



EAP Newsletter

Issue 17
May 2023

The great outdoors edition

In this month's newsletter we're looking at the benefits of the outdoors on mental health, how you can bring the outdoors in, why greens are so important to your diet and combating the busy world with meditation and mindfulness.

The benefits of the outdoors on mental health

Did you know Mental Health Awareness Week starts on Monday 15th May?



What is mental health?

We all have mental health and it's just as important to look after as your physical health.

When your mental health is good, you feel better able to look after yourself and engage with the things you care about.

When your mental health is struggling, you can feel overwhelmed and unable to cope, which can make it difficult to manage in your day-to-day life.



How can nature help?

The environments we live in shape our daily routines and our wellbeing, yet modern life sees many of us spending more time typing on laptops, sitting in offices or scrolling through phones, rather than being present and enjoying the world around us.

Living in a greener environment can promote and protect good health, aid recovery from illness and help manage poor health. Greener environments are also associated with better mental health and wellbeing, help to reduce levels of anxiety and depression, increase energy, and enhance quality of life.

Studies show you need to spend a minimum of two hours per week enjoying nature to fully feel its powerful effects. Don't worry if this doesn't sound manageable, it can be divided into smaller chunks. In fact, just 18 minutes per day would help you achieve your weekly quota.

Just in case you needed any more persuasion to get outside, here are five amazing benefits of the great outdoors:



1. Reduce feelings of stress and anxiety

Anxiety and stress are some of the most common mental health problems you can face. A recent study showed that spending time in nature can lead to a range of positive stress-related benefits. The calming effects of exercise offer respite from our everyday worries by helping to lower your blood pressure and reducing the production of stress hormones. Most of us will feel a reduction of worry within 5-15 minutes of starting exercise, and it's sustained for 2-4 hours after finishing.



2. Boosts feelings of happiness

It's well known that even in small amounts, physical activity can have a positive effect on your overall health and wellbeing. Research has suggested that regular exercise can be as effective as antidepressants in improving symptoms of mild depression. This is because exercise increases the production of your brain's 'happy hormones,' also known as endorphins, helping to improve mood and energy.



3. Promotes good sleep quality

Being outdoors can help to improve sleep quality by calming your mind and allowing you to decompress. Going for a walk, especially during the afternoon or early evening, can help you relax and improve the quality of your sleep, particularly the most refreshing REM sleep.



4. Boosts Vitamin D levels

When you spend time outdoors your body is exposed to the sun's UV light, providing your body with the energy it needs to produce Vitamin D. Research shows that increased levels of Vitamin D can reduce depression, support immunity and help with weight loss.



5. Improve your concentration and focus

You may feel like you are constantly being bombarded with information. These demands on your attention can lead to you feeling like it is increasingly difficult to focus. Research has shown that looking at nature improves our ability to restore concentration, so that we can focus for longer.



How to connect with nature

Sunshine, warmer weather and longer evenings all mean we can spend more time outdoors and there is much to explore.

Walks in the countryside or your local park can allow you to see a variety of environments and get a good dose of nature.

Multiple studies demonstrate that visiting and noticing nature helps to support wellbeing. This just goes to show how crucial a connection with nature is when it comes to unlocking mental health benefits.

There are many ways that we can develop our connectedness with nature. Activities that involve the senses can help to develop our connection with the natural world.



Try this today: Next time you spend time outdoors try to use your different senses to connect with the world around you.

Listen to the birdsong. How many different calls can you hear?

Smell the freshly cut grass or the different flowers around you. Is there one that is particularly stronger than another?

Touch the bark of the trees or feel the soil between your fingers. When you are gardening or out for a walk feel the natural world around you.

Notice the variety of colours you can see. What is the predominant colour?

Taste locally grown fruits. From blackberries in hedgerows, to pick your own at farms, to growing your own strawberries on your windowsill, tasting the outdoors can be ever so rewarding. Look around and enjoy the sweet and satisfying taste of nature.

Reflecting on your experience once you're back inside can help to extend this feeling of connection and further improve your mood.

How to bring the outdoors in

Daily life can often make it difficult to get outside - you might be busy or simply not live close to any green areas. But don't worry, there are lots of simple ways you can bring the outdoors in and reap nature's positive benefits.

Here are three creative ways you can bring the outdoors, indoors:



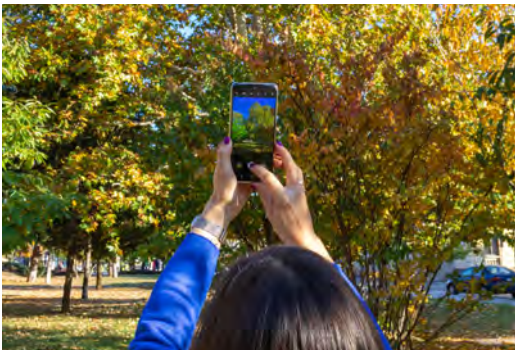
1. Grow, grow, grow

There are lots of different herbs, plants and vegetables that can be grown on a windowsill, shelf, or balcony so you don't even need a garden to grow. You could try mint, chives, cress, tomatoes or even chilli peppers. Growing something for yourself can bring a great sense of achievement too. You could also try re-growing vegetable scraps such as spring onions and celery, by placing their root bases in water and planting them in soil.



2. Connect creatively

If planting isn't your thing, you can also connect with nature through stories, art and sound recordings. Watching films or TV programmes about nature is a great way to connect and reflect with it. Not that you need any excuse to watch Sir David Attenborough.



3. Update your screensavers

Whilst this might seem a bit strange, try changing your screensaver to a picture of your favourite place in our natural world. Studies have shown that just looking at a picture of nature can help to reduce your stress levels, so if you use your computer a lot, this can give you a simple daily boost.



Why a green diet is important and how to pack more greens into your meals

Did you know it's National Vegetarian Week on Monday 15th May?

We're sure the phrase 'eat your greens' rang around your household as a child. Maybe you tell your own children to eat their greens, but don't manage to incorporate enough of them into your own meals? But eating your greens is one of the easiest ways to keep your mind and body healthy.

You just can't beat the greens for their all-round goodness. From a nutritional perspective, greens are a source of potassium, iron, calcium, manganese, Vitamin C and B-vitamins such as folate and B6 – simply put, they're a nutritional powerhouse.

Boiling or steaming veggies is great – but sometimes this can seem boring and bland.

Try this today: Here are some super simple ways to get creative with your greens

1

Drink them: Throw some spinach, kale or avocado into a breakfast smoothie and start your morning off with plant power.

2

Blend them: Soups are a really easy way to use up any leftover greens and taste delicious too.

3

Crisp them: Make kale crisps by drizzling with oil, lemon juice and salt, and baking them in a hot oven for 15 minutes – the perfect healthy snack on-the-go.

4

Bake them: We've all heard of carrot cake, but did you know that you can use other vegetables to make some sweet and tasty treats? Courgette and lime cake is a modern classic, whilst avocado brownies have taken the internet by storm.

Eating your greens is a vital part of eating well. Providing you with different vitamins, minerals and nutrients, you're doing your body a favour by fuelling it with more natural foods. Start adding more greens to your diet today to experience their health benefits, inside and out.

Of course, always be mindful of any allergies you might have when changing your diet and aim to start off with smaller changes when you are trying out something new.



How a green diet can also help the health of our planet

Not only does eating more vegetables improve your health and wellbeing, it also helps the health of our planet.

There is so much to be said about climate change but there is one simple thing you can do to make a difference: eat more plant-based foods.



Research has suggested that we should be **eating 30% less meat by 2030**. This can be achieved by having just two meat-free days a week.



Choosing **more vegetarian food** is one of the best things we can all do for the planet.



80% of consumers had at least some awareness of the connection between food choice and the environment.

Try this today: Make one of your meals meat-free

One of the most common myths about meatless meals is that they won't fill you up, but there's plenty of ways to keep your meals protein packed. It's so simple to swap out meat and replace one of your meals with a veggie version, plus all the top chefs are on board so you'll find tons of delicious recipes online.



Combatting the busy world with meditation and mindfulness

World Meditation Day is celebrated on Sunday 21st May

Modern life can feel relentless and stressful. But with the right tools, we all have the potential to be healthier and happier. World Meditation Day is celebrated across the globe to encourage people to take the opportunity to press pause and reboot.

Meditation has become one of the most popular ways to take some time out and relieve stress. This trend is supported by growing research which shows how practising meditation and mindfulness increases connections between the parts of the brain that help us manage stress. By learning to calm your mind, feelings of stress are reduced leaving you recharged and ready to face your day.

Furthermore, meditation can help us to stimulate relaxation and brings a sense of calm to a busy mind. The best part is, anyone can practise meditation, anywhere, all you need is yourself and a couple of free, quiet minutes.

Try this today: Here are two simple ways to incorporate meditation into your day...

1

Breathe deeply: This technique is perfect for beginners because breathing is a natural function.

Focus all your attention on your breathing. Concentrate on feeling and listening as you inhale and exhale through your nostrils. Breathe deeply and slowly. When your attention wanders, gently return your focus to your breathing.

2

Scan your body: When using this technique, focus attention on different parts of your body. Become aware of your body's various sensations, whether that's feelings of anxiety, warmth, tension or happiness.

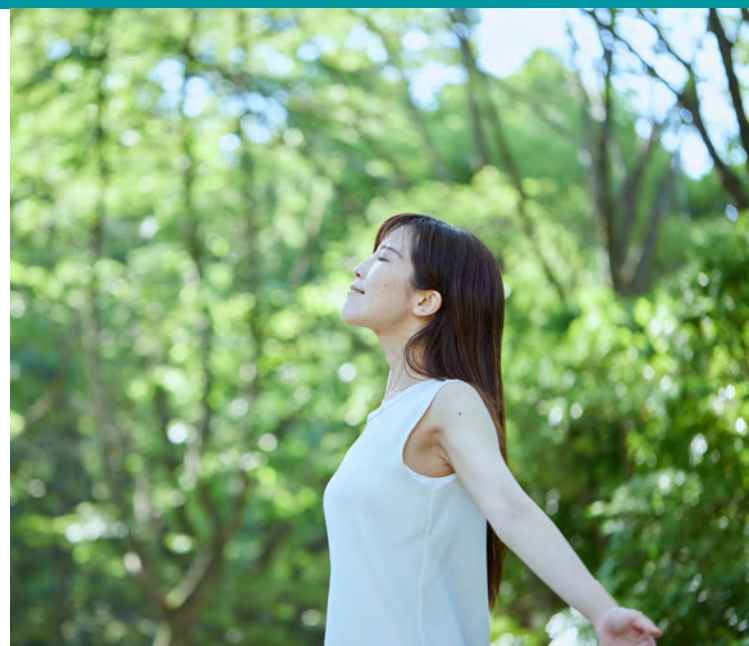
Combine body scanning with breathing exercises and imagine sending your breath into specific parts of your body as you feel yourself beginning to relax.

Meditation and mindfulness around the world

In Japan, the ancient art of forest bathing ('shinrin-yoku) is being used in preventative healthcare to keep people well. This traditional practice involves immersing yourself in nature by using your five senses mindfully.

Extensive studies have looked at how forest bathing supports the immune system, the respiratory system, mental relaxation, the cardiovascular system, mental clarity, depression and anxiety and finally, increased feelings of gratitude and selflessness.

Why not try this mindful exercise the next time you go for a walk outside in nature?



And finally, our tip of the month; the one thing we ask you to do today if you do nothing else...

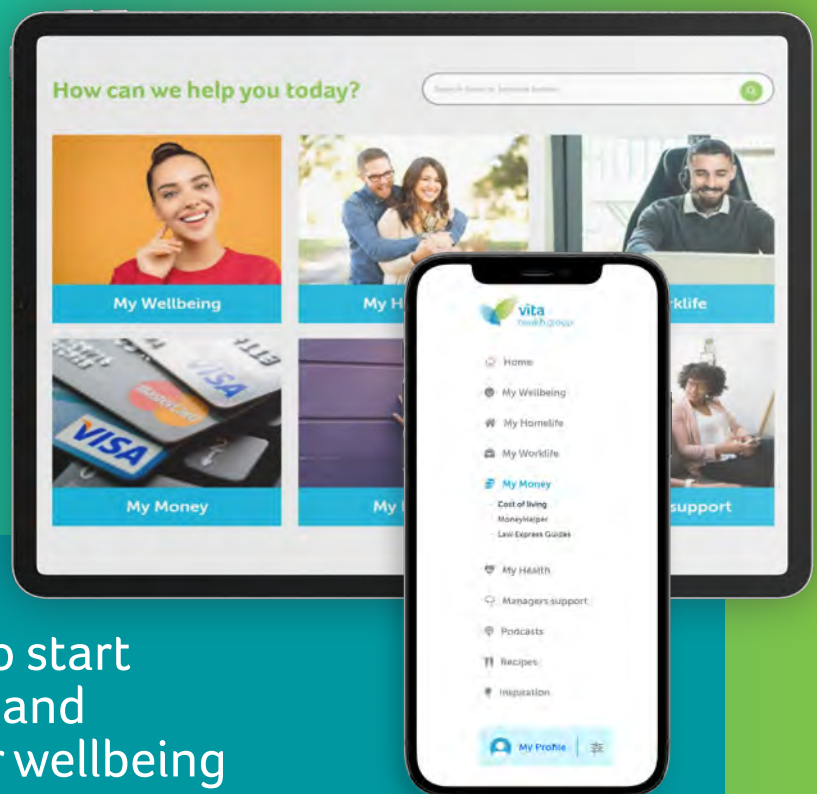
Stop looking at your screen and head out for some air: Whether it be staring at our computer screen all day, checking our social media accounts, or watching TV, it's fair to say that many of us spend far too long looking at screens. Next time you're thinking of looking at your Instagram account or checking your emails, why not take a few moments to get some fresh air instead. Head outside, breathe in deeply and just take a few minutes to reset. You'll be amazed at how restored and refreshed you feel.

Wellbeing Hub

Helping you to manage the daily challenges of life and work

We have created a range of guidance and practical advice on how to cope with the cost of living crisis.

Simply visit www.my-EAP.com and use the organisational code provided to access the site. Visit our cost of living page in our **My Money** section.



Scan the QR code today to start your journey and improve your wellbeing