

# Is There Healing *In Your Backyard?*

By Mara Bishop, MS, ThM, CSC

**D**uring the Coronavirus pandemic, about 30 percent of adults in the U.S. showed symptoms of anxiety, a dramatic increase compared to 2019. Working with qualified health care professionals is important to assure mental and physical health, especially during these times when all aspects of our health can feel particularly vulnerable. Preventative medicine practices can potentially lessen the need for medical intervention, pharmaceuticals, and other forms of treatment. One of those practices is available to you wherever you are, at any time; it is literally at your doorstep, and it is also within you. A growing body of evidence demonstrates positive psychological and physiological changes when people interact with nature.

## “NATURE” IS EVERYWHERE

Being in nature is free and available to everyone. While we may have a tendency to associate the word “nature” with wild places, nature is all around us wherever we are. Nature is in our “backyards” whether our backyard is cityscape, suburb, farm, wilderness, or somewhere in between. And even if we are not able to physically be outside, we can still experience the benefits of engaging the natural world.

Being in nature increases physiological and psychological well-being. Studies show it lowers blood pressure, pulse rates, and cortisol levels; restores mental clarity; improves mood; initiates cognitive and emotional resets, and even increases immune system activity. It impacts the way our brains function.

The prefrontal cortex is an area especially affected by being in nature. It’s one of the most highly evolved brain regions; it is also particularly vulnerable to stress. Stress can seem relatively amorphous—what is it exactly? Worry? Working too hard? Over excitation of the nervous system? It’s a state of tension that can be physical or emotional; it can be long-term or short-term. But although



the term “stress” can seem a little vague, its consequences on our bodies are specific and significant: anxiety, depression, hypertension, gastrointestinal problems, headaches, obesity, and many other conditions have links to stress.

Spending a short time with nature can directly counteract some of these conditions.

## “NATURE” IS IN YOU

Simply walking in the woods is powerfully healing. Research shows we don’t even need to be in nature to experience the benefits. Simply looking at images of nature has similar results. Patients who had a view out a window to trees healed faster after surgery, with less medication and complications than those looking at a wall. Visualizing nature can provide some of the same benefits as actually being outside, particularly for reducing anxiety.

Spending time with nature, even just a few moments to look out the window, can help our bodies relax and reset. This can be something you do as time permits and the mood strikes you, or something you make part of a regular practice. For me, it’s part of daily life and is profoundly nourishing.

Because I’ve found relationships with nature so meaningful, ideas for engaging nature play a big part in *Shamanism for Every*

*Day: 365 Journeys*. Here is a sample entry about how we crave nature to feel like our best selves:

*Those of us who are sensitive to the landscapes around us sometimes crave places on the planet. Do you find yourself longing for the cleansing of the beach, the power of the mountains, the protective canopy of the forest, or the expansiveness of the plains? As our physical bodies sometimes crave nutrients or vitamins when we are deficient; our spiritual or energetic bodies can crave places that supply us with something that helps keep us feeling healthy. When we spend time in these places, we soak up their energy, environmental supplements we lack, and can return to our homes invigorated, grounded, soothed—whatever we may need. And remembering the spirit of reciprocity, how can we “feed” these places in return? What environmental supplements would benefit you right now?*

The more time we are able to spend being present with the natural world the more the individual animals, plants, and landscapes we are with share themselves with us. This helps us understand ourselves better in the process. Physically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually, being in nature does us good. **h&h**

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