Reconnect and Recharge: Nature's Role in Mental Health

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Happy Nature Rx Day

Happy Stress Awareness Day

And….Welcome to a Liminal Space



In nature, nothing is perfect and everything is perfect. Trees can be contorted, bent in weird ways, and they're still beautiful – Alice Walker

In every walk with nature one receives far more than they seek – John Muir

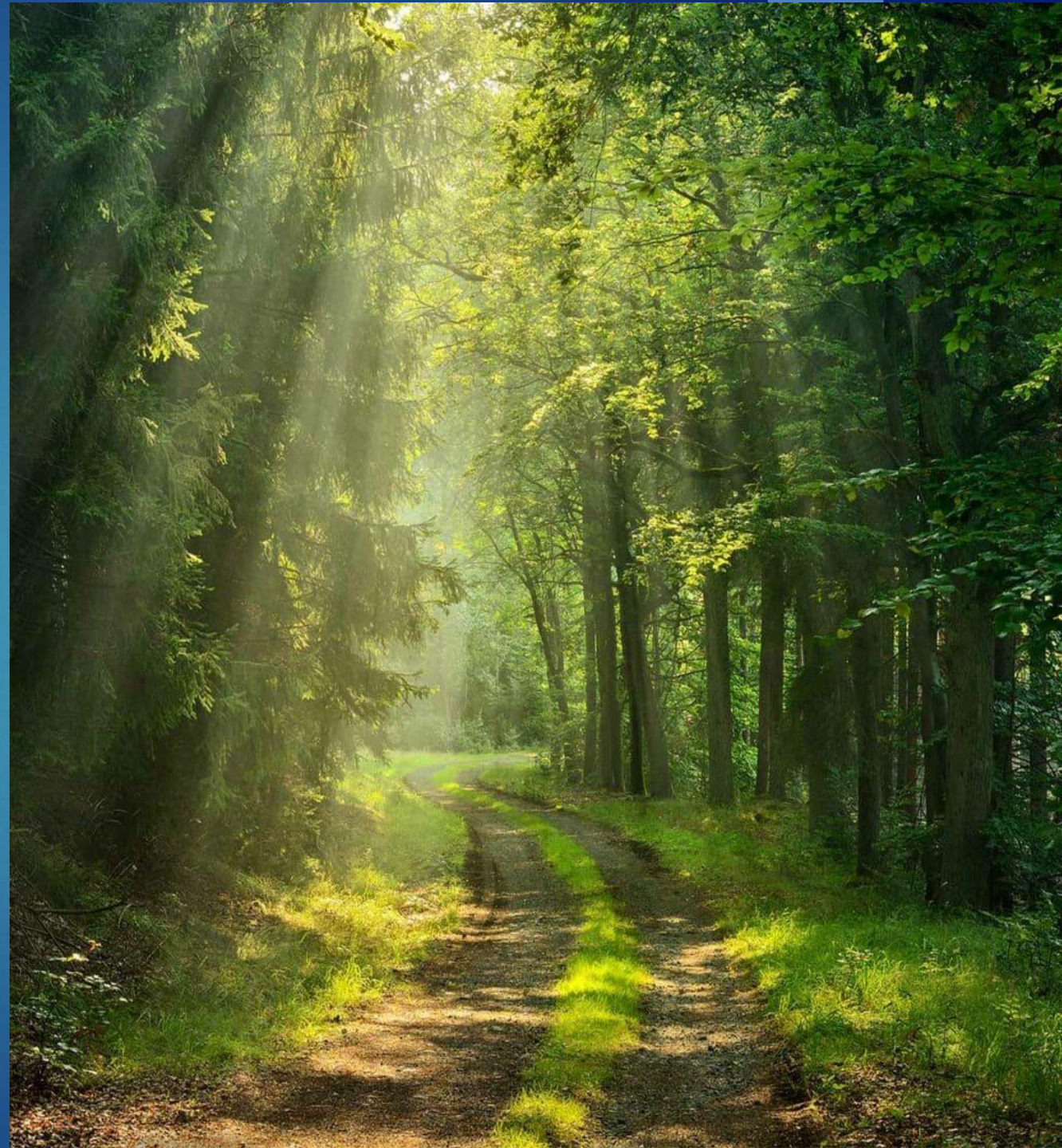
I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree – Joyce Kilmer

To me a lush carpet of pine needles or spongy grass is more welcome than the most luxurious Persian rug – Helen Keller

Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished - Lao Tzu

In all things of nature there is something of the marvelous – Aristotle

But nature loves diversity, it is only the smallness of the human mind or heart that cannot see the beauty in that diversity – Audre Lorde



A memory and a phrase

Think of a moment in nature that stayed with you.

A BIG MOMENT OF AWE

Sand dunes, Rocky Mountains

A SMALL GLIMMER

A flower, leaves changing color, snow on a branch, water sounds

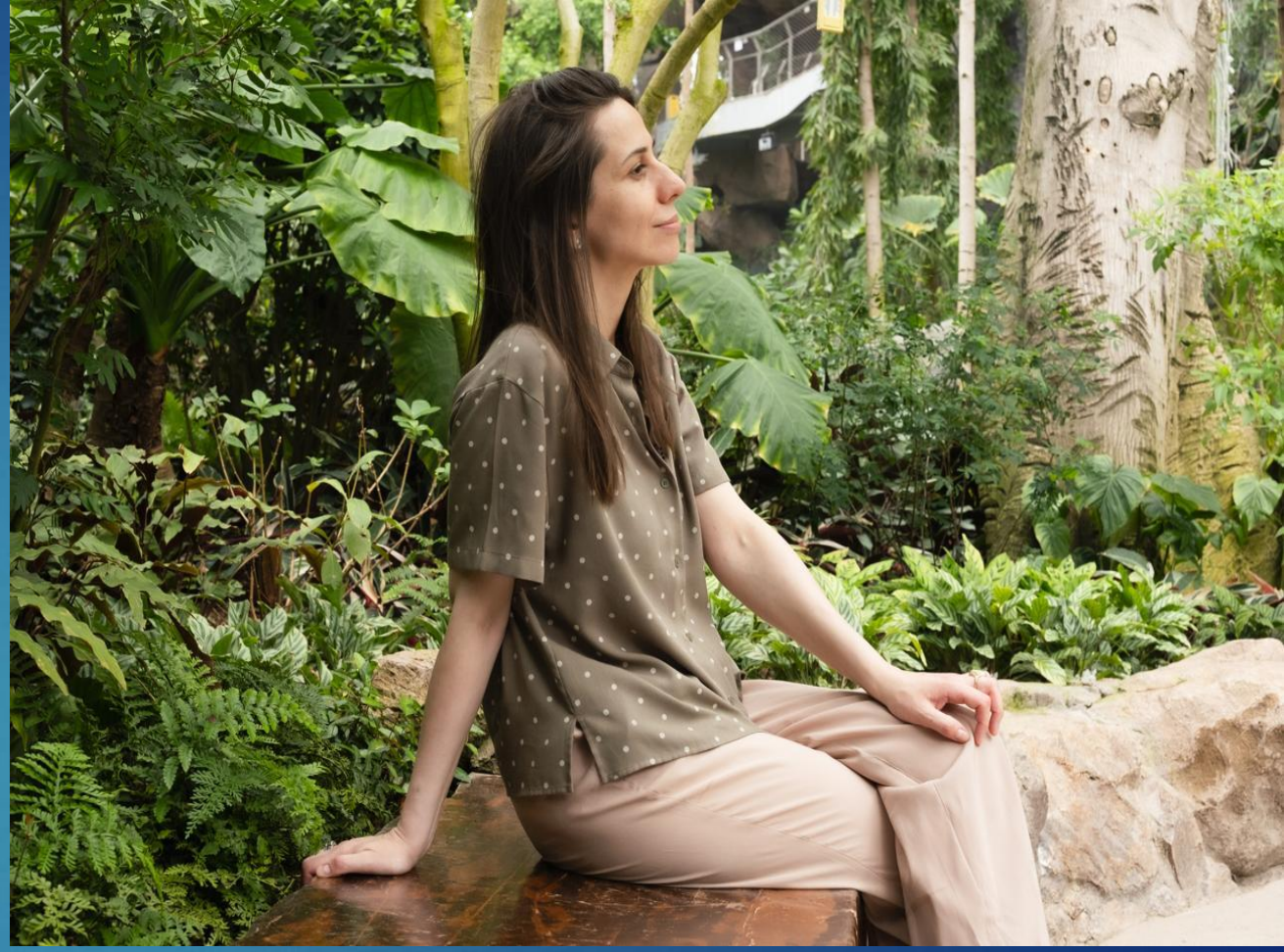
A WORD OR PHRASE

peace • beauty

energy • perspective

Documented Well-Being Outcomes

- Lower reported stress
- Lower physiological stress
- Lowered anxiety
- Reduction in depression related symptoms
- Improved attention and cognitive restoration
- Improved psychological restoration – less depleted
- Improved physical activity
- Lowered blood pressure, lowered heart rate
- Increase social connections
- Reduced lonliness
- Improved overall health ratings



Themes from Journal Initiative

- Calm, Peace, Stillness, Grounding
- Healing, Restoration, Renewal
- Spiritual, Connecting to Something Bigger
- Wonder, Awe, Beauty
- Escape from Overstimulation
- Creativity, Inspiration
- Reslience, Growth, Hope
- Connection – self, others, nature, beauty
- Gratitude



3 Concepts

1. Direct and Indirect
2. Short Term and Longer Term
3. Activities and Relationship



The Payoff for our Well-Being – Cumulative Experiences

- Greater Emotional Resilience
- Sustained Attentional and Cognitive Functioning
- A More Positive Psychological Orientation
- Stronger Relationships and Social Connectedness
- A Stronger Sense of Meaning & Purpose
- Healthier Habits and Self-Regulation



Activity in Nature	Outcome of Time in Nature	Protective Assets for Positive MH	Mental Health Issues
Mindfulness	Lowered Stress/Calm	Resilience/Coping Skills	Stress
Meditation	Decreased Lonliness	Stress Management	Anxiety
Physical Activity (alone,others)	Increased Cooperation	Healthy Relationships	Depression
Experiencing "Glimmers"	Increased Sense of Spirituality	Emotional Regulation	Substance Use
Observing/Noticing	Feeling More Grounded	Physical Health (incl sleep & diet)	Trauma Recovery/PTSD/CPTSD
Engaging Multiple Senses	New Perspectives/Insights	Connectedness	Eating Issues
Conservation Work	Retreat/Taking a Break	Self Care	Grief
Planting & Harvesting	Restoration/Recharge	Adaptability	Personal Growth
Experiencing Beauty & Awe	Healing	Purpose/Meaning	Life Transitions
Artistic Activities	Increased Creativity	Self-knowledge/Self-awareness	Neurodivergence
Walking	Cognitive Clarity	Internal Locus of Control	Difficult Decsion(s)
Sitting/Quiet Time		Cognitive Flexibility	

Note: All of the above happen in contexts, in "environments", which may change

Handout by Todd Sevig and Elizabeth Glynn (Matthaei Botanical Gardens & Nichols Arboretum)

A Little Bit of Theory

- Attention Restoration Theory
- Stress Recovery Theory
- Broaden and Build Theory
- Psychological Well-Being Theory
- Self-Determination Theory/Self-Authorship Theory

Complementary (not competing) Frameworks



5 Practical Strategies (for building lasting benefits)

- Repeat Beneficial Experiences – Intentionally
- Reflect on What Made the Experience Beneficial
- Share Positive Experiences with Others
- Translate Insight Into Action
- Practice Carrying the Benefit Into Daily Life
- Creating Supportive Environments and Routines



Get Out and Explore!

- Nature Rx – website
- MBGNA – website, events
- A2/Ypsi Parks
- Your garden
- Your backyard
- Plants in your apartment
- Walking on campus
- Others ?!?!?!



A five-step pathway



Try the cycle for one month, then adjust it to fit your life.

A Tentative Approach to Enhanced Reconnection, Restoration & Reclaiming The Power of Nature for our Well-Being

Four strands that can inform and enrich one another – an ever expanding "quadruple helix"



Make the practice fit you!

There is no single “right” way to experience nature.

PERSONAL MEANING

What feels restorative to one person may not feel the same to another

CULTURE & IDENTITY

Cultural background, social group identity, and lived experiences all shape meaning and experiences

REAL-WORLD CONDITIONS

Time, transportation, safety, mobility and welcoming spaces can support—or limit—access

Well-being should not rest on willpower alone. Supportive environments and inclusive opportunities matter.

Choose one small experiment

Complete this sentence:

“This week, I will connect with nature by...”

MAKE IT SPECIFIC

When? Where? For how long?

What do you like? What do you want to try?

MAKE IT PERSONAL

What do you hope to feel or notice?

Reflection – why?

MAKE IT POSSIBLE

What could help you follow through?

A small practice can be a beginning—not a test you pass or fail.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Explore, Be Open, Experiment, Repeat and Adjust, Find a Mantra, Keep it Going

Thank you!

Questions • reflections



Selected Book Recommendations

Nature Rx: Improving College-Student Mental Health. by Donald Rakow and Gregory Eells.

The Open-Air Life: Discover the Nordic Art of Friluftsliv and Embrace Nature Every Day. by Linda Åkeson McGurk.

Glimmers Journal. by Deb Dana.

The Nature Reset: A Practical Guide. by Kathleen McIntyre.

The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and more Creative. by Florence Williams.

Healing with Nature: Mindfulness and Somatic Practices to Heal from Trauma. by Rochelle Calvert, PhD

Grounded: How Connection with Nature Can Improve our Mental and Physical Wellbeing. by Ruth Allen.

Resilience: Connecting with Nature in a Time of Crisis. by Melanie Choukas-Bradley.

Selected Research Articles

Andersen, L., Corazon, S. S., & Stigsdotter, U. K. (2021). Nature exposure and its effects on immune system functioning: A systematic review. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18, 1416.

Barton, J., & Pretty, J. (2010). What is the best dose of nature and green exercise for improving mental health? A multi-study analysis. Environmental Science & Technology, 44, 3947–3955.

Berman M. G., Jonides J., Kaplan S. (2008). The cognitive benefits of interacting with nature. Psychological Science, 19, 1207–1212.

Hartig, T., Mitchell, R., de Vries, S., & Frumkin, H. (2014). Nature and health. Annual Review of Public Health, 35, 207–228.

Kaplan, S., & Berman, M. G. (2010). Directed attention as a common resource for executive functioning and self-regulation. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 5, 43–57.

Kuo, M. (2015). How might contact with nature promote human health? Promising mechanisms and a possible central pathway. Frontiers in Psychology, 6, 1093.

Ohly, H., White, M., Wheeler, B., Bethel, A., Ukoumunne, O., Nikolaou, V., & Garside, R. (2016). Attention restoration theory: A systematic review of the attention restoration potential of exposure to natural environments. Journal of Toxicology and Environmental Health. Critical Reviews, 19, 305–343.

Schertz, K. E., & Berman, M. G. (2019). Understanding Nature and Its Cognitive Benefits. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 28(5), 496-502.

Shanahan, D. F., Bush, R., Gaston, K. J., Lin, B. B., Dean, J., Barber, E., & Fuller, R. A. (2016). Health benefits from nature experiences depend on dose. Scientific Reports, 6, 28551.