



BY NANCY PARELLO

Forest Bathing

PAUSES THE STRESSES OF DAILY LIFE, PROMOTES RELAXATION AND WELL-BEING

Be still. Look, listen, breathe.

See the rippled bark of the hickory, the sprouting saplings next to the toppled oak, decay and rebirth connected. Hear the birdsong skip across the treetops, the breeze lift the leaves. Inhale the woody scent of the fallen pine needles mixing with the crumbling leaves on the forest floor.

Welcome to forest bathing — the meditative practice of soaking in a forest's aura, connecting to its living, breathing soul and, in the process, mending your own.

"In today's world, there's just so much going on in our lives, we have a hard time slowing down," said Leona Kral, a certified forest therapy guide, who leads walks on the Paulinskil Valley Trail in Sussex County. "By helping people slow down and become part of nature, they start to feel connected to the forest and the Earth. That is fundamental to well-being. We want to feel connected to ourselves, others and the world around us."

Inspired by the Japanese practice of Shinrin-yoku, forest bathing has been shown to provide a host of health benefits, including boosting mood, reducing stress, anxiety and depression, and improving cardiovascular and respiratory health, according to the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy, which trains and certifies forest therapy guides.

"It's similar to the Native American philosophy of honoring the beings around us, including trees, birds, water, the sky," explained Sharon

Lohse, a former registered nurse who is now a certified forest therapy guide in Montgomery Township. "We want to recognize we are just a being around many other beings, all connected."

Psychologically, forest bathing can help us relax and become grounded in the present, rather than lamenting the past or worrying about the future.

"Most mental health issues involve ruminating on the past — what I did wrong, what I regret — or future-focused fears, which leads to anxiety," explained Jacky Fernandez, a licensed counselor at The Counseling and Mindfulness Group in Hackettstown, who uses nature therapy in her practice. "When you're mindfully present in the forest, you're freeing yourself from that mental rumination and worry. This is when we experience happiness."

"Our environment has a great impact on who we are, our physical and psychological well-being," added Dr. Kristin Pannorfi, a licensed psychologist who uses nature therapy in her Connective Space Therapy practice in Oakland.



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Photo courtesy of Kristin Pannorfi



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"Forest bathing is a way to incorporate mindfulness through the five senses. I've had clients tell me they are noticeably more relaxed, calmer. You're releasing whatever has built up."

Studies have also found that spending time around trees can strengthen our immune system.

"The trees give off a chemical known as phytoncides that can help increase a certain type of white blood cell that helps fight viruses and boost immunity," Fernandez explained. "When we humans walk through the woods, we actually bathe in this chemical."

Forest bathing events are held sporadically throughout New Jersey by different organizations and private guides. While guides conduct these forest wanders in various ways, a typical experience involves spending one to three hours in the woods, quietly feeling the forest, participating in meditative exercises and sharing feelings with group members.

"When most people hear 'therapy guide,' they assume you're a therapist," Kral said. "I don't do therapy. I open the doors to the experience the forest provides. It's guiding everyone through that experience of allowing the forest to do its healing."

Tea ceremonies are also frequently part of the forest bathing experience. Lohse invites her guests to enjoy tea made from hickory bark or bee balm to complete the connection to the natural world.

Stephanie Kreiser, director for South Jersey at the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, attended a forest bathing event her organization sponsored at its preserve in Burlington County.

"I have always found peace in being outdoors," Kreiser said. "I wanted to see what a guided outdoor experience was like. It was less about walking and more about experiencing the forest through what you're seeing, hearing and breathing. I loved it. For me, it helped me think things through and feel less stressed."

Thankfully, New Jersey is awash in local and state parks (see page 32), giving just about everyone the chance to spend some time soaking up the forest.

"This is something that's accessible to everybody," noted Lauren Theis, who has led forest bathing events for New Jersey Conservation Foundation. "It doesn't cost money to smell the pine needles on the forest floor. Whether it's the trendy title of forest bathing or deepening an existing attraction to nature, it offers so much you can take with you for the rest of your life." ♦

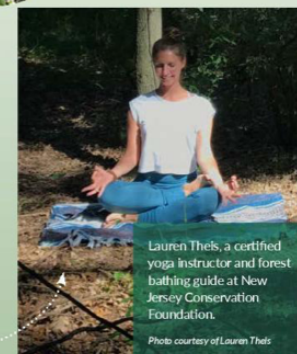
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Leona Kral, a certified forest therapy guide, who leads walks on the Paulinskil Valley Trail in Sussex County.

Photos courtesy of Giuseppe Di Caro



Lauren Theis, a certified yoga instructor and forest bathing guide at New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

Photo courtesy of Lauren Theis



A TYPICAL EXPERIENCE INVOLVES SPENDING ONE TO THREE HOURS IN THE WOODS, QUIETLY FEELING THE FOREST.

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