

# Going Wild in the woods

*Why Nature is the greatest Therapy*

REGISTERED COUNSELLOR AND PSYCHOTHERAPIST,

SHARON HINSULL, SHARES HER EXPERTISE.



**F**or countless generations, the healing power of nature has been widely recognised by many different cultures and traditions throughout the world. Whether it's simply enjoying a spot of gardening, taking a leisurely bike ride around the local park, or river rafting in the wilds of Snowdonia, there can be no mistaking the feeling of enhanced wellbeing that comes from spending time in the great outdoors.

**“SPENDING TIME IN NATURE HAS BEEN FOUND TO PROVIDE A SIGNIFICANT BOOST TO OUR MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING”**

Sharon Hinsull



In recent decades, scientific research into the healing effects of nature has seen a growing trend towards re-establishing an authentic, respectful connection between humans and the natural world we inhabit. As well as the obvious benefits that outdoor exercise can bring to our levels of physical health and fitness, spending time in nature has been found to provide a significant boost to our mental and emotional wellbeing.

The theme of this year's Mental Health Awareness Week is nature and the environment. This theme was chosen in part, say the organisers, because research conducted within the last 12 months has found that access to nature has played a vital role in supporting people's mental health during recent periods of lockdown.

**NATURE AS THERAPY**

Over the past few years ecotherapy, sometimes referred to as nature therapy, has been steadily gaining international recognition as a therapeutic approach in its own right. Its philosophy is based on the principle that people have a deep connection to the natural world around them, and that failing to nurture this connection can take a serious toll on a person’s wellbeing, particularly their mental health.

The aim of ecotherapy is to improve both physical and mental wellbeing through taking part in outdoor activities. This can be done

independently, in a group (where social distancing allows), or with a trained professional guide. Whatever type of activity you choose to engage in, the aim is to free your mind of unhelpful distractions by focusing your senses on the immediate natural environment that surrounds you. This could be in the form of pausing to appreciate a particularly striking cherry tree when it’s in full blossom, taking in the sweet, delicate aroma of fresh spring flowers, listening to birdsong, noticing the feel of the soft earth beneath your feet, or simply tuning in to the sound of naturally flowing water. In essence, the practice of ecotherapy is simplicity itself.



**“IN ESSENCE,  
THE PRACTICE OF  
ECOTHERAPY IS  
SIMPLICITY ITSELF”**

Sharon Hinsull



**MINDFUL IMMERSION**

One form of nature-based therapy that has been enjoying a particular rise in popularity in recent years is forest bathing. First established as a therapeutic approach known as ‘Shinrin-Yoku’ in Japan in the 1980s, forest bathing is now regularly practised across the world. The term ‘bathing’ in this particular instance has nothing to do with immersing oneself in water; it is purely about the process of intentionally spending time within the natural environment, making a conscious connection with the earth and its intrinsically grounding and healing energies.

Here in the UK, a number of organisations such as Forestry England and The National Trust are now actively promoting the benefits of forest bathing, encouraging members of the public to commune with nature in a purposely mindful and contemplative way.

The art of forest bathing is a very simple one to master and is something that can be enjoyed by people of all ages. By firstly considering any possible risks to personal safety and following a few basic guidelines, it’s an activity that can be easily practised in just about any natural environment, even those located in small pockets of urban copse or woodland.



**TAKING THE FIRST STEPS**

As one of the largest landowners in the UK, The National Trust manages nearly a thousand square miles of green open space that is free to access for all. Recognising the benefits of nature for mental and emotional wellbeing, the Trust recommends the following tips for first-time forest bathers:

❁ **Pick a quieter time of day.** There will probably be fewer people around if you go to the woods in the early morning or later in the evening. If your schedule allows, you could also try weekday afternoons (outside of the school holidays).



❁ **Try turning off your electronic devices.** An hour or two of digital detoxing will help you to slow down and focus on your surroundings.

❁ **Take your time.** Wandering slowly through the trees can be very meditative, or you can settle down on a log to really take in your surroundings. If you stay still and quiet enough you're also more likely to see wildlife, such as deer and birds.



❁ **Use all of your senses.** When did you last touch a tree trunk and feel the rough bark, or notice the way the sunlight catches the leaves, or try to pick out all the different types of birdsong around you?

❁ **Pay attention to your breathing.** This is a great way to relax and clear your mind, so you can focus on what's around you. Try closing your eyes and taking ten slow, deep breaths in and out, then gently open your eyes and bring your awareness back to the forest.



❁ **Stay as long as you feel comfortable.** Two hours is the recommended time for a forest bathing session, but if you've got a busy schedule then even just 10 minutes in nature can help you to feel refreshed.

**OFFSETTING THE NATURE DEFICIT**

Forest bathing can be enjoyed by all the family and serves as a great way of introducing children to the holistic benefits of spending time in nature. As well as the feeling of adventure that comes with a walk in the woods, children can learn to appreciate both the beauty and tranquility of their natural surroundings, and the positive impact of the great outdoors on their sense of wellbeing.

**“FOREST BATHING CAN BE ENJOYED BY ALL THE FAMILY”**

Sharon Hinsull



The term ‘nature-deficit disorder’ was first coined by American author Richard Louv, co-founder of The Children and Nature Network. Louv attributes the modern-day rise in childhood obesity rates, lower self-esteem, social anxiety and certain behavioural disorders to children’s decreased exposure to the natural world around them. “A growing body of research links our mental, physical and spiritual health directly to our association with nature - in positive ways. Several of these studies suggest that thoughtful exposure of youngsters to nature can even be a powerful form of therapy for attention-deficit disorders and other maladies. As one scientist puts it, we can now assume that just as children need good nutrition and adequate sleep, they may very well need contact with nature.”

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

Hosted by the Mental Health Foundation, this year’s **Mental Health Awareness Week** on the theme of **nature and the environment** takes place from May 10th to 16th.

More information about the benefits of forest bathing and other forms of ecotherapy can be found via the following links:

- [Forestry England](#)
- [Forestry and Land Scotland](#)
- [The National Trust](#)
- [The Forest Bathing Institute](#)
- [The Mental Health Foundation](#)
- [Mind](#)
- [Anna Freud Centre \(children’s mental health\)](#)
- [The Children and Nature Network](#)

The Forestry England website features a range of wellbeing resources for adults and children alike, including a free downloadable forest bathing booklet and activity pack. As well as an online search facility for locating the nearest areas of public forest and woodland, the site includes a selection of interactive videos, giving users a virtual glimpse into the full immersive experience of forest bathing in the comfort of their own homes. ❖

Sharon Hinsull is a BACP registered counsellor and psychotherapist. [therapy-and-training.co.uk](http://therapy-and-training.co.uk) Follow on Twitter @Therapy\_CPD.