

Benefits of Being in Nature: The next step into outdoors health is yours.

		
<u>Black Creek State Forest:</u> a botany lesson	<u>Old Croton Aqueduct:</u> a bike ride through history	<u>Harriman State Park:</u> Psalm Sunday hike

Shinrin-yoku, the Japanese word for hiking in nature, translates to “forest bathing.” And like a soothing bath, time in nature is healthy for our body, is peaceful for our minds, and brings rest to our souls. Central to *shinrin-yoku*, and time in nature, is the outdoor use of our senses: what do you smell? what do you feel? what do you hear? what do you see? what do you taste? what do you perceive with the mind’s eye?

I am always amazed at how new research continues to shed light on the many unknown benefits of breast feeding, massage, and even checkers. Who knew that breast fed babies would be more intelligent? Who knew that massage removes impurities from the body? Who knew that playing checkers would stem the tide of memory loss? So, too, you might be surprised at the many benefits of being in nature.

- Getting outside improves distance vision and lowers the chance of nearsightedness.
- Spending time outside raises levels of Vitamin D, which helps protect us from bone problems, heart disease, and diabetes.
- Stress levels fall within minutes of being exposed to natural settings.
- Stress levels are lower for exercise outside compared to the same exercise indoors.
- Being outdoors on a bright day increases serotonin levels in the brain which improves disposition and outlook.
- Even a view of the outdoors improves health: hospital surgery patients with windows to nature recovered faster and were discharged quicker than those who did not.
- Exposure to the outdoors, or even to outdoor scenes, measurably lowers cortisol which suppresses the immune system leading to poor health.
- Outdoor exercise has a dramatic anti-depressive effect.
- Outdoor activity improves the cardiovascular system which lessens the incidence of heart disease.
- Aerobic exercise enhances the respiratory system improving the lives of those with breathing ailments.

- Outdoor exercise enhances the endocrine system which regulates mood, metabolism, and growth.
- Outdoor exercise improves muscle tone.
- Outdoor activity burns calories which is effective in weight control.
- The moderate physical stress of outdoor activities builds bone strength and delays the onset of osteoporosis.
- Voluntary exercise is associated with long-term improvements in mental functions and is the single best thing one can do to slow the cognitive decline that accompanies normal aging.
- Physical exertion affects the brain chemistry that provides short-term pain relief.
- Exposure to natural settings reduces symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).
- Children who have ample time playing outside are more creative in their play, less aggressive, and show better concentration.
- Students in schools with environmental education programs score higher on standardized tests in math, reading, writing, and listening.
- Play enhances children's emotional development, while loss of free time and a hurried lifestyle can contribute to anxiety and depression.
- Outdoor exercise produces endogenous opioids in the brain which makes outdoor activity feel good.

We are fortunate in this Hudson River valley region to have nature so accessible to us: a multitude of state parks (NYSparks.com) and Scenic Hudson preserves (ScenicHudson.org). Several local retreat centers offer outdoor programs (HolyCrossMonastery.com, GraymoorCenter.org). And there are many volunteer organizations to make outdoor access easy: the Adirondack Mountain Club (midHudsonADK.org) provides a plethora of local hikes and walks as well as paddling instruction and outings; the New York – New Jersey Trail Conference (NYNJTC.org) provides trail building opportunities, and the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC-NY.org) offers a multitude of activities for all skill levels. Henry David Thoreau writes, "In wildness is the preservation of the world." In fact, time in nature is needed for the restoration of each person in the world. The next step into outdoors health is yours.