Opinion Feeling stressed? Try forest bathing.

How immersing yourself in nature can improve your health with no side effects.

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There is a new field of medicine that might sound too good to be true. The therapy can reduce stress, lower blood pressure, improve mood, help with sleep and even enhance the immune system, yet there are no pills involved and no side effects.

This medical field is called forest medicine, based on the practice of shinrin-yoku, a Japanese phrase that translates to "forest bathing." Forest bathing is not physical exercise, but rather a form of relaxation while experiencing the forest through all five senses.

The idea that being in nature can be therapeutic is not new, but it was only in the last two decades that researchers began documenting the health benefits of forest immersion. Qing Li, a physician and professor at Nippon Medical School in Tokyo, is widely regarded as a founder of the field of forest medicine. He and his colleagues have authored dozens of peer-reviewed papers demonstrating the health benefits of forest therapy.

One meta-analysis of 20 clinical trials found that forest bathing can reduce blood pressure, in some cases with effects on par with antihypertensive agents. Other studies revealed that the practice decreases hormones implicated in metabolic disorders such as obesity and diabetes. Forest bathing has also been shown to lower anxiety and reduce depressive symptoms, and there is also data associating forest immersion to higher levels of anticancer proteins.

Li's hypothesis for the wide-ranging effects is that being in a forest decreases stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. The reduced stress response relaxes the brain, reduces blood pressure and impacts other body systems including the endocrine and immune systems.

"The relaxing effects of forest bathing begin to appear 20 minutes after you begin and reach their maximum effect after two hours," Li told me in an interview. "The longer you bathe in the forest, the greater the effect will be."

Li explained that though forest medicine is in its nascency in the United States, it is so well established in Japan that there are 65 official "forest therapy bases" across the country. Some Japanese companies contract with these bases to improve their employees' health and manage their stress, and some even pay for their employees' forest outings with company insurance.

Forests occupy 67 percent of the land in Japan, making them more easily accessible than here in the United States. So I was glad to learn that city dwellers can experience the benefits of forest bathing simply by visiting local parks. Li himself lives in central Tokyo and practices forest bathing weekly by walking in city parks.

He advised that forest bathing can encompass many activities. "Find a place you like, then sit for a while and read or enjoy the scenery," he said. "You can do tai chi, yoga or picnic." Walking is great, but he cautioned against overexerting yourself and recommended resting when you are tired.

Melanie Choukas-Bradley, a naturalist and forest bathing expert in D.C., offered additional guidance for people interested in trying this practice.

"Any time you take to connect with nature is good for you," she told me. "If you have five minutes to walk into the backyard and look up through the branches of a tree at the sky, just feel the breeze on your face, feel the sun and feel the rain."

When Choukas-Bradley leads guided walks, she asks people to try simple exercises that engage their senses. For instance, she asks them to notice what's in motion.

"It sounds like such a simple thing, but it's a really powerful mindfulness exercise," she said. "You notice the tiniest little movement in the leaves and an ant crawling across the ground, a spider and a web. You just notice so much, and you calm down."

Another exercise is to stand with one's back to a flowing stream and cup one ear from the front. This amplifies the sound of the water. Then take away your hand and see how much the sound diminishes.

"Even just closing your eyes when you're in nature magnifies the sounds around you, and you focus on the sounds and the smells," Choukas-Bradley explained. She encourages people to connect with nature wherever they are, even if it's looking at one tree. "It's really an awareness practice," she said.

In my view, the potential preventive effects of forest bathing are convincing enough that people should give it a try. Here's another reason: One of the key tenets of the forest medicine movement is that it promotes not only human health but also forest health. By practicing forest bathing, we are also celebrating conservation and spreading the message that human well-being is inextricably tied to the well-being of the natural environment around us.

Have you tried forest bathing, and do you have advice to share? I'd love to hear from you. I plan to feature reader comments and questions in a future edition of The Checkup newsletter.