

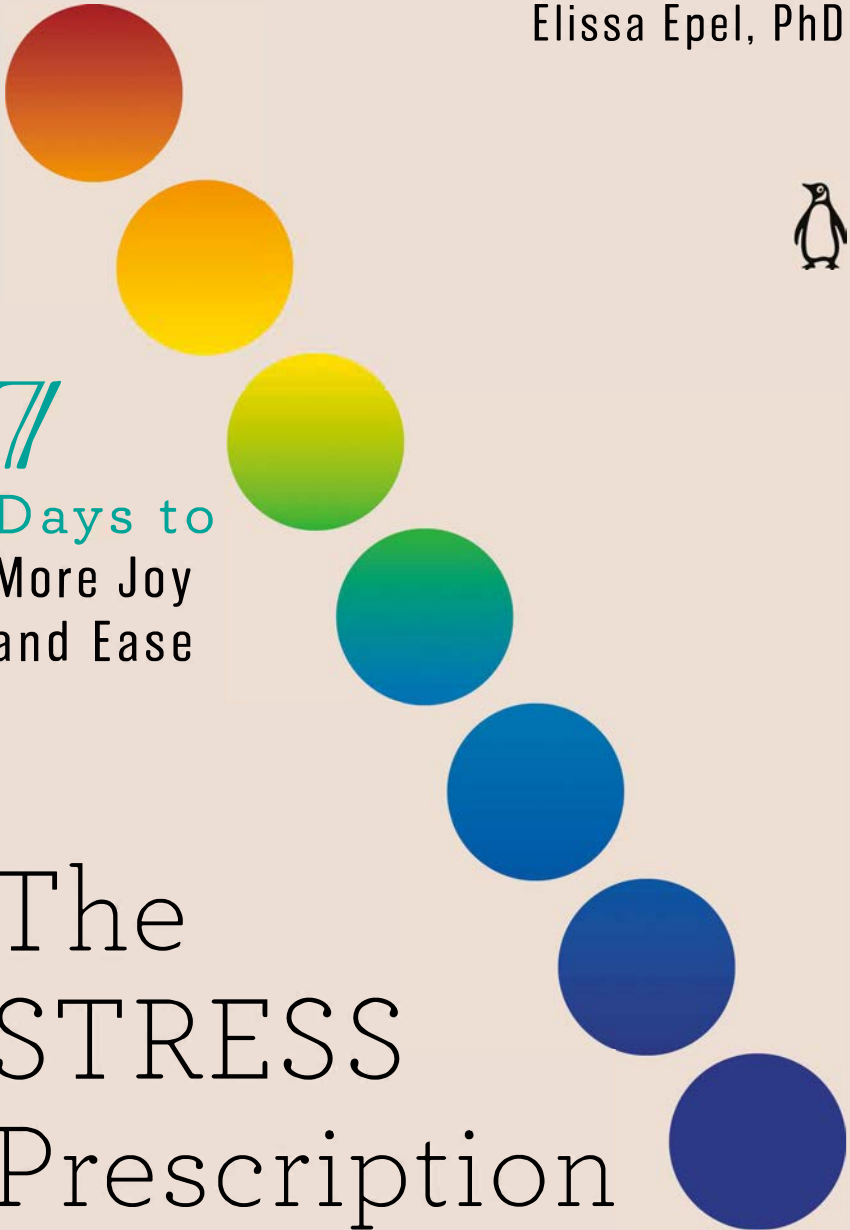
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7

Days to
More Joy
and Ease

The
STRESS
Prescription



DAY 5

LET NATURE DO THE WORK

IMAGINE THIS: FOR OVER A YEAR, YOU ARE COMMANDED TO STAY HOME. Everything closes; there is no place to go. You do all your work via computer, bathed in the blue light of your laptop or monitor. There is no socializing. You can communicate or interact with others only through the big screen of your computer or the small screen of your phone.

Too familiar, I know. Unless you were a first responder or essential worker (which came with its own unique and intense stressors), this was probably your reality for at least part of the pandemic. We were inside a lot, staring at our screens for the majority of the day: suddenly, it was where we did everything from working to socializing to collaborating with colleagues. There was no other way. Even before the pandemic, the amount of time that we were all spending inside, away from the light of day and the rhythms of the earth we live on, was already at a historic high. Now, the more we were in front of screens for work, the more frequently we were checking news, social

media, and other sources of global bad news. Across the board, surveys revealed unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, sleep problems, and burnout.

During lockdowns, there was a common way that people coped with pandemic anxiety: they went outside, into nature. With everything closed, it became the only option for getting out of our houses and taking a break. Studies have since measured how much “blue-green space” people were getting—exposure to urban parks, woods, rivers, and coastal areas. A survey conducted by the UK’s Mental Health Foundation showed that 62 percent of people in the UK reported finding relief by going for a walk in urban gardens and parks.¹ And there appeared to be a dose-response effect: the more time outdoors in the natural world people got, of any age (the survey looked at people of all ages, from children to older adults), the better their mental health. In Spain, during the initial COVID-19 wave when the country was under a strict lockdown, those without views of or access to nature had much worse mental health, regardless of income.² Nature, it seemed, was a powerful antianxiety drug.

I live in a city, and I have a city mind—I am habituated to the ambulances, fire engines, and car motor sounds, all of which surely add to my yellow mind state of vigilance, even though I’m no longer aware of it. Every day, I take my dog for a walk. No matter how busy I am, there’s no option to skip it. I have to set aside my to-do list and just go. I walk him out by the ocean, where I can hear the waves, or in Golden Gate Park among the trees, where the musical rustle of wind in the leaves causes me

to—however briefly—forget my worries and snap into attunement with the world around me. The contrast reminds me, I need more nature! And the effects of *raw* nature—when I can get away from the city completely and immerse myself in a wild place—are even more powerful.

My favorite escape is to a remote house by the ocean. Within a day my nervous system recalibrates, just by being close to the wild, open ocean. My thoughts move away from the ruminative loops about work and family and toward the rhythmic, transfixing sound of the waves. All my problems seem to shrink in comparison with the stunning enormity of the Pacific. My body seems to synchronize with the environment around me. Whereas at home I am in sync with the digital clock and the screens that run my life and work, here I am attuned to the sunrise, the sunset, the changing temperature of the day, the scents, sounds, and sensations.

If there was a silver lining of the pandemic, maybe it was this: during one of the most stressful and uncertain times that any of us have experienced in our lives, people were forced outside into nature, when it was accessible. Sure, it was by necessity—we really had no other options!—but it turns out that exposure to nature, in all forms and contexts, is one of the most powerful and immediate ways to shrink stress.

Here's the problem: Most of us are now back in "nature deficit." In our regular day-to-day, in our typical routines, we experience overstimulation and loss of perspective. We quite literally get lost inside the minutiae of our problems. In an effort

to solve them, we focus on them more, and they get bigger and bigger. The stress becomes enormous, filling the whole lens. It's all we can see.

When Stress Creates Cognitive Overload: Yellow Mind

The human brain works as a master prediction machine: based on our past experiences, our memories, and our body's signals, we are constantly predicting what the next moments will bring. So if we're frequently overconnected to screens and electronics, the result is that we're always anticipating massive amounts of stimuli to be forthcoming. We expect it. We get hooked to it. We even seek it.

With this habit and expectation of being connected, engaged, and stimulated, it can feel impossible for us to shift into a more peaceful state, doing less, or nothing. The brain tells us we should be doing something, worrying about this or that, checking the news or email, and on and on and on. In red or yellow mind, our minds prefer to do *anything* other than sit in stillness. In one study,³ people were left to think freely for ten minutes or more. If the participants wanted something to do during that period, they could choose to administer a minor electric shock to themselves. Almost 20 percent of the participants self-administered a minor shock: some were curious, but some did it out of a drive to escape boredom or their own thoughts.

Because of this overconnection to stimuli, and a cultural drive to overwork, we tend to be inside most of the day, and in front of screens. When we lose in-person connection to others while we have big doses of social media, it's a deadly formula. Social networks thrive on negative emotions and angry emojis; that's what gets amplified.⁴ And now we know that Facebook algorithms have been making that problem even worse, spreading material with angry emojis five times more than those with Likes.⁵ Then there's the way that social media is set up to make us believe everyone else is living a more ideal life than we are, an effect that hits our youth the hardest: suicide rates in US teens stayed stable from 2000 to 2007 and then increased 57 percent by 2018.⁶ Technology addiction is reflected in some of the policies trying to rein it in—France, for example, has passed a “right to disconnect from email” law so that people can unplug at night and not have to answer urgent work emails—but most of us don't have this protection. Rather, we suffer from the aforementioned disconnection syndrome—we're disconnected from ourselves, from how we feel, from our bodies, from each other, and from nature.

Urbanites may suffer from this even more. Those of us who live in urban environments get used to a certain constant level of stimulation, but that doesn't mean it's not affecting us. “The urbanicity effect” refers to the higher rates of depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia in people who grow up in urban areas, who also tend to overreact to social stressors compared with people who grow up in rural areas.⁷ Even urban honeybees are

different from rural honeybees—they have greater levels of oxidative stress, presumably from the higher levels of pollution, noise, and other stimulants.⁸

We live in a world where there is simply too much going on—too much stimuli from our screens, too much constant engagement, too many distracting pulls on our attention. But our mental state and stress levels are shaped by our environment. By going into nature, we use this to our advantage.

Let Nature Calibrate Your Nervous System

It's simple: By shifting our physical environment, we can shift our mental state. We can change both the content of our thoughts and our thought processes. For many people, this shift is almost automatic when they place themselves into the natural world: the mind moves from conditioned thought patterns—rapid thoughts, negative self-talk, anticipating what's next—to discursive thought, which is slower, calmer, creative, curious. Immersion in nature immediately reduces the amount of human-created sensory stimuli we are used to—from screens, information, urban sounds. It enforces a mental break. It's a sanctuary environment that calms the mind and eases the body. Yes, we can train the brain to do this in our typical environment (through mindfulness practice, for example, as we discussed), but nature is a quick way to do it, and it comes with a whole host of other benefits for our mental state and nervous system.

The beneficial effects of forests have been well documented. Many studies have shown that regular immersion in forests im-

proves a wide range of health problems. In some countries, it's called *forest bathing*. Forest bathing is an established practice in Asia in particular—researchers in Korea and elsewhere have studied the effect of being immersed in the forest ecosystem for several hours, several times a week, while walking slowly and paying mindful attention to the environment, or sitting and viewing the landscape. In clinical trials it has been shown to reduce blood pressure, cortisol, and inflammation.⁹ In New Zealand, doctors will write a “green prescription”: *You are recommended to spend two hours in nature, three times a week*. It's so effective, it's been folded into mainstream medicine in many places.

One of the ways forest bathing has this incredible effect on the human nervous system is through our sensory channels: plant or tree odors like cedarwood may reduce biological stress, and in forests, the air is not only less polluted, but more ionized,¹⁰ especially when there are waterfalls or recent rain. Sound plays a big role too: wind in the trees, birdsong, and the sounds of water or ocean are all intrinsically calming and relaxing to humans. We aren't sure exactly why, but one theory is that it taps into old evolutionary feelings of safety. Visually, the same effect may be happening when we are surrounded by shades of green—we may be evolutionarily conditioned to feel calm and safe in this environment. On the flip side of that coin, a more urban landscape can be overstimulating to humans, because instead of natural shapes and horizons, we see and hear too many unnatural shapes and sounds. The urban landscape, for many, doesn't trigger safety—it triggers vigilance and alertness.

This dramatic shift we experience in nature is called the *attentional restoration effect*: we have relieved attentional overload, we have opened up space in our mind, we feel better. Studies have examined brain waves, or brain activity, while people looked at pictures of either nature or urban landscapes. They find that when compared with nature scenes, urban landscapes immediately demand more attention and cognitive processing, and activate stress-related areas like the amygdala.¹¹ Dr. Pooja Sahni, a researcher at the Indian Institute of Technology in New Delhi, found that when watching a nature video, our brains show greater alpha and theta waves (neural states that create relaxation) and enhanced cognitive ability to overcome distractions.¹² Interestingly, waterfalls and rivers seem to be the most potent nature stimuli in Sahni's study.

The Magic of Water

Many people also resonate with the soothing sound of rhythmic ocean waves—it affects our breathing, slowing it down and encouraging deeper breaths than the shallow and insufficiently oxygenated breathing that is our habit (more on this in the next chapter). And there is something special about water: marine biologist Dr. Wallace Nichols calls this “the Blue Mind effect,” and it's exactly what we've been on a mission to achieve this week. “Blue mind,” as we've been discussing it in this book, refers to a deeply restful state that generates well-being and restoration, but Nichols's point (in his book also titled *Blue Mind*) is that water is a particularly effective way to achieve

well-being. He describes water as medicine. Through water, we may be able to reach blue mind states that we otherwise would not.

Exposure to water—whether it’s being in the ocean or a pool, or floating in a saltwater tank—induces psychological benefits of peace and well-being. People have used water for centuries for health: from hot to cold, from natural hot springs to highly engineered indoor float tanks. Float tanks are filled with water and large quantities of salt so that your body can safely and effortlessly float. People report that in these tanks, they feel a pervasive sense that all their needs are met, that they are safe and at ease. One group has been studying the effects of tank flotation with *silence*, a powerful way to change your mental context by stripping away auditory stimuli, and found that with a single ninety-minute float tank session, people with high anxiety or anxiety disorders saw their anxiety levels come down close to that of the average person.¹³

Why? One theory is that floating in water may change the body’s signals, dramatically reducing muscle tension and blood pressure, which then has ripple effects throughout the body and mind. Floating in water also seems to increase *interoception*, the connection between our sensory awareness and our body. Attention turns inward—not toward ruminative thought processes, but toward the breath, the heartbeat, the feelings and sensations in the body. Blood pressure goes down by, on average, ten points, and the more it lowers, the more serenity people feel—a calm that lasts all day.

We walk around with an enormous cognitive load. We’re

carrying so much around in our working memory—worries and to-dos, thoughts that pop up out of nowhere, reactions to the stimuli around us. In nature, our attention is more effortlessly focused. Our attentional control improves. In the lab, we see this happen on neuropsychological tests. The cognitive load is relieved, opening up space for creativity, spontaneous thought, and present-moment experience. This all loops back to what we've been talking about throughout this book: that we are unconsciously stressed most of the time. We're taxed in ways we aren't even aware of. People often don't realize how stressed they are until they get into nature and notice the *absence* of stress for the first time in a long time. A close friend of mine who absolutely loves her life in San Francisco said recently after a weekend away in the woods, "I didn't even know it, but the city is so stressful!"

Getting to Blue Mind

As humans, we have an affinity for nature—being in nature allows us to access green mind states of relaxation and even blue mind states. Blue mind can be a state of deep relaxation (as we discussed in the introduction), but it can also show up as a moment of transcendence in which you feel connected to your body and environment and experience a calm expansiveness of thought. In fact, immersive nature exposure is one of the quickest ways to achieve a blue mind state.

I've been studying stress resilience for decades now, and quite honestly I am amazed by how effective immersion in na-

ture is at shaping the activity of the autonomic nervous system. Nature is unique in its capacity to soothe, to calm, to put things into perspective, and to shrink stressors that once seemed huge. A major part of this is because we experience feelings of wonder and awe from the raw beauty of the natural world.

Exposure to nature puts us into contact with beauty and with a world that is so much larger than us. When polled, people who seek out nature describe being powerfully impacted by the “vastness” of the ocean, the “massive” size of the mountains, the “enormity” of the desert landscape or the open sky. What seems to bring people calm, peace, and relief from stress is a shift in perspective that comes from the sheer scale of the natural world; being in nature reminds us of our relatively small size in the larger context of the universe.

Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, is an emotions researcher whom I have known for twenty years. Early in his career he focused very narrowly on one positive emotion: awe.

I didn't understand his fascination back then, but now it seems like one of the most important human experiences to understand. He has continued to do extensive research into what he calls the “uniquely human experience of awe” and has found that when we feel awe, we experience immediate biological effects, like better heart rate variability, reduced blood pressure, and a measurable drop in stress levels. In older adults, a simple “awe walk” (noticing things, taking photos together) versus a typical walk led to lower daily stress and greater daily positive emotions and, in their photos, larger smiles.¹⁴ Awe is

transformative—the feeling of being in the presence of something larger than oneself immediately snaps things into perspective for us. When we are reminded of the grandeur of the world, issues that seemed large and looming, driving up stress in the body, suddenly shrink. Our worries simply cannot compete.

Keltner believes that awe may turn out to be a powerful “prescription” for things like stress, anxiety, depression, and PTSD. His center ran a study in which they took veterans with PTSD into the wilderness. Over the course of a single week, they saw a *30 percent* drop in PTSD symptoms.

“People have been writing about awe since the beginning of human time,” says Keltner. “Awe is when we encounter vast things we don’t understand. Lab studies show that our sense of self gets smaller. We feel we are connected to larger things, like ecosystems. We get really curious about the world. Our minds open. Awe makes us committed to the community we share; we put aside our differences and become more interested in other people. The data are coming in, and I actually think that awe is potentially the most central pathway to healing and resilience that we can find.”

Awe: A Long-Lasting Anti-stress Medicine?

Keltner’s research into awe and human resilience is ongoing, and one of the questions he’s investigating is how long the effects of awe last. We know that awe experiences not only reduce stress, but have a neural signature as well—awe can deactivate

the brain network that fuels rumination and negative self-related mind wandering. But is it lasting? Is it fleeting and transient, working only in that moment, or does it have residual effects that stay with you?

My belief is this: it could last a lifetime.

My colleague George Bonanno, a world expert in trauma and author of *The End of Trauma*, had a tough childhood. Growing up, he had to deal with an abusive parent. He moved out as a teenager, got into heavy drugs, and watched his life start to fall apart. At seventeen, he decided to leave his hometown, to get away from patterns of addiction and bad influences and try to start fresh. He started hitchhiking to the West Coast. A friendly truck driver picked George up, learned his story, and ended up driving hundreds of miles out of his way to get George toward his destination. George doesn't remember the man's name, but he remembers what he said: "Kid, what you're doing is absolutely the best thing. You will take control of your life. You will make mistakes. But that's okay, because they'll be *your* mistakes, and you'll learn from them and grow."

By nightfall, the driver had to finally turn around and go back the other direction. He suggested that George walk a little way off the highway and sleep up in the hills—he pointed the way—and then resume hitchhiking in the morning. So George walked up the hill in the pitch black, shook out his sleeping bag, and fell asleep under the stars. When he awoke at dawn, he realized he was right in the middle of a mountain range. He had never seen mountains before in his life. The sky was huge, filled with brilliant

pinks and purples, and he had the most overwhelming feeling that he struggles still to describe—he refers to it now as “a sense of God, in some nonconceptual form.”

“At that moment I saw a clear order to the universe,” he says now, so many decades later. “Timeless, not good or bad, and felt in touch with it. I knew right then and there that everything was going to be okay. My life would be okay. And literally, from that moment on, my life was okay.”

George is now a pioneer in human resilience, and his work has shown that most people, after going through a traumatic event, will bounce back to their previous state of well-being relatively quickly, within a few months, and the vast majority within a year or two. We are resilient. Our bodies, our cells, our spirits are built for resilience. And awe is an ace we have in our pocket—it can cut through hard moments and strengthen inner resilience. You may have had moments when all of a sudden, your life had more purpose; you saw your place in it and how the puzzle pieces all fit together. These insights come when we are in green or blue mind states, rarely red or yellow.

“Experience awe” isn’t usually something that shows up on our daily, weekly, or monthly to-do lists. But it needs to be. Keltner told me about a recent period when he forgot about the importance of regular awe-inspiring experiences.¹⁵ In 2019, he lost his younger brother, whom he was extremely close to. Then COVID hit, and with it, the stressors that we all experienced: being cut off from friends and family, worries about illness, uncertainty about the future. Two years went by during which he

felt that he was just pushing through with his head down and his teeth gritted. And one day he realized: he felt terrible.

“I felt the constant tension of chronic stress,” he says. “I felt the heat of inflammation. My mind was fixated on problems. My cells were probably aging prematurely! And I just had this epiphany: I study awe. I have to go and live it.”

It was COVID, so big travel was out of the question. And he had committed to living a low-carbon-footprint life: no big road trips, no flights, no buying lots of stuff. He had to experience awe simply. He started looking for the feeling everywhere. He’d go for a walk and find some new trees he hadn’t noticed before. He’d listen to music. He’d watch the sky at sunset. He started reading for pleasure again, to get back to the big ideas that used to broaden his mind and thrill him. And it worked. The grief and worries were still there—they don’t go away—but they didn’t consume him anymore.

Recalibrate Your Nervous System, No Matter Where You Live

Being connected to nature is not easy for everyone. We tend to like what we grew up with and are acclimated to. For many, being suddenly immersed in raw nature may not be immediately calming, because it’s unfamiliar. Those of us who’ve grown up in a more urban landscape, who have acclimated to its rhythms, sights, and sounds, may initially feel more safe and calm in that familiar busy environment. But I want to suggest that if we give

it the chance, if we put some time into acclimating to these green or blue landscapes, there is a deeper part of us that can feel an even more pervasive sense of calm, of focused attention, of a quieted mind, when we are surrounded by the natural world instead of the human-made one. “Full immersion” in nature can provide a kind of “mega-effect,” and so I encourage you to give it a try. But when we’re talking about managing our day-to-day stress, urban nature also packs a huge punch.

In studies, the presence of urban greenery is associated with better attention, lower heart rate, lower anxiety, and more peacefulness. Meanwhile, low urban greenery is associated with higher violence, worse mental health, lower physical activity, and higher mortality.¹⁶ Children are affected too—higher hyperactivity and behavioral problems are associated with low-nature areas—and this is all controlling for socioeconomic factors.¹⁷ Telomeres seem to like green spaces too! A study out of Hong Kong found that people who lived in the outer suburbs, with more greenery and nature spaces, had longer telomeres than those who lived deeper in the city (again, controlled for socioeconomic factors).¹⁸ Fish from rural rivers have longer telomeres than fish from urban, more polluted rivers.¹⁹ Same thing for rural versus urban birds.²⁰ There are so many ways that gardens and trees promote well-being and calmness, including in urban spaces.

In a recent conversation with a friend, I belittled urban nature, saying, “I’m starved of nature!” I was comparing my city walks with a long wilderness immersion. My friend gently (and rightly) pointed out to me that nature is everywhere, if I look

for it. We build cities on top of nature, and it bursts out joyfully everywhere it can. Birds build their nests in the trees, or wherever they can (gutters, city fire escapes, even in potted plants). Resilient plants spring up from cracks in the asphalt. Gardens explode in tiny patches of lawn or window boxes and other containers. Nature will always seep in, and that's something we can notice and even nurture. I find myself appreciating my garden more than I ever have and opening my sensory channels to all the nature that thrives in the city. I can get daily hits of urban nature that help immensely, while also knowing that I crave and benefit from wild nature. So now I'm going into my backyard every day to feel the ground under my bare feet, to feel the sun on my face, and to hear the birds.

Your Mission Today

Experience nature. Experience awe. Remind yourself of your place in the world. Remind yourself of the real “size” of your problems from a larger perspective. Sensory input from nature sends signals of safety, calmness, and grounding—this is deep and evolutionary. Even urban nature can do this. This is the green mind state.

We were really good at this during the pandemic, and we saw measurable benefits. Let's learn from it. The pandemic was a watershed time in terms of stress science: we learned so much about what really builds stress resilience and leads to greater well-being, greater joy. And nature was a really big piece of it. As people began getting vaccinated, workplaces began to open

up again, and life started to shift back—at least for the moment—toward pre-pandemic rhythms, I remember something that my colleague Elizabeth Blackburn, my partner in telomere research, said to me: “Let’s not let the pandemic go to waste.”

Crisis creates opportunities for change. We call this *post-traumatic growth*. Nature was a coping mechanism commonly used during the pandemic, and we learned from large-scale studies how truly beneficial it is. Let’s learn from this. Don’t go back inside. Go outside at every opportunity and experience the sensory bath of the natural world, which does wonders for your stress baseline, moving it toward green mind.

There’s a stability and a slowness to nature—it’s patient and resilient itself, and it inspires that in our bodies as well. Inside, we have the time pressures of our self-constructed day. Outside, we realize that the time frame that matters is measured in years and centuries. You walk in the woods and see that a large tree has fallen and died, and then you notice the new growth, and all the new shoots, the offspring that will grow for the next century. You see the history of the earth, and the future. And I must note here that due to the climate crisis, I also feel sadness and sometimes despair for the threat to nature, and I am sure you do too. We need nature for our well-being, and for our survival, and we need dramatic actions to protect it that we feel will have impact—we’ll talk more about this a bit later.

Today we tap into the deep calming power of nature in whatever way is accessible to you. If you can immerse yourself in raw nature today, wonderful. But remember: nature is potent and helpful to you in any form. It’s through the sensory chan-

nels that nature affects us, so there are many routes we can take. A walk in your neighborhood can work. Going into your backyard can work. You can bring the sounds and smells of nature into your home or office. Whichever method you choose, your mission is to recalibrate the nervous system by using the cues of the natural world. By creating a nature-evoking sanctuary inside, or going outside, you change your context and in doing so, change the processes of your mind and body to be calmer, more joyful, and more resilient. Today, let nature do the work for you.



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TODAY'S PRACTICE

LET NATURE SHRINK STRESS

Go-Bag Skill: Get Perspective and Get Connected

Today you can choose from three different options for your practice, depending on your capacity. Whatever you cannot do today, know that you can always try it in the future. Any of these practices will work to shrink stress, recalibrate the nervous system, and give you a calming “reset” to continue on in your day with more resilience.

Option 1: Immersion

Think of someplace you can go today that's raw nature, a place that feels like true wilderness, away from the sights and sounds of human urban life. Today you want to walk in nature for full immersion, attuning your mind outward, noticing both the small details and the visual sweeps. My friend Mark Coleman, who leads regular nature retreats²¹ and who is British, likes to call this type of walking “bimbling” about. This is wandering without a goal. You are not trying to get somewhere. You aren't trying to finish a hiking loop or achieve a peak. It is strolling slowly, noticing things as you go.

Ideally go alone. If you're more comfortable with others, that works too. But remember that this is not time to talk and catch up. It's a sensory experience. Walk in silence,

slowly, and far apart. Your primary mission is to let your senses be fully engaged. This is a time to become outwardly focused and open to what you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel. Otherwise, it's easy to become immersed in something else: your own spinning thoughts. If you're walking silently, slowly, but your mind is elsewhere, at the end of your walk, you won't really have seen a thing.

Let the magic portal of your attention open up to what is around you. Take a full breath, and begin your walk, with these goals in mind:

- **Walk quietly with open ears.** Listen for birds, breezes, movement, water. Try counting the number of sounds you hear. Once you start listening, it may feel like you notice the rich texture of the sounds of nature for the first time.
- **Notice the feel of the wind, your body as it moves, and your feet on the earth with each step.** As Thich Nhat Hanh says: "Print peace and serenity on the Earth. Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet."²²
- **Notice the changing views as you pass slowly.** Take in the ground, the plants, the sky, the colors, the light.
- **Pause to get close up, as close as you can.** Touch leaves, bark, flowers. Smell them. If you won't feel silly doing so, hug a tree trunk or at least lean against its weight and solidity.
- **Remind yourself you are made of nature.** The water in you is the water from this planet, your local groundwater

well or reservoirs. The pounds of microbiome you depend on (in your gut, lungs, skin) are shaped by your local environment, the produce you eat, the air you breathe (yes, there are millions of airborne microbes). Know and be known by the natural world, which you are part of.

When you walk in nature this way, with sensory portals open, the ruminative mind pauses, and whatever stress you are holding can dissipate, without your conscious effort. When you turn around to go home, you leave refreshed and ready to return to your demanding day with more reserves and a baseline set closer to green mind. You might take a photo of an image that moves you so you can re-experience this embodied feeling later.

Try bimbaling for at least fifteen minutes—or as long as you can! Take an hour if possible. There is no such thing as “too much” nature immersion.

Option 2: Reset with Urban Nature

For the most effective urban getaway, find a place where you don't see or hear cars. You could go to a nearby park or waterfront, even a quiet neighborhood. This works best when you can be surrounded by trees or other greenery, have some kind of view, or be near water. But use what you have. There is always the sky.

The goal here is to use your senses and turn off your “city vigilance.” If you can tap into your sensory experience here, you can get a helpful mini-version of the nature effect.

Take as much time as you have—even fifteen minutes can help your system reset. Walk slowly. Try to slow your breathing to your pace. Focus your attention on the elements of the natural world around you—see what you can notice. Observing wildlife, even in a cityscape, has an additional calming effect. You might see birds or squirrels. You can put up a feeder and attract hummingbirds to your yard. Watching a hummingbird, whose wings can beat up to eighty times per second, can induce feelings of awe.

Option 3: Bring Nature to You

For this method, bring nature into your own space. The senses are powerful. Sensations, smells, and sounds affect the nervous system. Studies on essential oils (from plants like cedar and especially lavender that release volatile organic compounds) show that inhalation leads to a brief but meaningful reduction in feelings of stress and anxiety.²³ This naturally works better with a short massage (rubbing it into your hands, feet, neck, or back). There are a lot of ideas out there about how essential oil aromas impact neurochemistry.²⁴

Find a space in your home where you can be alone and can sit comfortably (either on a chair or on the floor) or lie down. If you have access to calming aromatherapy oils, use them. You can also bring nature objects inside—flowers, grass, leaves, acorns, anything that evokes the outdoors and the natural world. Activate auditory signals of nature.

Find an audio of nature sounds that resonate with you—wind, rain, waves (simply typing “nature sounds” on YouTube or a music streaming app gives generous choices). Then, do a short breathing activity to help nudge you into that “green to blue mind” state:

- Notice your flow of breathing, with one hand on your belly and one hand on your chest. You might feel your belly inflate more than your chest.
- Take five breaths through the nose, but breathe out more slowly than you breathe in.
- Now turn your focus outward, toward your senses and the room.
- Focus on any sounds. What does the air feel like as you breathe in? What do you smell? Do you want to feel or examine any nature objects?
- Imagine you are deep in a nature scene, whether it’s by the water or in a forest, and visualize a detailed image.
- Tell yourself that this vast expanse of nature can hold any of your thoughts and emotions; it’s big enough for all of your experience. Let it hold and support you right now.

However you decide to get your dose of nature, beauty, or awe, I’d like to leave you with a quote from John Muir: “Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.”²⁵

Troubleshooting

Not feeling the wonder that others are raving about? Some feel it easily and are quickly able to name it. Others just don't. You may not feel it in the way described, or it may not come to you readily. But that doesn't mean nature doesn't work for you. The natural world will still do its work on your nervous system, regardless.

There is no single recipe for awe, and it's not a requirement, no matter how gorgeous the landscape. You don't need to force it. There may be other types of experiences that bring you the sense of wonder and expansiveness that some people feel in front of a mountain range or the ocean. Watching videos of heroic human acts or space often induces feelings of awe. Awe is an experience we can cultivate with our attention and open curiosity about things we don't usually notice. Notice your surroundings, from tiny details to a full, zoomed-out view. You might try snapping five pictures each week of some sights that give you pause, and describe in a few words the emotions or thoughts they inspire.

If You Aren't Comfortable in Nature . . .

If being in raw, wild nature feels uncomfortable to you, take your time. An environment you perceive as unfamiliar or even threatening will rocket your vigilance in the wrong direction. This doesn't mean you can't tap into the power of nature. Try noticing plants and trees in your familiar

neighborhood, or bringing the sounds and scents of nature into a space where you feel safe. Think about building up to more immersive nature experiences gradually.

You may have a strong preference for one type of nature over another. We have long known that people seek environments that fit their personality. Extroverts, for instance, have a higher need for social connection and activities, and feel more joy afterward than introverts, who will feel drained or taxed; extroverts feel comfortable in louder places like cafés. And, it turns out, they have their own, individual nature preferences: several studies by cultural psychologist Shigehiro Oishi and colleagues showed that extroverts prefer the ocean more than introverts do, whereas introverts prefer forests, mountains, and other quieter, more secluded places.²⁶

Your personal preferences and comfort levels are worth respecting, but do try to push yourself a little bit. Novelty and exploration are also ways of expanding our resilience. Even if you feel a little “on alert” the first time in an unfamiliar ecosystem, my bet is you will quickly acclimate and begin to reap the stress-reducing rewards.