# Walking In The Forest Is Better For You Than You Can Imagine

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Daniel Krieger

They say we ought to slow down from time to time to stop and smell the flowers. That sounds great in theory, especially for those of us moving at hyper speed, but the logistics of it are another matter.

One way to get a quick taste of this slowing down business is by doing what the Japanese call *shinrin-yoku*, or "forest bathing," which entails basking in the forest's atmosphere as you move slowly, calmly, and mindfully, soaking it in through all five senses while lingering for a few hours. A host of studies show that this can do wonders for your health.

This modern take on an ancient practice got its start in Japan in 1982, when the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries began promoting walks in the woods as a tonic for mind and body. About a decade ago, they also began funding research into the health effects of "forest therapy," and the practice has been catching on all over Asia, as well as North America and Europe.

Yakushima, Japan.  iStock

Qing Li, an associate professor at the Nippon Medical School in Tokyo and president of the Japanese Society of Forest Medicine, writes in an email that Japan, with 70 percent of its land forested, is well-suited to this practice, and there are now 60 Forest Therapy Trails designated for *shinrin-yoku,* visited by millions every year. Dr. Li's research shows that forest therapy can boost immunity, lower blood pressure, heart rate and stress hormones as well as increase energy and reduce anxiety, depression and anger.

Li says the benefits come mainly from breathing in "aromas from the trees" known as phytoncides, an array of aerosols that trees give off for pest control. With its proven medicinal value, Li believes it's time for mainstream medicine to embrace forest therapy. "The final goal of my research," he writes, "is to introduce forest therapy into the national healthcare system in Japan."

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As forest therapy gains momentum, academics around the world are becoming interested in it as well. In 2010, the International Society of Nature and Forest Medicine (INFOM) was established to bring them together (with Dr. Li named vice president and secretary general). Mark Ellison, the head of INFOM's North American Chapter and founder of the Hiking Research blog, says he first heard about forest bathing seven years ago while working on his dissertation about how nature impacts humans. A hiking and nature enthusiast based in North Carolina, he was intrigued. "I thought, 'this is what I've been experiencing, but I didn't have words to explain it,'" he says.

Ellison is currently setting up an online community and aims to host a conference. He also holds classes on forest therapy. "The strength of it is that it's bringing people from different disciplines together," he says, including "physicians, psychologists, Parks and Recreation people, occupational and physical therapists, people with all kinds of backgrounds."

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*Shinrin-yoku* has also caught the attention of Amos Clifford, a wilderness guide and former psychotherapist in Northern California with decades of experience in mindfulness meditation. Clifford launched Shinrin-yoku.org in 2012 with his partner Maria Buitenhuis, to advance what he calls "the medicine of simply being in the forest."

Clifford has developed a weeklong training program for guides to learn how to lead these walks, which cover about half a mile in three hours. His first training course took place last September, and more are on the way. (See the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs, which Clifford founded, for details.) Soon, at least six dozen trained guides will be leading walks around the country. The guides themselves are not therapists, Clifford clarifies: "The forest is the therapist." The role of the guide is merely to help participants slow down, call attention to their senses and get them to reflect and share.

Of course, anyone can take a walk in the woods, but the advantage of starting with a guide is to avoid moving too quickly and getting lost in thought without focusing on the five senses. The guide serves to anchor walkers in the present and make sure they get the most out of what the forest is offering them.

This video from Shinrin-yoku.org offers tips for anyone who'd like to try it on their own:

Clifford's long-term goal is to make forest therapy part of the United States healthcare system. But first, he said, "we've got to build an infrastructure," which would include training centers all over the country that can turn out thousands of guides. "I want to create a whole new category of job," he says.

Soon there will be enough certified guides in Sonoma County to propose a pilot project to large healthcare providers like Kaiser and Sutter. With a successful pilot and a national guide certification system in place, it will be hard for the medical community to ignore it.

"What would it be like if we could get the largest referral network in this country, the medical system, to start sending people out into nature to reconnect with it?" Clifford says. “That's the inspiring image we have."

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