

...wellbeing in the National Park

Ten ideas for Mindfulness in Nature





Mindful walking in nature - slowing right down

Mindful walking is very simple, you are just turning your focus to the movement and rhythm of your body whilst walking. Walk naturally at a comfortable pace and become aware of your posture and breathing. Focus on the walking itself, focusing awareness on the rhythm of the movement of your legs, each foot as it lands on the ground and presses down into the earth, and the feeling of fluid movement of all the muscles in your legs. Feel how the body balances and how many parts of the body are involved with the motion of walking. Doing this whilst being outside in nature can also allow you to tune into the sensations of being outside – the bird song, the feel of wind on your face, the colours of the natural world around you.



Mindful breathing

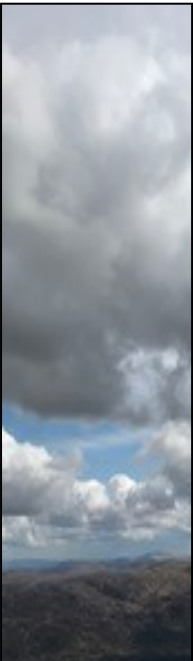
Using your breath as a focus to anchor the mind in the present for even a short period of time can be very beneficial. One simple exercise involves pausing for a moment before setting out on a walk to take ten deep and slow breaths and paying attention to how they feel – the depth, the rhythm, the quality of the air. Later on in the walk, repeat this by pausing to take ten breaths and again notice how they feel, paying particular attention to the feeling of the air flowing in and out of the body. Often there is a real contrast to the quality of the breath after walking in nature for a while – slower, calmer and more at ease.

A more focused mindful meditation is the Breathing Canopy. Looking up into the canopy of a tree, as you breathe in observe one leaf and as you breathe out move your attention to another leaf – keep doing this - one breath, one leaf. If the tree is not in leaf, you can move out along the branch, focusing your breath on different sections until you get to the tiny twigs at the end of the branch. Your mind will wander off to other things, but gently bring it back each time to the breath and the tree.



Immersing yourself in birdsong

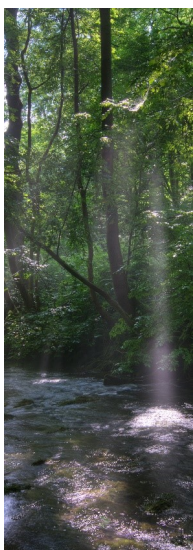
Getting close to nature can help to relieve the pressures of modern life, and one of the simplest ways to connect with nature is to tune into bird song. Research has shown that of all the natural sounds, bird song is the most restorative and can help to improve your mood. Although the dawn chorus is the time when you get the most bird song, you don't have to get up super early to catch this, as bird song can be heard throughout the day. In any area where there is some tree cover, you are likely to hear some birds singing. Don't worry about trying to work out what type of bird is singing; just enjoy the beauty of nature's very own symphony.



Sky Gazing

Nothing ever stays the same, the present moment will always be different from the next. A good way of exploring this idea is to spend some time looking at the sky. It doesn't matter whether the sky is clear and blue or overcast and grey; it is always full of shifting and changing patterns whatever the weather. Spend 5 minutes just gazing at the sky and watching the ever changing view; you can look down at a mirror to look at the sky or even lie down.

Distractions and thoughts can be likened to the weather passing across a clear blue sky. Sometimes those thoughts can be calm and clear but on other occasions they can be wild and stormy, but no matter what happens to the weather, the blue sky is always there.



Going with the flow

There is something particularly relaxing about spending time near water and just observing its movement. This can be the flow of either a stream or river, waves lapping on the shore of a lake, reservoir or sea or even maybe water being blown by the wind in a puddle. Spend some time observing this movement, paying full attention to the patterns, sounds, colours and rhythms. You could visualise any other thoughts that pop into your head, being taken away by the flow of the water.



Grounding

Making a physical connection to the earth can have a very grounding and calming effect. Choose your own special place in the natural world; this could be in a quiet area of a local park (preferably away from too many people/distractions) or further afield in a woodland, riverside, beach, hill top etc. Settle yourself down in this special place, either sitting or lying down, if you can. Give up the whole weight of your body to gravity and let yourself relax down towards the ground. Spend some time being quiet and still, say for 5 – 10 minutes (you choose), either with your eyes open observing what is around you, or zoning out. You may start to feel calmer and at one with nature, perhaps even feeling part of the natural world. If you want to feel a deeper connection to the earth beneath you, why not kick off your shoes and have a go at barefoot walking.



Exploring a Natural Object

The concept of "beginner's mind" encourages you to study an object with an attitude of curiosity and openness, as if you have seen it for the very first time. Taking the time to closely explore a natural object with all your senses, can be a very immersive activity that enables you to focus your attention in the present moment. Try this with any natural object that takes your interest, it could be a leaf, a flower, a stone or something bigger like a whole tree. Look closely at the object to notice the detail that you might not normally notice. For example - is it symmetrical; is it the same colour on both sides; are there any interesting patterns? Now close your eyes and start to explore the texture of the object, is it rough or smooth; slimy or damp etc.? You could try brushing it against your cheek or tracing the outline with your finger. Does it smell of anything? Hold it under your nose; see what you notice every time you inhale. If you know that your object is edible (maybe a leaf or a fruit like a blackberry) explore the taste by taking a small bite. Without chewing, simply explore the sensations of having it on your tongue for a few moments. Then start to chew and notice the flavours and feel the texture with your tongue.

Another way to truly focus your attention on a natural object, is to have a go at sketching it. It doesn't matter if you are not an expert at drawing; the simple act of observing something and then trying to record this by drawing can be very immersive.



Appreciating the Beauty of Nature

The natural world is a very beautiful place that we often overlook in our general everyday busyness. The simple act of slowing down and taking the time can help us to appreciate the beauty of the natural world. This could be pausing to take in a fantastic view of the landscape. Alternatively, it could be looking more closely at a natural object, such as moss or lichen growing in crack in a wall or the iridescent wing case of a beetle.

Some specific activities to help you tune into this beauty include:

Collecting colours and shapes in nature – on a short walk, collect small pieces of natural materials (part of a leaf, petal of a flower, tip of a blade of grass etc.) and arrange them on a small piece of card with sticky tape. This will help you to slow down and focus on the natural world. A different focus could be given to the collecting task e.g. different shades of one colour, different shapes of natural objects.

Environmental art – artists like Andy Goldsworthy use the natural world to create art. Using natural materials in this way can also help to appreciate the beauty of the natural world.

View finders – either using a card frames or framing a view with your hands; choose a favourite view of the natural world around you. The view can be large scale of the landscape or focus on something nearby like a flower or a tree. Maybe come up with a title for the view.

Compass poem – you can record the beauty of a stunning 360° view by slowly turning around on the spot to take in everything you can see as if you were a video camera. Pause occasionally to make a record of what you can see, noting this either mentally or writing it down. These collected words, more often than not result in a lovely poem to help remember that special view.

Photography/videos – this can also be a good way to observe and record the beauty of the natural world. Taking slow-motion photographs of insects like bees and hoverflies can really show the beauty of their flight.

Looking at the finer details in nature – using magnifiers to look at leaves, flowers or invertebrates, just for the pleasure of observing them rather than identification.



Noting Nature

Research has shown that our minds are more inclined to focus and remember negative experiences, feeling and emotions. However, this can be counter-acted by using positive psychology interventions like noting and savouring. Simply taking the time to note (mentally/ written) and savour positive experiences, thoughts, feelings and emotions will decrease anxiety and stress and will promote and prolong feelings of wellbeing. Why not make nature the focus of your noting and savouring?

First comes the noticing part. Try and make some time each day to spend time noticing nature. It is best if you can get outside into your garden or some local green area, but you can also do this even if you do not have access to outdoor space. If you can see a little nature from your home, some plants, a tree, visiting birds etc., then you can also do this exercise every day. Simply take a moment to tune in and notice everyday nature.

Then it is time to note the things that you have noticed. Write down the things that you have noticed in nature. It can be just a few words or you can write a sentence – it is up to you. It could be as simple as hearing a bird singing or the movement of a tree in the breeze, seeing changes in the clouds or noticing the beauty in nature. You can share this record with a friend or family member.



Expressing Gratitude

Focussing on feelings of gratitude has been shown to be beneficial for our levels of life satisfaction and general wellbeing. By making a connection with a natural place that means something to you, you can tap into those feelings of gratitude. Do this by either recollecting that favourite wild place in your mind or try the activity when you are in that place. Take a few moments to reflect on what is unique and special about this place. Be grateful for all the things that have shaped the landscape around you. Think about the geological forces that shaped the landscape - how the bedrock was formed over millions and billions of years. Acknowledge the elemental forces that have weathered the landscape too, and formed the beautiful shapes and patterns before you. The water that has carved through the rock and the sunlight that has been transformed into energy by the plants, creating the right conditions for life to thrive. Finally, appreciating all the people that have shaped the landscape before you, by managing the land and perhaps fighting for the freedom to be able to enjoy it.