Downtime to Recharge⁹ – Our brains use about 20% of all the energy the body produces. This figure can increase by another 10% when we are trying to solve problems. Even when we think we are resting, quite often our minds are consumed by thoughts that worry or annoy us. Our brains need downtime. How often do you find yourself struggling to get to sleep or find yourself waking up in the early hours? Studies show that over 50% of adults in the UK struggle to get to sleep and fail to get enough sleep.¹⁰ Brain science has discovered that in a 'daydream state,' when our minds are free to wander, the brain can rest and recharge. The brain settles into a default mode where the day-to-day mind chatter switches off. Have you ever caught yourself having driven a familiar route and arriving at your destination with no memory of driving there? This is quite a common condition experienced by all of us at some point in life. Sometimes, the brain needs to switch into this autopilot mode to recharge and recover from long periods of over use. I suggest that rather than daydream while you are driving, you access this mindful state, wandering in nature.

Nature can lower blood pressure and reduce stress – Stress and stress-related disease costs the UK economy nearly £6.5b each year, with people taking 10.4 million days off work through stress-related illness. Studies have been carried out in Japan since the 1990s monitoring the effects of a practice I regularly refer to on my Natural Mindfulness walks called Shinrin-yoku, known in the west as Forest Bathing. Field experiments were carried out in 24 forests across Japan,

with 280 participants in total. In each experiment, the scientists would send one half of the participants into the woods and the other half into a city. The next day, those who spent time in the woods would be sent to a city and vice versa. Scientists found that those who spent their day in forests had lower concentrations of the stress hormone cortisol, lower pulse rate and lower blood pressure. In other words, participants were decidedly less stressed when they were in nature as opposed to an urban environment. Further studies have indicated that when participants were mindful of the health benefits of what they were doing, results would increase by up to 25%.

Nature Can Boost Our Immune System¹¹⁻¹³ – It is not only our minds that benefit from time in the woods, but also our bodies. There is widespread evidence that chemicals emitted by plants, known as phytoncides, essential wood oils, can help strengthen the immune systems of humans who are exposed to them. Plants emit phytoncides to protect themselves from insects and rotting. A study from the Nippon Medical School in Tokyo found when humans breathe in these chemicals it increases the number of natural kill cells, a type of white blood cell, in our bodies. Natural kill cells are vital to our immune systems as they hunt and kill tumours or infected cells. Again, adding the element of mindful awareness of the benefits resulted in further increases.

Nature Stimulates Our Intuition and Creativity – Our minds become sharper and more inventive after spending time in nature. One of the most detrimental aspects of modern society is that we spend far too much time on our phones and digital devices. A study from researchers at the University of Kansas and University of Utah revealed that spending time in the great outdoors and away from all the technological distractions makes us more intuitive and creative.¹⁴ The researchers sent 56 participants on hiking excursions ranging from four to six days in the wildernesses. During this time, the participants were not allowed to use any electronic devices. Ultimately, the researchers found the participants showed a 50% increase in creativity, overall attention and problem-



solving abilities after several days in the wilderness, away from technology. Whether this was a direct consequence of exposure to nature or less technology requires further research for more conclusive evidence. However, this still suggests natural environments stimulate the brain in ways civilisation cannot, improving our cognitive abilities and igniting our imaginations. Many of history's greatest pieces of art, literature and music were produced by those who appreciated nature and invested their time in it.

Nature Improves Memory – Several studies show that being out in nature and moving naturally has memory-promoting effects.¹⁵ In a study by the University of Michigan, students were given a brief memory test, then divided into two groups. One group took a walk around an arboretum and the other took a walk down a city street. When the participants returned and did the test again, those who had walked among trees showed an improvement of almost 20% better than the first time.

Nature Can Make Us Less Afraid and Anxious – When we are afraid we often say, “I feel nervous.” We are referring to our sympathetic nervous system which controls the fight-or-flight response all animals have to a perceived danger. There is another part of our autonomic nervous system called the parasympathetic nervous system, which is a much more chilled ‘default’ state of being, sometimes referred to as the digest and rest response. An American study discovered that loud noises trigger our sympathetic nervous

system flooding our body with a stress hormone called cortisol. Recent studies discovered that this can happen even when participants are sleeping, creating cortisol spikes. The good news is that the study also revealed that sounds found in nature like birdsong and the running water, can stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system.^{16, 17} This can even have a relaxing and calming effect on us when the sounds are recorded. You will notice these sounds are regularly used in guided meditation, mindfulness practice and other well-being activities such as yoga.

We all live in an ever-changing, fast-paced, busy world. Over half the population now lives in cities where the noise, pressure, stress and anxiety can overwhelm us. Fewer and fewer of us can find an opportunity to pause, breath, still our overburdened minds and take a moment. It is beginning to look like a combination of nature and mindfulness may hold the key to living healthier, happier and more consciously connected lives. Re-discovering our instinctive and intuitive connection with nature can inspire us all to not only change the way we interact with our natural environment, but to also rediscover a simple way to discover, heal, know and release our own true nature.

On that warm and fresh spring day in 2014 I went for a long wander in nature looking for answers to the question — How can I bring the ‘me’ I am in nature back into my day-to-day life?

It is now almost five years since I wandered and pondered that question. My life-journey has brought me to the realisation that nature gives rise to all life, including our own. Our bodies and minds originated in the natural world and are made up of nature's elements. We are nature and part of something much greater than ourselves — a wonderful awe-inspiring web of life.

Today it may seem that many of us have forgotten this undeniable truth. However, interest in the links between nature and well-being is rapidly growing worldwide. There is a longing for more *Nature*

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Connection. An awakening to a need for belonging. People from all over the world are creating ways to reconnect with nature, to build nurturing communities and create more sustainable ways to live in today's world. Nature Therapy, Forest Therapy, Shinrin-Yoku, Forest Bathing, Ecotherapy, Rewilding and Natural Mindfulness are just a few of the many ways people are being encouraged to form a new relationship with the natural world and their own true nature.

I believe it is time to bring our awareness back to the natural world. Firstly, because experiencing nature can make us happier¹⁸ and healthier. Secondly, practising mindfulness in nature can make us more aware and therefore wiser. The natural world holds one of life's greatest truths — that our well-being is intimately linked with that of the rest of nature, so what we do to nature we ultimately do to ourselves. Thirdly, people protect what they love and a true love of nature will inspire solutions to the creation of a more sustainable world. €



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