

Trees by the Tub-full

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A hot soothing bath is a tried-and-true remedy for calming our nerves, but science has now shown that a better tonic for anxiety and stress is bathing in the forest, fully dressed. True story. Of course, a few details would be helpful.

In a blinding flash of the obvious, research has proven that being in the woods makes us feel better. To be fair, the scientific process requires measurable evidence, so in this case, real-time brain imaging with fMRI and PET scans, as well as blood-cortisol levels, heart rate and blood pressure, were used in a host of studies which showed that being immersed in nature does us a lot of good, even if we're skeptical.

Canada is blessed with an abundance of forested land, so we're ahead of the curve in a new fad headed our way called "forest bathing." In Japan this has been going on for decades, but it has recently arrived in North America. Apparently in Los Angeles, forest bathing is an organized activity led by trained, certified forest-bathing guides. I'm not saying that's wrong, but really, all you have to do is step into a forest for 20 minutes or more. That's it. No fees; no equipment to buy. Although walking as you "bathe" is ideal, you'll reap benefits even if you just sit or lie there inert.

Lest you think this is a lot of fuss about nothing, remember that a solid majority of Canadians reside in urban areas. Down in the US, a 1994 study revealed that Americans spent 93% of their time indoors, and that was before the Internet and smart phones. We may rate better, but I doubt it's by much.

In light of this, and the mounting evidence of how important nature is to our health, mainstream medical doctors in Canada as well as in many European countries now actually prescribe walks in the woods. In the US, more than 500 doctors have joined a group called Park Rx America, a "non-profit organization whose mission is to decrease the burden of chronic disease and increase health and happiness by virtue of prescribing Nature during the routine delivery of healthcare."

Distance from wild forests need not be a barrier for urban dwellers, as a well-treed park will do just fine. In fact, researchers say that if we could get our cities and suburbs to a tree-canopy density of 40% – which is quite feasible, by the way – people could accrue the benefits of "bathing" in a forest right in their neighbourhood.

The positive effect that trees have on our health is not some vague notion – it is being quantified, and the results are staggering. Governments are very interested in potential health-care cost reduction which can be attained through exposure to nature. South of our border, where they have by far the most expensive health care system in the world, Dr. Kathy Wolf of the University of Washington calculates the annual US savings to be at least \$2.7 billion, and possibly as much as \$6.7 billion.

Early in the history of public zoos, keepers noticed that animals deprived of a naturalistic environment tended to get violent, and became ill more often. The same holds true for the human animal. Dr. Frances Kuo from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana says humans living in landscapes that

lack trees undergo patterns of social, psychological and physical breakdown that are strikingly similar to those seen in other animals deprived of their natural habitat.

The advantages of experiencing nature are amazing. In a Feb. 2014 article in the guardian.com, Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, tells how patients in rooms with tree views had shorter hospital stays and needed less pain medication compared to patients without a natural vista. Elderly adults tend to live longer if their homes are near a park or other green space, regardless of social or economic status. College students do better on cognitive tests when their windows face natural settings, and after just an hour in the woods, memory performance and attention span improves 20%.

Scandinavian countries quietly embraced this idea long ago. In Norway there's a movement called *Friluftsliv*, "open-air life," which kind of boils down to forest bathing. They even have a law, *Allemannsrett*, or "all humankind's right," which allows anyone to walk on rural land not under cultivation.

We need to think of nature as an essential part of our health, and treat it accordingly. I encourage everyone to start forest-bathing as soon as possible. For that over-the-top stress, however, perhaps you could arrange to have your tub moved into the woods to get the best of all worlds.

For more information on forest bathing, see <https://www.webmd.com/balance/news/20190611/forest-bathing-nature-time-hot-health-advice> Dr. Wolf's research on the health benefits of trees can be found at <http://www.naturewithin.info/>

*An ISA-Certified Arborist since 1996, **Paul Hetzler** wanted to be a bear when he grew up, but failed the audition. Having gotten over much of his self-pity concerning that unfortunate event, he now writes essays about nature. His book "Shady Characters: Plant Vampires, Caterpillar Soup, Leprechaun Trees and Other Hilarities of the Natural World," is available on amazon.*