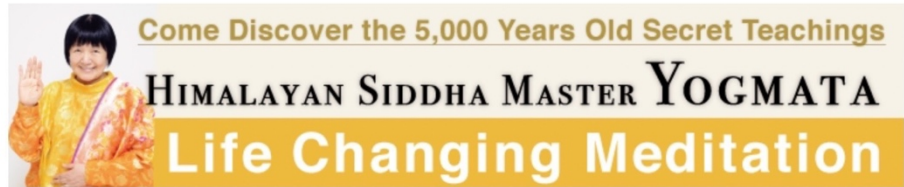


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The Evidence for Nature's Healing Powers

APRIL 4, 2018 BY [CARL GREER](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

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*In this excerpt from **Change Your Story of Your Health: Using Shamanic and Jungian Techniques for Healing**, Carl Greer, PhD, PsyD, writes about the healing powers of nature and how we can integrate its benefits into the new story of our health and wellness....*

Many people have intuited that nature has healing powers, but now researchers are discovering more about how our bodies and minds benefit from our interactions with nature. When it comes to scientific and medical research, some of the positive effects of nature are measured by study participants' self-reporting. Others are measured by lower blood pressure or lower levels of stress hormones such as cortisol. Some studies look at brain activity changes, which show we have a different internal experience when we are exposed to nature. These experiences contribute to better mental and physical health in the short and long term.

A 2007 British study showed a walk in nature reduced depression in 71 percent of the participants. That matches up with Japanese research into the practice of *shinrin-yoku*, which can be translated as "forest bathing," or immersion in a wooded environment. Studies have shown that walking in the woods lowers levels of the stress hormones cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline, boosting immunity and mood. It also reduces heart rate, lowers blood pressure, improves sleep, and increases anticancer protein levels.

Eva M. Selhub and Alan C. Logan have pointed out in their book *Your Brain on Nature* that the Victorians sent those with "nervous conditions" or tuberculosis to sanitariums. These facilities were typically located in pine forests, as evergreen trees were believed to emit something into the air that promoted healing. As it turns out, these claims were not the mere invention of imaginative promoters of sanitariums.

Selhub and Logan note, "Natural chemicals secreted by evergreen trees, collectively known as phytoncides, have also been associated with improvements in the activity of our frontline immune defenders." The air in natural areas, especially in forests or near moving waters such as rivers, tends to have a very high concentration of negative ions, known to increase levels of the mood-boosting neurotransmitter serotonin. These types of ions also are associated with a sense of greater vitality, and they reduce depression, fatigue, and stress. Breathing them in is easy to do when we are outdoors in nature.

Touching soil, or perhaps just being near it and breathing it in to some degree, benefits health, too. An increasing amount of research is showing a connection between microbes, encountered when outdoors, and a healthy gut colony of organisms that contributes to digestive health and even positive moods and protection from depression and anxiety. Dirt puts us in contact with microorganisms that establish their home in our digestive system.

As David Perlmutter, MD, wrote in his book *Brain Maker*: "The microbiome is dynamic. It's ever-changing in response to our environment—the air we breathe, the people we touch, the drugs we take, the dirt and germs we encounter, the things we consume, and even the thoughts we have. Just as food gives our bodies information, so does our gut bacteria speak to our DNA, our biology, and ultimately, our longevity." A healthy colony of microbes in our gut serves to promote our immunity as well as healthy cognitive abilities and emotional well being.

Gardening is one outdoor activity known to have many health benefits, including reduction of physical pain and stress, improved mental wellness, increased physical fitness, increased social contact and sense of community, and greater consumption of fruits and vegetables. In a garden, you are exposed to sunlight, needed for the production of vitamin D and serotonin. Both affect mood, reducing the risk of depression. Most of our serotonin, a neurotransmitter that contributes to a sense of contentment and happiness, is produced not in the brain, where it is used, but in our digestive system, where microorganisms from the environment live. It makes sense that being in the sunlight, touching dirt, and getting physical activity could improve depression and anxiety. Then too, planting, weeding, and harvesting vegetables in a garden offers the health benefit of greater accessibility to foods known to promote health.

One of my clients, who had cancer, told me that gardening made her feel happy and relaxed because it made her feel connected to the earth and life itself. She also said it made her less preoccupied with her cancer.

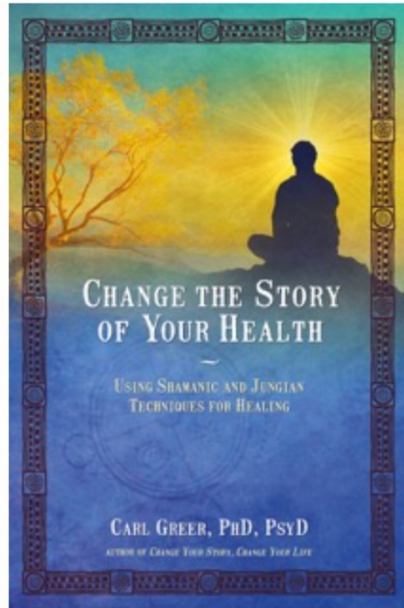
Although being in nature, enjoying it and moving our bodies as we appreciate it, is good for the body and mind, we are increasingly spending time indoors in artificial environments. Consequently, our eyes and skin are exposed to artificial light. We know that interaction with technological devices affects our eyesight. It's now common to have an eyeglass prescription for close reading, one for regular vision including distance vision, and yet another for reading from a computer screen or mobile device located 20 to 26 inches from our eyes (trifocals are common now, too). Children who spend more time indoors have an increased risk of nearsightedness. Researchers are still looking into how indoor lighting might be affecting us differently from how natural sunlight affects us. Fluorescent lighting, for example, may increase your chances of developing an eye disease or cataracts. Being indoors or in an urban setting, away from natural sounds and exposed to more mechanistic sounds created by humans, has deleterious health effects as well. According to a report issued by the Harvard School of Public Health in conjunction with the John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center, "Excessive anthropogenic [caused by humans] noise has been associated with annoyance, disruption of sleep and cognitive processes, hearing impairment, and adverse impacts on cardiovascular and endocrine systems." It seems the further away from nature we get, the more our bodies have to struggle to adjust to our unnatural lifestyles. Consider whether this struggle may be related to health problems you are experiencing.

Why are we so sensitive to the difference between natural and unnatural environments? How could something as simple as unnatural sounds have such strong effects on our emotional wellbeing and health? The answers may lie in how the body, brain, and nervous system process experiences in man-made environments versus natural environments. One benefit of spending time in nature is that you enter a mind state similar to the one typically achieved when using shamanic practices, and the nervous system is able to switch from an alert sympathetic state (fight or flight) to a soothing, restorative parasympathetic state (rest and digest) for better health. That switchover fosters greater immunity and triggers a process of cellular repair in the body.

Research on "green exercise"—in other words, exercise undertaken outdoors, in a natural area—shows it provides even greater health benefits than exercise indoors, presumably because of the effects of nature. Exercising near water may be especially advantageous.

In his book *Blue Mind*, author Wallace J. Nichols cites many neuroscience studies showing that our moods can be positively affected by time spent interacting with bodies of water. He suggests we humans evolved to be calmed by the mere sight of water before us—a patch of blue meeting the sky and above a field of green.

Perhaps we have inherited an ancestral memory of walking across a lush green landscape, rich with plants that feed us and the animals, and looking toward the horizon to be comforted by the sight of the nourishing waters of a lake or river. In such places, we may experience a sense of home as well as a connection to the land that helps us to better understand who we are and what our lives are about. Writing in *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Henry David Thoreau said, "A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature."



Carl Greer



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