What is it?

Nature Therapy comes from the tradition of “Shinrin Yoku,” or “forest bathing” the Japanese practice of mindfully experiencing nature through the senses. Scientific studies have shown that the practice has a wide array of health benefits from lowering the stress hormone cortisol, to strengthening the immune system, to improving mood and cognition.

The practice involves slowly moving through the natural landscape, cultivating a sense of presence, and exploring a relationship with other beings. These walks follow a “standard sequence” as established by the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy (ANFT). This deep nature connection not only promotes healing, but also awakens creativity, inspires wonder, and kindles realizations.

Planning your excursion

1. Choose your location, it can be a local park, or public land, even a local garden-- ideally it should be a place where you would like to spend a bit of time that is away from the hustle and bustle of cars and traffic.

2. Excursions typically last from 2 to 3 hours. Tell participants to dress comfortably and bring whatever they need to be safe and feel comfortable in that specific environment during that time: sunscreen, water, hiking boots, etc.

3. Adapt the prompts from the sample “standard sequence” below to suit your location and group needs.

4. Enjoy!
Standard Sequence

The standard sequence is the framework guides use to provide participants with a basic structure, while still allowing freedom for creativity. It is culturally neutral so that participants are free to experience nature in a way that resonates with their personal belief system. Guides offer the group “invitations” (instead of exercises) so that attendees have the choice to participate as they wish.

Here is a suggested sample of a standard sequence:

1. Greeting participants. Start out by providing basic orientation such as how long is the walk, what they should bring (ex. water), and what safety precautions they should take in that particular location. This is also a time to share geological and indigenous stories of the land - helping participants transition from focusing on everyday concerns to becoming fully present in the here and now.

2. “Pleasures of Presence”: In a flat and open area, guides ask the group to form a circle and when it’s comfortable for them, have them close their eyes (or keep them softly open). The guide invites them to focus on their senses, one at a time. Questions include: “What scents do you perceive? What sounds can you hear far away? Which ones are closest to you? Can your skin feel the wind? How do your hands feel when you touch them gently?” The guide then asks participants to open their eyes very slowly, and imagine they are seeing the world for the very first time. And have them imagine that whatever they are looking at might be “looking” back at them.

3. “What’s in Motion” invitation: the guide invites the group to walk very slowly for about 10-15 minutes and observe whatever is in motion (ants, leaves blowing in the wind, etc). If they wish, guides can play an indigenous flute to set the tone and slow the group way down. This invitation can be interpreted as a walking meditation with a focus on motion. At the end of this invitation, the guide asks participants to choose a “being” in the forest - such as a leaf or a rock - and pass it around the group. As each person holds that being, they can share their experiences while others practice deep listening (round of council).

4. “Offering Friendship” invitation: Participants have 20 minutes to walk around, find a tree or natural feature that “calls to them” and sit with it to engage. Guides can encourage them to suspend disbelief and let their imagination run free like if they were the director of a Pixar animated movie. “What compliment could you offer that tree? What did she/he reply? Is there a secret you’d like to share? A question that you would like answered?” The guide can follow this invitation with a round of council where people sit in a circle and practice deep sharing and deep listening.
5. “Water Invitation”: If near a creek or lake, the guide can invite participants to slowly bring their hands very close to the body of water but without touching it. Hands are to stay still for a minute and with eyes closed, participants can sense the energy emanating from the flowing water. Ever so gently, they can let their hands sink into the water and notice the sensations on fingers and the palm of the hand.

6. “Sit Spot”: The guide invites participants to find a spot that calls to them and sit completely still for 15 mins. The idea of this invitation is that by being quiet and non-threatening, nature reveals itself in surprising ways. What beings show up in sight? What sounds can be heard? What textures, patterns, and colors reveal themselves to the silent observer?

7. “Tea Ceremony”: While participants are at their sit spots, guides can prepare a tea ceremony. The idea is to offer the group an opportunity to “ingest” the forest in a spirit of gratitude to the beings that witnessed and supported their healing. Guides often adorn their tea ceremony areas with fallen leaves, twigs, acorns, etc to add beauty and sacredness to the experience. Cut fruits and healthy snacks are also a nice addition for participants to enjoy. Tea ceremonies are the official closing of a forest bathing walk and once participants have taken their first sip of tea together, they can now return to “head space” and re-engage with the everyday world. An option for those who are comfortable is to make the tea ceremony out of foraged herbs, giving participants an extra opportunity to deepen their taste for place.

**Taking the experience further**

After a forest bathing excursion, participants see the natural world in a renewed way. You may want to extend this newfound awareness into your everyday life. Here are some suggestions of how to start!

- Take 5 minutes out of your day to sit outside in silence. Listen. Look. Any of the invitations experienced in your excursion can be adapted to a wide range of landscapes.
- Learn about the indigenous history of the land you live on. Who lived here before colonization? Where are they now? What were their beliefs and traditions? How did they live off the land?
- Learn about the geology and biology of your local environment. What is the soil made of? What rocks are in the earth? What plants are native to this area?
- Learn about foraging of wild edible plants, incorporate these foods into your diet!
Different Environments:

While the Japanese Shinrin Yoku practice was designed for bathing in the atmosphere of forests, the practice has now broadened and nature therapy can be experienced in other types of environments.

Beach Therapy:

In some cases, beaches can offer an even wider array of sensorial experiences, given the constant motion and sounds of ocean surf, sensations of sand on feet and hands, varying fragrances of ocean mist and the opportunity to gaze at the horizon and witness colorful clouds and sunsets.

At the beach, guides can offer the following invitations (feel free to include variations):

- Walk slowly along the shore and feel the surf caress your feet. Questions to be shared in council: What sensations are present? Can your walk follow the rhythm of the surf?
- Let your hands and arms massage wet sand in rhythmic motions. Question to be shared in council: What do you notice?
- (if calm seas). Let your body float on the sea surface and gaze at the clouds above. What is it like to feel weightless? Might there be a message in the clouds for you?

Desert Therapy:

The desert evokes a sense of timelessness rarely experienced in other habitats. Guides here might want to focus on invitations that inspire “big picture” gazing.

In the desert, guides can offer invitations such as:

- Walk on a dune barefoot experiencing the grains of sand enveloping your feet. As you climb, notice your breath deepening. Let it follow the rhythm of your feet. What sensations are present?
- When you reach the top, sit down and let your breath slow down. With a soft gaze, scan the desert with its shapes and colors. What feelings does the landscape evoke in you?
- (at night time). Lay down on your back and gaze at the starry sky. Take deep breaths and witness the cosmos above you. Let yourself realize that the only thing that holds you from “falling” is Earth's gravity. What do you notice?

Other Environments:

As an ANFT mentor likes to say “you can forest bathe anywhere, even in a parking lot as long as you find a tree, a plant, or even just a window to the sky above.” Guides just have to focus their intention on encouraging participants to slow way down (with the first 3 invitations of the standard sequence), have them open up all their senses, and stimulate a connection and reverence with beings from the “more than human” world.

For more information on Forest Bathing / Nature Therapy including research on the science behind the practice visit the Association of Nature Therapy Guides and Programs

Happy bathing.