

4 Ways to Maximize the Benefits of 10 Minutes Outside

We know from science that carving out a few minutes for a breath of fresh air is essential for our health and well-being. “Being in nature is good for us. We feel energized, more clear-headed, and more content,” Inna Khazan, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and faculty member at Harvard Medical School, tells Thrive. “Research tells us that spending just two hours a week in nature brings significant improvement to our health and well-being.” And it’s just as effective if you break it up into small chunks throughout the week, she points out.

Here are four ways to enjoy the healing power of nature today:

Find a spot to take a pause

The experience of being still – without phones or distractions, and preferably in a park or green space – is particularly valuable for those who work in an environment with little or no natural light. If you’re running around at work all day, lingering for a while on a park bench can be restorative, and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. As spiritual teacher and author Eckhart Tolle explains in his latest video, it’s about simply “being” for a while, rather than busily “doing” all day long.

Focus on one detail at a time

When you are outside, pay attention to whatever your eyes are drawn to: the veins and patterns on a leaf, the vivid colors of a petal. Using every one of your five senses, absorb the sensations around you. “Look at the trees, the grass, the squirrels racing up trees; hear the birds chirping; smell the fresh air,” Khazan recommends, noting that you’ll enjoy your break more by focusing on these subtle details. Plus, deliberate deep focus can reignite your creativity and sense of wonder for the miracles of nature.

Hug a tree (or touch one)

Campaigns in both Iceland and Israel have encouraged people to hug trees during the pandemic when they can’t hug friends and family members. It may sound odd, but the initiatives are grounded in science: Studies have found that directly connecting with nature can combat feelings of loneliness as well as increasing joy. And if wrapping your arms around a tree trunk isn’t something you’d consider (especially in public), just touching the bark or some greenery can produce a similar effect.

Watch a nature show

Research has shown that connecting to nature virtually can also have a positive impact on our well-being. So when you don’t have a chance to get outdoors, just look at a photo of a lake or forest, or watch a natural history show. One recommendation: Check out the breathtaking videos by cinematographer Louie Schwartzberg. His work will transport you to a wondrous world that’s completely different from your own, while lifting your spirits, too.