Forest Bathing

by Lyn Chimera

This is not about taking a bath in the forest although that does sound like fun. Forest Bathing refers to a relaxing effect similar to what you experience with a nice long bath. This form of relaxation therapy began in Japan about 30 years ago. It is called shinrin-yoku. Shrinrin in Japanese means "forest" and yoku means "bath". It is so effective that it has become part of preventative health care and healing in Japanese medicine and has spread around the world. The US has developed a Certified Forest Therapy Guide to help people understand the process (see references below).

Forest bathing is much different than taking a walk or hiking in the woods. It is done for relaxation and its health benefits rather than exercise so anyone can do it regardless of their fitness level. The object is to be in a forest or natural environment and connect with nature. People have always realized it is relaxing to be in nature, now there is science to prove it.

Studies have been done in Japan as well as in the US which show that forest bathing improves your immunity by strengthening and increasing NK cells. NK refers to "natural killer". These cells target infections, viruses and cancer cells. There have been studies in the US which showed improved healing and recuperation for patients in hospitals simply with a view of trees out their windows. Other benefits are reducing blood pressure, stress levels and pulse rate. This form of relaxation reduces dopamine and cortisol levels which in turn reduces stress levels and helps improve sleep. Anxiety and depression are also improved. Sounds too good to be true, so just how does this form of relaxation therapy work?

You'll notice a difference in the air in a forest. This is because trees take in carbon dioxide and give off oxygen. Trees also give off organic compounds that support our immune systems (NK cells). Forests are cooler and the purified moist, cool air is part of the benefit. The forest canopy forms a womb like atmosphere surrounding you with green. There are clinics that charge you to breathe in high oxygen moist air, forest bathing is FREE!

Connecting with nature is more important than ever in our busy urban/suburban/technology filled lives. According to a study by the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) they found the average American spends 93% of their time indoors. Much has been written about how modern lifestyles are contributing to increased stress levels in adults as well as children. This is not a new problem. Early in the last century John Muir (the father of our National Parks) wrote, "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over civilized people are beginning to realize that going to the mountains is going home. Wilderness is a necessity." More now than ever.

Simply spending some time in a forest can be therapeutic. This doesn't require a long walk. Simply sitting on a log or bench and letting your senses experience the environment is beneficial. Listen to the birds, notice all the different colors of green in leaves and mosses, watch the chipmunks scurry, notice the light changes as the sun filters through the leaves and breathe in that wonderful forest air. If a forest isn't available to you simply sitting under a tree can be therapeutic.

I have always found solace in forests. It's my favorite environment. If I'm feeling particularly stressed there are a few spots I go to and just sit and think things out or just sit and feel the stress fade away. I'm lucky to live where I have easy access to forests. If you don't, take a drive to a local park. We are surrounded by wonderful parks. One of my very favorite spots is the WNY Land Conservancy property, Owens Falls. It's south of East Aurora off Center Road. There is a walking trail that leads to benches in strategic locations for relaxing with amazing views of the forest, a ravine and stream with waterfalls. There are many other parks that provide road access to lovely spots to sit. Give nature a try. It's free and a wonderful way to spend an hour or two.

For more information go to Shinrin-yoku.org, https://www.mamanatural.com/forest-bathing/ or https://www.natureandforesttherapy.org/

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