

# Forest Therapy

*How a walk in the woods reduces depression*

In Japan it's covered by insurance. There it's called *Shinrin-yoku*, which means *forest bathing*. The practice is actually quite simple, and involves walking in a forest for 1-4 hours. It helps if you engage with the environment, stopping to touch, explore and notice the surprises a forest has to offer.

A series of studies have shown that forest therapy improves depression and general health, including diabetes, pain, and blood pressure. It's particularly helpful in people who have both depression and physical health problems, and it has helped depression due to alcoholism and trauma as well.

A walk in the woods literally changes how the brain works. In one study, a 90-minute walk in the woods calmed the prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain associated with worry and negative thinking. In that study, people were directed to walk in the woods or the city. Those who took their walk in the woods returned with significantly less ruminative worry than those who had strolled in the urban landscape. Similar studies have found that forest walks improve ADHD and concentration more than walks in suburban or urban environments.

Other studies find health benefits after only 20 minutes in the woods. We know that a single walk in the woods can improve physical and mental health, but we don't know the exact frequency of walks that are needed to treat depression. It's likely the benefits build up over time, and that walking every 1-2 days over a week will bring about a significant benefit. Even a weekly walk in the woods could help – studies find the physiologic benefits of a trip to the woods last for a week.



## How it works

No one knows exactly how forest therapy works. Part of it is visual: forest scenes alone can bring about health benefits. In one study, people whose hospital rooms overlooked a forest had shorter post-surgical stays than those whose windows faced an urban wall.

Wood itself may have mental benefits. Japanese researchers have found that the right amount of wood decor in a room reduces stress levels, but that too much wood can be suffocating and increase stress. The ratio they've arrived at – walls covered with 30-40% wood – is similar to the ratio found in natural forests.

The air may also have something to do with it. A humid forest is rich in negative air ions, which are known to improve mood. Ocean air and waterfalls are also good sources of these ions. If, like most of us, you have to stay indoors for much of the day there are devices that produce them and treat depression as well as an antidepressant:

[moodtreatmentcenter.com/airionizer.pdf](http://moodtreatmentcenter.com/airionizer.pdf)

Plants also produce antimicrobial compounds called phytoncides and these may contribute to the benefits. Keeping plants in the office or home has health benefits as well.

## Start Local

North Carolina is rich in forests, rivers, and lakes. Walks near water produce similar benefits as walks in the woods. Find local

resources at [traillink.com](http://traillink.com) or google “Nature trails.”

*Winston-Salem and Clemmons:* Bethabara Park, Reynolda Gardens (note the forest trail behind the house), Salem Lake, Graylin, Muddy Creek Greenway, Triad Park, Horizons Park, CG Hills Park, Tanglewood Park.

*Mount Airy:* Pilot Mountain, Hanging Rock Park (try the waterfalls there for an extra boost of negative air ions).

*Greensboro:* The bridge behind our office leads to a forest trail. Also try Wild Turkey Mountain Bike Trail, Guilford Courthouse Military Park, City of Greensboro Country Park, The Bog Garden, Hester Park, Greensboro Arboretum.

### **Official Forest Therapy**

Certified forest therapists are trained to help people interact with the forest in ways that foster mindfulness and gratitude, modes of thinking that reduce depression. You can find guides at this site, which includes some near Asheville and Chapel Hill:

[natureandforesttherapy.org/find-a-guide.html](http://natureandforesttherapy.org/find-a-guide.html)

Resorts with forest therapy (prices vary!):

Virginia: [earthwalkways.com](http://earthwalkways.com)

Pennsylvania: [thelodgeatwoodloch.com](http://thelodgeatwoodloch.com)

New York: [www.shimmeringlight.info](http://www.shimmeringlight.info)

Arizona: [lauberge.com/spa/forest-bathing](http://lauberge.com/spa/forest-bathing)

Read more: *Your Brain On Nature* by Eva M. Selhub, MD and Alan C. Logan, 2014.

—Chris Aiken, M.D., updated 4/16/2017