

# FINDING WELLNESS IN NATURE

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*The author's son accompanies her on a hike to Lost Lakes.*

The light breeze moving through the quaking aspens, the smell of fresh mountain air after a gentle rain, the musical sounds of a creek flowing nearby... Spending time in nature rejuvenates the spirit.

With stress and anxiety running wild in today's world, it is beneficial to make time for the outdoors. Did you know that spending just two hours in nature each week is shown to increase

wellbeing? Regular outings can have positive effects on our mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

Immersing ourselves in nature is easier than we may think. Many of us imagine this as a trip into our beautiful San Juan Mountains, a drive on the Grand Mesa, or a hike into the Uncompahgre wilderness. We like to get away into the depths of our majestic public lands. These fantastic nature escapes feed our humanity and strengthen our connections. Time in the wilderness invokes our curiosity, brings clarity to our inner selves, and renews our sense of calm.

So, what do we do when time is limited, when that day trip into the mountains just isn't in the cards? Consider taking in the views from the nearby Black Canyon National Park or sitting by the water's edge at Riverbottom Park in Montrose or at Ridgway State Park. Local city parks, open spaces, and recreation paths also call out to us. Just a few minutes from home, we can enjoy mindful time sitting by the river, walking on the trails, or resting on a blanket under a tree.

These days, many of us may not be able to leave home, whether due to health, pandemic distancing, or other limitations. So how can we get a bit of nature? Backyards are perfect for relaxing, digging in the cool garden soil, walking barefoot on the grass, and taking in a bit of fresh air. No yard? No worries. Sit by the window and notice the warm sunshine, the birds chirping as they fly about, and the soft summer breeze.

When we find ourselves outdoors, we benefit from mindfully experiencing the environment. The following simple practice will bring us closer to nature, our senses, and ourselves. Spend as much time with each of the exercises as you would like. If, for some reason, you are unable to physically use a sense, simply skip that part and move on to the next.

Sit or lie comfortably in a safe place. If possible, have bare feet or hands touching the earth. Take three deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth, focusing on the sensation of air moving into and out of the body. Move the focus to what the eyes are seeing—colors, patterns, shapes. If it feels comfortable, close your eyes. Moving your focus to hearing, notice any sounds. Next, focus on the sense of smell, noticing any scents. Finally, focus on physical sensation—air, textures, temperature. Open your eyes and experience all these senses at once, offering gratitude to everything around you.

If we crave a dose of nature and do not have an opportunity to get outside, we can call upon our creativity. Nature-based guided imagery has been shown to ease anxiety and improve wellbeing. Written or recorded scripts are helpful when learning this meditative practice and can be found online. I am happy to share as well. Common imageries include forest paths, mountain walks, and animal interactions.

Whether spending time outside or using guided imagery, consider keeping a nature journal of these experiences. Record any thoughts, physical sensations, feelings, and spiritual insights. This journaling can be done by writing or another artistic expression, such as drawing, poetry, singing, or painting.

Start today. Find your nature!