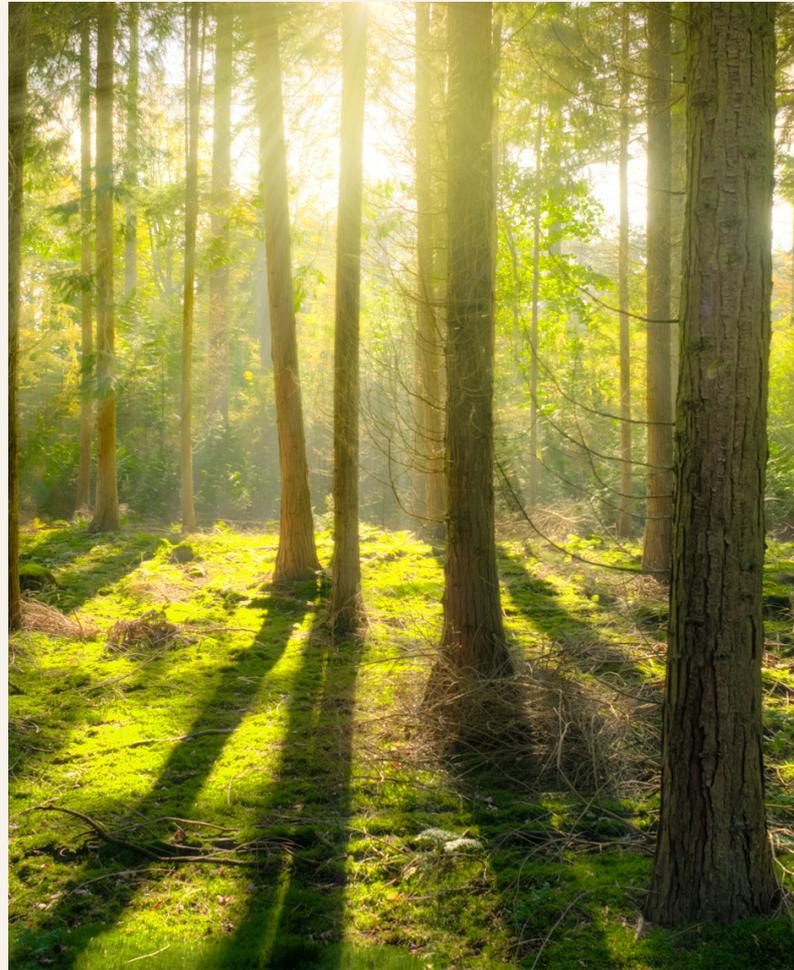


BE IN NATURE

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BEAUTIFUL NATURE
FOR HEALTH AND
WELLBEING



Though we can passively benefit from being around nature, it is much more effective to actively engage with it. It doesn't need to be anything strenuous: although there are plenty of positives associated with exercising outdoors, simply connecting with nature on a regular basis is enough to improve our wellbeing.



WESTON-SUPER-MARE
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'Nature connectedness' is an evolving area of study. The University of Derby has identified five 'pathways' that are useful to consider when spending time in green spaces:

- Activating senses – what can you see, hear, smell, touch and taste?
- Noticing beauty – take the time to appreciate a sunset, or even less obvious forms of beauty like the intricate patterns of a cobweb.
- Eliciting emotion – nature can easily provoke emotional responses. Though it's tempting to focus solely on happier feelings, like the happiness you may feel as flowers bloom in the spring, this is about recognising the whole spectrum of emotions that nature elicits. It's okay to acknowledge that grey days might make you feel a bit gloomy, too! Connection to what's happening around you is the most important bit.
- Finding meaning – forget-me-nots are a great example of a plant that carries a sense of meaning. What other flowers, trees or wildlife mean something to you? Why?
- Feeling empathy – take the time to imagine the world from the perspective of another living organism: a tree losing its leaves in winter, a bird whose eggs are hatching, or a plant being watered after a hot summer's day. How do you think they feel?

There are plenty of activities that naturally incorporate all five pathways. A great example is forest bathing (or shinrin-yoku), a Japanese method of engaging with nature. www.forestryengland.uk/blog/forest-bathing provides a useful summary; in essence, forest bathing is the process of slowing down and using all of your senses to immerse yourself in a woodland space (although the concept can certainly be transferred to other natural settings!). Some people choose to lie down, while others slow their walk to a gentle stroll. It's a particularly good form of mindfulness for those who may struggle to 'switch off': having external stimuli makes it harder for your mind to wander compared to traditional meditation. What's more, trees emit invisible chemicals called phytoncides that reduce stress hormones like cortisol, lower blood pressure and improve immunity, meaning there are passive benefits to spending time around them too.

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'The Wildlife Trust's 30 Days Wild programme is a fantastic way to introduce children to nature connectedness, as it was developed with the pathways in mind. It's been demonstrated that higher levels of nature connectedness correlate with a higher likelihood of someone engaging in nature conservation, and even pro-environmental behaviours like recycling, so encouraging younger generations to get involved can only be a good thing for the future of our planet! Having read all the above, it may seem as if nature connectedness is an obvious solution to plenty of problems. In terms of health, the NHS is starting to agree. They have adopted a 'life-course' approach to healthcare, meaning that more importance will be placed on prevention of illness, through self-care and community care, rather than relying on clinical interventions when someone is already unwell. In other words: wellbeing before health, and wellbeing as health. One element of this approach is a move to Integrated Care Systems, which aim to link up health and care services locally. In Weston-super-Mare, we are part of the Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucester ICS. This means that money is split across the whole ICS rather than just traditional health settings and services. As such, it is important to be able to demonstrate how investing in things like green spaces will translate financially, especially over the whole course of someone's life.

Ultimately, the aim is to increase the amount of years an individual spends in good health over their lifespan, especially since health issues tend to cluster towards the end of life. Many of the risk factors for poor health are things that build up over many years, such as stress. Green spaces are a great example of an intervention in this case, as an individual being able to reduce their stress levels reduce the impact on their body, and thus their need to rely on healthcare services for more serious resulting symptoms later in life. It means potential reductions in prescription costs, GP appointments and other clinical interventions.

People can be supported to use green spaces to improve their wellbeing in a variety of ways, both formally and informally. While some individuals are happy to go out and try activities for themselves, without the need for referral, others may need more support – which is where green social prescribing comes in. The government defines social prescribing as “a means of enabling GPs, nurses and other health and care professionals to refer people to a range of local, non-clinical services”, recognising that there are many factors that can affect wellbeing and allowing for more holistic treatment plans. Green social prescribing is a branch of social prescribing whereby individuals are referred to nature-based services to alleviate their symptoms. This could be anything from a walking group to nature photography courses.

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'Theoretically, a community with good social prescribing networks would have less need for clinical medical interventions, as early symptoms of stress, anxiety and even some physical issues could be mitigated before developing into more serious illnesses. With the average cost of a GP appointment sitting at around £40, it is clear that reducing the amount of time individuals spend in clinical settings could also reduce costs for the NHS. Once further referrals, treatments and prescriptions over someone's life-course are accounted for, the benefits of early community-based interventions are obvious. Of course, financial benefits are only part of the story – the effects on individuals' wellbeing cannot be expressed through money alone.

Weston's local ICS, BNSSG, was selected as a green social prescribing pilot area. A programme called Healthier Together has been developed to test the concept, and a directory listing local services is available to browse. It's certainly worth a look, as there are a whole range of activities taking place across BNSSG.

However, it doesn't take an organised event to start benefitting from nature. Just taking the time to actively notice 3 good things in nature for the next week will improve your connection – give it a try!

