

# 'Forest Bathing': How Microdosing on Nature Can Help With Stress

The practice, long-popular in Japan, is gaining traction in the U.S. as a way of harnessing the health benefits of being outdoors.

[Rahawa Haile](#) Jun 30, 2017

On first glance, it looked like a two-hour walk in the woods. Our guide had already tackled the hard part of finding a trail with minimal elevation gain and limited poison oak along its flanks. This wasn't a hike, we were reminded. A hike usually involved clear endpoints and physical exertion. We were invited to walk slower than usual, perhaps a quarter of our normal speed. To pay attention to the different shades of green we encountered, the snapping of twigs beneath our feet, the sudden vaulting of winged life—nothing was ornamental. Everything was in its right place, including us. The forest bathers and I had come to the woods in search of peace. All of us were to be present, focused solely on the moment. Our immersion in the natural world would act not only as a balm to everyday stresses but a catalyst: According to the event description, we had gathered outside that day to emerge, as flowers might after a long winter.

In 1982, Japan made *shinrin-yoku*, or “forest bathing,” a part of its national health program. The aim was to briefly reconnect people with nature in the simplest way possible. Go to the woods, breathe deeply, be at peace. Forest bathing was Japan's medically sanctioned method of unplugging before there were smartphones to unplug from. Since *shinrin-yoku's* inception, researchers have spent millions of dollars testing its efficacy; the documented

benefits to one's health thus far include [lowered blood pressure, blood glucose levels, and stress hormones](#).

I showed up at Joaquin Miller Park in Oakland, California that afternoon for the purported mental-health boost. The four other attendees and I exchanged pleasantries by the trailhead as the sun baked our arms. All of us were women —although San Francisco's "[Forest Bathing Club](#)" Meetup group boasts 428 members across the gender spectrum. However, I'd discovered this outing not on the Meetup but via a late-night, anxiety-induced Google search.

We started off by walking down a paved path. Talking among ourselves was not discouraged, exactly, but neither was it encouraged. A children's birthday party had claimed a coveted nook among the redwoods to our left. The streaming tinsel of their conical hats could be seen between the branches. I trained my gaze higher, slowly, until it nearly grazed the sky. Six shades of green. A short while later we were in the forest proper. Airplanes could be heard overhead, but just barely. In the woods, the sounds of our wandering were deafening. Each step we took brought an orchestra to life. At one point a blanket emerged from our instructor's pack. We lay on our backs in a circle, our bottom halves flat against the earth. A stray ant traced the length of my index finger and disappeared behind a rock. The five of us were invited to consider the tops of the trees above, how they swayed even when thick trunks kept them rooted. We closed our eyes as our instructor continued to speak in soothing tones. My mind, blissfully, went blank.

[The popularity of forest bathing in the U.S. is unsurprising](#), particularly in metropolitan areas where people may wish to *get outside* more often than they wish to *go outdoors*. To many, the former sounds closer to a stroll in the park than a trek up a mountain. Forest bathing sits in the middle of this false dichotomy, one where people associate being in nature with roughing it or struggle to think of experiencing nature as relaxing. Instead, forest bathers

intentionally go outside to relax with nature, and allow nature to help them relax.

An entire industry has cropped up around the practice of forest bathing, ranging from high-end spas eager to lure guests with eco-therapy offerings to training sessions around the globe for the next generation of forest bathing instructors. Tuition for those looking to become formally [certified](#) as forest bathing guides runs upwards of \$3,200, not including travel, lodging, or food. Some might scoff, but upcoming training sessions in the Berkshires as well as in Northern California are already at capacity.

But what does forest bathing at large look like in a country as vast as America? How does it differ from [park prescriptions](#), where doctors prescribe park outings to their patients? Or from organizations such as [GirlTrek](#), whose aim is to get black women to walk outside for a minimum of 30 minutes a day? While Japan has numerous official “forest therapy trails,” the size and ecological diversity of the U.S. makes it impossible for most people to forest bathe in the ways described thus far. So who, exactly, has access to forest bathing? And is there room for interpretation when it comes to the term? Forest bathing made complete sense in certain geographic areas, namely those with low humidity and temperatures in the 70s. It made less sense in the swamps of South Carolina. I’d felt at peace floating down a river in an inner tube in Florida as a child, but I’d also felt sweaty, thirsty, itchy, and uncomfortable often enough to dive into the water and climb back out.

In Japan, a [forest-therapy base](#) must meet certain criteria to be recognized by the government, including a scientific evaluation of its healing ability. In America, however, there are no set guidelines for what constitutes a forest bathing environment. Which raises the question: Is a forest essential to forest bathing? Could one forest bathe in the desert? Or in a park in the middle of a city?

I brought up these questions with my instructor after our walk. He believed anyone anywhere could forest bathe, that the term was never intended to limit what kind of nature individuals expose themselves to. According to him, if people are going outside and centering themselves in nature, they're forest bathing, even if they're at the beach. He stressed that the most important thing was getting people to associate being in nature with feeling good. According to the [Association of Nature and Forest Therapy](#), forest bathing "is a research-based framework for supporting healing and wellness through immersion in forests and other natural environments." That last "and" is important; the forest itself might not be necessary.

Certain research indicates that perhaps you can get some benefits even without the actual outdoors, although such extrapolation is bound to be contentious. Studies conducted by [Roger Ulrich](#) at Texas A&M concluded that "environments with nature-related imagery, such as photographs and paintings on the wall, reduce anxiety, lower blood pressure, and reduce pain." Just looking at an image of nature could be healing.

Virtual environmental therapy may offer a middle ground for those unable to enjoy the outdoors for one reason or another, whether due to physical or environmental limitations. "A real-life experiment is under way at the Snake River Correctional Institution in eastern Oregon," writes [Florence Williams](#) in *National Geographic*. "Officers there report calmer behavior in solitary confinement prisoners who exercise for 40 minutes several days a week in a 'blue room' where nature videos are playing, compared with those who exercise in a gym without videos."

Likewise, video game consoles are nature-themed, living-room holodecks waiting to happen. Games like *Firewatch*, a walking simulator set in Shoshone National Forest, offer a free-roam mode, where one can wander hiking trails aimlessly to their heart's content. In [Flower](#), one plays as a petal

that endlessly floats on a breeze. [Walden, A Game](#) is an adaptation of Henry David Thoreau's life among nature. Such gaming experiences fill a niche that appears poised to grow substantially. If individuals recovering from surgery with a view of a garden can heal faster than those with a view of a [brick wall](#), can non-immersive exposure to nature benefit people in other ways.

Admittedly, nothing can take the place of actually going outside and feeling the sun and wind against one's skin. However, one of the biggest hurdles to getting people the health benefits of the outdoors is helping individuals, especially those from marginalized groups, to feel more comfortable in natural settings. I came to nature through water. A love of beaches and rivers primed me to love other outdoor environments. Everything has to start somewhere. Video games might lead to forest bathing, and forest bathing might lead to hiking (or swimming, or outdoor yoga); all of these are a means to an end, and that end is better health.

My forest bath concluded with a tea ceremony of foraged California bay leaves. They'd been steeped in a thermos of hot water my instructor had brought along. Everyone pooled their snacks together. The group discussed how we felt before and after the walk. Several noted a significant drop in anxiety, including myself. I had come to the woods that day as [an experienced thru-hiker](#), with the hope forest bathing would feel like microdosing a rest day on the Appalachian Trail. And to an extent it did, even without the associated prolonged exertion and endorphins. Transformations come in packages big and small. What forest bathing got me to do for the first time since leaving the A.T. was prioritize my mental health. I could have been recreating with friends in a number of different ways, or working on writing assignments, or on chores at home. Instead, forest bathing reminded me of how important it was to leave my house, shut off my phone, tell my loved ones I'd see them later, and breathe in the world because it was mine.