

What is Forest Bathing?

Many of us intuitively recognize that time spent outdoors, relaxing in a natural environment, can be restorative and calming. Often, if we're under pressure in our personal or professional lives, or we just aren't feeling all that well, we're instinctively drawn to going outside. We take a walk in the woods or sit quietly in a local park. We take our lunch breaks outside in the shade when the weather's nice. We go camping, hiking, fishing, or biking in the wilderness to recharge. Sometimes we just step outside to take a few deep breaths while standing in our backyard.

While the tendency manifests in a variety of ways, humans seem to gravitate to nature when our mental and physical energy is flagging. The lush foliage and inherent serenity of dense forests hold particular allure when our modern nerves are especially fried.

Consider the popularity of a quotation attributed to celebrated 19th century naturalist and conservationist, John Muir:

"Into the forest I go, to lose my mind and find my soul."

Nearly two centuries later, Muir's words resonate with a broad audience. They can be found adorning all manner of merchandise from coffee mugs to wall hangings to sweatshirts. Turns out Mr. Muir was on to something, beyond striking a chord with overworked city-dwellers everywhere. There are scientific findings indicating Muir's assertion may be rooted in more than just the philosophical.

In the 1980s, practitioners of Japanese medicine began advocating for a practice known as forest bathing as a powerful form of preventative medicine. Translated from the Japanese word *Shinrin-yoku* meaning "taking in the forest atmosphere", the term forest bathing describes harnessing the health benefits of spending time under the forest canopy while practicing mindfulness, deep breathing, and slow movements.

Sometimes called forest therapy or nature therapy, there's a growing body of evidence linking forest bathing to improved health outcomes, including:

- Better immune system functioning (tied to a natural chemical, phytoncides, released by trees)
- Reduced blood pressure
- Lower stress levels leading to reduced cortisol levels
- Improved mood

- Decreased anxiety
- Increased focus and concentration
- Improved memory
- Accelerated healing
- Increased energy levels
- Improved sleep

As much proof as there is to support the value of connecting with nature, we spend an increasing proportion of our days indoors. Estimates put the average American's time spent inside around as much as 90% of our days. It takes a conscious effort to prioritize getting outdoors as a regular part of everyday life.

Those of us who live in or near the Adirondack Park, or who are able to visit, have a distinct advantage. Wooded areas abound, providing endless opportunities for a therapeutic retreat. In the Town of Johnsbury, there are countless spots perfect for communing with nature and giving forest bathing a try.

Here are some simple steps anyone can take to incorporate the practice of forest bathing into their routine:

- Set aside time each day to get outside, preferably in, or near, a wooded area. Spending as little as twenty minutes around greenery is proven to have a positive impact on wellness, and accumulating ten hours a month of forest therapy time is considered ideal.
- Leave your devices behind- no phone, tablet, laptop, etc. Unplugging promotes mindfulness.
- If you're forest bathing with other people, agree not to speak to one another until the end of your walk, or for an agreed-upon amount of time. Companionship is welcome, but keeping conversation to a minimum helps with focus and being mindful.
- Open your senses and focus on them one at a time. What colors do you see? What sounds do you hear? What do you smell? Observing what information you're absorbing through each of your senses encourages being present in the moment.
- Breathe deeply and slowly, inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. Engage your abdomen.

- Wander, and move slowly and deliberately. It's not necessary to have a destination, and staying in one spot is fine too, if that's what feels most comfortable.

There's really no "right" or "wrong" way to practice forest bathing, as long as you're outside, near trees, and focusing on being mindful. The next time you find yourself wound a little too tightly, or better yet, before you've reached that point, immerse yourself in nature and let the forest work its magic!