

# HEALING WITH NATURE

by Melissa Keyser

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## WE'VE ALL FELT IT:

the inability to take a deep breath, the weight of the world heavy on our hearts, the sense of the room getting smaller and closing you in, the constant chatter that won't shut up in your head.

We can't focus on the task at hand, we are easily triggered and angered by small things. Regardless of where we live or who we are, we all experience ups and downs.

I am a highly-sensitive person. I feel emotions more deeper and stronger than most people, and I am easily over-stimulated by sounds, smells and light. Add on being someone who struggles with anxiety, a Pisces and an introvert, so I'm not offended if it gets summed up that I'm a constant emotional mess. Some days are fine, others, I just simply cannot process and have to escape.

But as functioning adults, regardless of what we're struggling with, we can't just run away from life. Some try to escape with substances, with shopping, with pints of ice cream, with pharmaceuticals. Everyone has their coping strategies to escape. For me, I escape to nature, and I let the natural world heal me.

## **THE BENEFITS OF SPENDING TIME IN NATURE ARE NOW WELL KNOWN.**

It can help boost your immune system, reduced blood pressure, reduce stress, improve mood and the ability to focus, accelerate recovery from surgery, increase energy and improve sleep. It can (very simply) be summed up that being in nature means less stress, less stress means less inflammation, and less inflammation means less illness.

Our bodies and brains developed over centuries with being in touch with nature, and there is a part of us that still feels at home when surrounded by wild spaces. Despite our fast paced and technologically driven world of today, we are still biologically bound to nature. Being surrounded in noises and crowds and the concrete jungle, our minds are on constant alert and over stimulated. Our souls and minds crave an

interaction and connection on a different level, one that is calmer and simpler, and being in nature does that.

There is a formal movement called **SHINRIN-YOKU**, translated to Forest Bathing. Simply, it means letting nature heal you. In Japan, government sponsored trials in wild spaces allow city dwellers to come and disconnect from technology and be immersed in nature. While forest bathing is traditionally used in Japanese medicine, the concept is spreading all over the world. Finland and South Korea are setting up their own Forests, and in the United States, there is a certification program to become a guide, and there are organized walks for people to participate in healing walks.

You don't need to have a professional help you to receive the healing powers of nature. Nor does it need to happen in a forest, just a spot that is rich in nature. For you, that might be a desert, a river, the sea or even a wild garden full of life. People often mistake spending time in nature to be hiking or equivalent with physical activity, and while it certainly can take that form, it doesn't need to be. You also don't need specialized clothes or fancy gadgets. Just head out to your local park or open space.

## **SIMPLY BE OUTSIDE IN A NATURAL ENVIRONMENT.**

Open your senses, and be mindful of your surroundings.

The further away from other people and cars you can get, the easier it becomes. Walk quietly and look at the trees. Breathe deeply. Crouch down and watch ants move by. If you find a feather, pick it up and touch its softness. Sit and watch the birds and listen to the sound of the wind as it sings through the leaves.

As pastoral and calming as that sounds, to sit and gaze at natural beauty, sometimes it is still hard to let our minds disconnect and be open to our surroundings. Like meditation, it takes practice. Even as a life-long lover of nature and the outdoors, 'just sitting' is difficult for me. Instead, I take walks out in wild spaces at least a few times a week. Sometimes I go by myself, but most frequently I go with my dog, Stella. We meander with no destination in mind.

I love exploring new places, but on days when I'm really overwhelmed, I seek out wild spaces that I've visited before. I might stop to look at a flower closer, or I'll watch a woodpecker in the trees.

One favorite activity that I love, both to connect me to the place I'm in and it helps me calm down, is to make cairns, a stack of balanced rocks. If I'm on a beach or a well-worn path, I like to take off my shoes, so I can feel earth and be grounded. I keep my

phone on silent, and I wait to get back to the car to post a picture to Instagram. I don't check my steps on a fitness tracker.

I make sure to breath deeply, taking in as much fresh air as I can. I might talk softly to my dog, or greet others in passing with a gentle hello, but I avoid long conversations.

I walk until I feel better. I urge you to try it, and I know you will, too.

When I'm out under the trees or in a meadow of dancing grass, my mind is reset. I do not go out with exercise in mind, I go to simply be outside. When I return back home, the perspective and calm that I've gained from the forest will continue, but soon modern life and stress will creep back in. Being outside in nature does not change who I am. I'm still a highly-sensitive person. I still have anxiety. I know that I'll still have the ups and downs, and I'll still have those moments when everything seems to be falling apart. But thankfully, I know where I can go for a cure.

About

A handwritten signature in a cursive, black ink style that reads "melissa". The letters are connected and fluid, with a lowercase 'm' starting the name.

A writer, naturalist, garden designer and urban homesteader.

Growing up on the central coast of California, she lived without electricity, and surrounded by redwoods and only minutes from the beach, she was immersed in the natural world from the very beginning of her life. She is passionate about environmental stewardship, self-sufficiency and DIY skills. In addition to writing, she designs ecological gardens to help bring nature closer to client's homes, and provides coaching and consultations to help others live more sustainably. She lives in California with her husband and a menagerie of rescued animals.

Blog - [melissakeyser.com](http://melissakeyser.com) // Instagram - @melissakeyser