

## A Walk in the Woods

Engaging with nature helps depression and calms the brain's worry circuits. In one study, a 90-minute walk in the woods reduced ruminative worry better than a similar stroll in the city. It also lowered activity in the *subgenual prefrontal cortex*, an area of the brain involved in worry, avoidance, and rumination (Bratman et al., 2015). That is no small feat. As we saw in Chapter 2, *depressive rumination* is a repetitive cycle of negative thoughts that's very hard to break.

Spending time in nature also improves concentration and decreases symptoms of ADHD. On the medical side, it is beneficial for diabetes, chronic pain, blood pressure, and the immune system. Some of these effects are measurable after only 20 minutes in the forest, and some continue for several weeks after leaving the woods. Walking beside bodies of water – oceans, rivers, or lakes – also works, as does walking with our four-legged friends. Whether tending a garden or petting an animal, contact with nature is good for the mind and body.

In Japan and Korea, forest therapy is even covered by insurance, where it's called *Shinrin-yoku*, or “forest bathing.” This type of therapy is undertaken with a guide, who helps people engage with the sensory experience of the forest. They walk through it slowly, or just sit and observe, paying attention to the finest details. They touch, explore, and appreciate nature's surprises for sessions lasting one to four hours.

No one knows exactly how forest therapy works. Part of it is visual. Forest scenes alone have health benefits. After a surgery, people heal faster when their rooms overlook a forest than when their windows face an urban wall. The air may also have something to do with it. A humid forest is rich in negative air ions, which have benefits in depression. Ocean air and waterfalls are also good sources of these ions. Chemistry is another possibility. Plants emit antimicrobial compounds called phytoncides that improve natural immunity.

From gardening to agriculture, people who work the soil outdoors for at least seven hours a week have half the rate of depression as those who stay inside. Though cause-and-effect hasn't been fully parsed out in that research, we do know that the risk of depression goes down with more time spent in nature (Asai et al., 2018).

In order to connect with nature, clients can search online for public forests, rivers, nature trails, and lakes near them. They can also find local resources at [www.traillink.com](http://www.traillink.com).

## Guided Forest Therapy

Forest therapy is a growing field with its own standards and certifications. Professional guides can be found at [www.natureandforesttherapy.org](http://www.natureandforesttherapy.org). The following resorts and spas also offer forest therapy, though this is usually a pricier option.

- Arizona: L'Auberge de Sedona ([lauberge.com](http://lauberge.com))
- California: Brewery Gulch Inn ([brewerygulchinn.com](http://brewerygulchinn.com)), Gaige House ([thegaigehouse.com](http://thegaigehouse.com)), Ojai Valley Inn ([ojaivalleyinn.com](http://ojaivalleyinn.com))
- Canada: Ruby Lake Resort ([rubylakeresort.com](http://rubylakeresort.com)), Trout Point Lodge ([troutpoint.com](http://troutpoint.com))
- Connecticut: Mayflower Grace ([gracehotels.com/mayflower](http://gracehotels.com/mayflower))
- Missouri: Big Cedar Lodge ([bigcedar.com](http://bigcedar.com))
- New York: Mohonk Mountain House ([mohonk.com](http://mohonk.com)), Shimmering Light ([shimmeringlight.info](http://shimmeringlight.info))
- North Carolina: Skyterra Wellness Retreat ([skyterrawellness.com](http://skyterrawellness.com))
- Oregon: Salishan Resort ([salishan.com](http://salishan.com))
- Pennsylvania: The Lodge at Woodloch ([thelodgeatwoodloch.com](http://thelodgeatwoodloch.com))
- Tennessee: Blackberry Farm ([blackberryfarm.com](http://blackberryfarm.com))
- Vermont: Stowe Mountain Lodge ([destinationhotels.com/stowe-mountain-lodge](http://destinationhotels.com/stowe-mountain-lodge))
- Virginia: Earthwalk Ways ([earthwalkways.com](http://earthwalkways.com))

### **Bringing the Forest Indoors**

Indoor plants also improve health and concentration, though not as much as the forest. Wood decor also helps, when the ratio is right. Stress levels go down when walls are covered with 30–40% wood, but too much wood has the opposite effect. That ideal balance resembles the density of wood in a typical forest. Pictures or murals of the woods can achieve these visual benefits as well. Air ionizers and salt lamps mimic some of the qualities of forest air (see “Antidepressant Air Ions” in Chapter 4).

### **A Tale of Two Transports**

Walking in the woods may improve depression, but a different mode of travel can make it worse: the automobile. The risk of depression starts to rise when the commute to work takes longer than 30 minutes one-way. There’s a world of difference between the path and the parkway. Here are some of these differences:

	<b>Walking in the Woods</b>	<b>Driving to Work</b>
<b>Motion</b>	Walking.	Sedentary.
<b>Threat level</b>	Low. Unless it’s an unsafe area, the forest is relatively free of things that trigger worry or threat.	High. Life-threatening accidents, aggressive drivers, and job-risking delays are common.
<b>Mental space</b>	Captivated by nature’s ever-changing features, as well as the need to balance our feet on the shifting terrain.	Hours of boredom punctuated by moments of terror. Most sights fly by too quickly to capture attention in a mindful way, but occasional life-or-death matters raise our alertness.
<b>Control</b>	We control our movement and pace.	Traffic patterns set the pace.
<b>Timing</b>	Usually there’s no rush to be somewhere.	Time is a pressure cooker.
<b>Social</b>	If strangers pass by, they’re generally friendly and greet us face to face.	Eye contact and greetings are rare. Rude cut-offs and tailgaters are the norm.
<b>Surroundings</b>	Nature.	Concrete, steel, and billboards.
<b>Sunlight</b>	Overhead.	Indirect, unless you’re in a convertible.
<b>Air</b>	Rich in antidepressant air ions and healthy phytoncides.	Full of unhealthy emissions or, if the vents are closed, air-conditioning units that deplete air ions.

In order to help clients integrate more “path” and less “parkway” into their daily routine, ask them if there are ways they can make their work commute more like a walk in the forest. People who walk, bike, or take the train to work have lower levels of commuting stress than those who drive or take the bus or subway (St-Louis et al., 2014). If they can’t change their mode of travel, clients can consider taking scenic routes, leaving early so they’re not rushed, avoiding traffic, using an aromatherapy car diffuser, stretching, getting absorbed in music or audio books, opening the sunroof, and slowing down to let a stranger merge, with a smile and a wave.