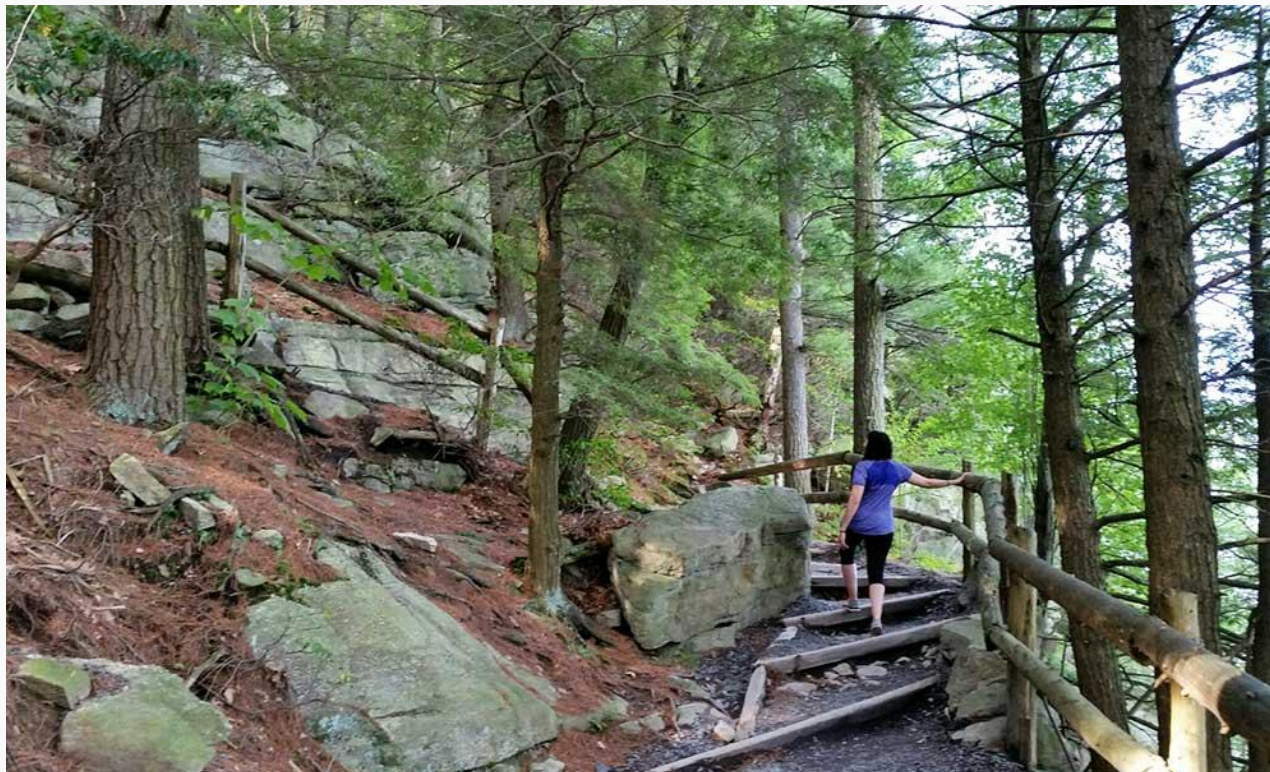


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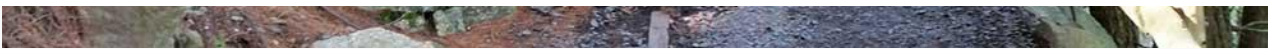
# I Tried 'Forest Bathing' And This Is What Happened

JULY 27, 2016 By BARBARA BRODY



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[An anxious person](#) by nature, I've tried numerous tactics to prevent my mind from racing, but I never had much luck with alternative remedies: Yoga was fine, but I'm far from flexible and reciting mantras made me giggle. Deep breathing? Boring. I hated acupuncture. So when I heard about "forest bathing," I figured I might as well give it a shot. Spending some time in nature had to be better than being literally pinned to a table. (Lose up to 25 pounds in 2 months—and look more radiant than ever—with *Prevention's* new [Younger In 8 Weeks plan!](#))

But about 5 minutes after I volunteered to investigate and write about the topic, I panicked: What, exactly, had I agreed to do?

I soon confirmed that forest bathing has nothing to do with taking a bath in the woods (thanks, Google!); the terms "forest immersion" or "forest meditation" are probably more accurate—although less colorful—ways to describe it. But I was still wary. If forest bathing turned out to involve chanting with a bunch of hippies while we danced around trees, I was not going to be happy.

What kept me somewhat motivated—or, at least, prevented me from bailing—was the knowledge that my adventure would take me to [Mohonk Mountain House](#), a Victorian castle/historic resort in New York's Shawangunk Mountains. I was invited to join Nina Smiley, Mohonk's director of mindfulness programming, for a one-on-one introduction to forest bathing. So I packed my sneakers and a water bottle and hoped for the best.



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### Ready, set, hike

When I met Nina, the first thing she did was [take away my smartphone](#). I couldn't decide if I should be thankful for the (forced) respite from interruptions or nervous about the fact that no one would be able to contact me. Maybe the fresh mountain air was already working some magic, but I quickly made peace with going phone-free. I also felt better upon learning that Nina has a PhD in psychology from Princeton and is the coauthor of a book called *The Three Minute Mediator*. She was clearly a practical person of science, not the new-age-y guru that I had been expecting/dreading.

Nina led me down a wooded path toward a scenic overlook above Lake Mohonk, and we sat on a bench while she offered her take on [meditation](#). I confessed that I had tried meditating before but found sticking with it to be next to impossible. Sure, I know that [studies have found](#) it may alleviate [anxiety](#), lower blood pressure, and perhaps even [slow brain aging](#), but I always felt silly doing it. Besides, who has the time to sit quietly in a dark room and do nothing for any duration of time?

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Apparently, I was doing it wrong (for me, anyway).

"Mindfulness [meditation](#) is simply being present in the moment in a gentle, nonjudgmental way," Nina explained, adding that you can meditate just about anywhere for any duration of time. The key is to tune into something, [such as your breath](#), while letting distractions

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float away. The nonjudgmental part resonated with me: When unwanted thoughts creep in, it's easy to think "This is stupid" or "I can't do this." Instead, I could remind myself that distractions are normal but choose to let them go and redirect my focus.

After a brief deep-breathing exercise—I could handle a few minutes—we set off to forest bathe. Nina instructed me to walk slowly and softly while taking in the surroundings with all of my senses. I made a concerted effort to note the gravel crunching under my feet, the crisp smell of the air, the sunlight streaming through the foliage. Every now and then she would direct my attention to a unique-looking tree or how the bark felt when I rubbed my hand against it.

When we emerged from the woodsy path about an hour later, I was undeniably calmer. Was it simply being in nature, ditching my cell phone, or listening to Nina's soothing voice that did the trick? My guess is a combination of the three. The originators of forest bathing—[Japanese scientists](#), who introduced *shinrin-yoku* in the 1980s—point to phytoncides, or volatile organic compounds that are emitted by plants. When you spend time in the forest, you breathe them in, and [there's evidence](#) that doing so gives the immune system a boost. (Here are the [7 best healing destinations around the world](#).)



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Now try this at home?





PHOTOGRAPH BY BARBARA BRODY

Before Nina and I parted ways, she mentioned that she lives near the resort in a home nestled into the side of the mountains. That's great, I thought, but what about the rest of us who don't happen to live in the woods? Can you make forest bathing a regular habit if you don't reside near a forest?

The answer, she explained, depends on your perspective. Technically, forest bathing requires access to a forest, for obvious reasons. But experts believe that any time you spend in nature is beneficial. Last year, [researchers](#) at Stanford University randomly assigned study participants to take a walk in either a serene part of the campus or a nearby urban area and found that those who strolled in nature were less anxious and less likely to ruminate than those who hit the city streets. The nature group also scored higher on tests of working memory. (Here's [how to walk to relieve your stress.](#))

I live about 20 miles outside Manhattan, and it turns out that there are several nature trails within a 10-minute drive of my home. I'm also lucky enough to live just minutes away from a leafy park that overlooks the Long Island Sound. So the other day, after dropping my daughter at camp, I did the unthinkable: Instead of heading straight to my home office to start work (or, OK, surf Facebook), I drove to the waterfront park and spent about 15 minutes just walking around. I tried to channel Nina as I reminded myself to tune into the briny smell of the air, the sound of the small waves lapping at the stony shore, and the light shimmering on the water.

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It wasn't perfect, and plenty of distracting thoughts flooded my brain. I worried that I might bump into a neighbor (this [exercise](#) was *not* about chatting), that I'd made a mistake by wearing leggings instead of something shorter and lighter given the heat, and that I was wasting time when I should have been working. But I also thought that the view was lovely, the fresh air invigorating, and that spending a few moments by myself just relaxing was pretty amazing.

As I got into my car, I resisted the urge to turn the radio on and tried to hang onto the tranquility for a few moments longer. And while many different thoughts popped into my brain, including a number of items on my ever-growing to-do list, there was one that stood out above all the others: Why didn't I do this more often?

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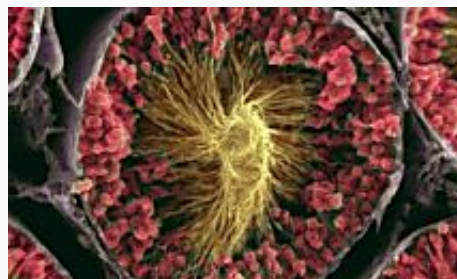
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