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EAP EMPLOYEE ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER



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The Benefits of Spending Time in Nature

The term *nature* has a wide definition. This article will refer to nature as the physical world including plants, landscape, and other features of the Earth.

Regardless of the definition used, spending time outdoors can and does bring about a wide range of positive emotions—such as calmness and serenity—and it can improve your focus, attention, and memory. Whether simply taking a walk in the countryside or practicing shinrin-yoku (also known as “forest bathing”), everyone could probably benefit from spending time in nature.

Nature Throughout Time

Spending time in nature used to be a bigger part of daily life, but the discourse of how and when people spent time in nature has changed as society moved on. Urbanization and technological advancements meant a steady decrease in the amount of time people spent outdoors, and a shift to a gadget-oriented world of TV and smartphones. Humankind and nature, in a way, became separate entities. There are many benefits of spending time in nature, and people should strive to reconnect with the world around them.

Proven Benefits

Research has shown that time in nature is a direct antidote for stress. When you are experiencing physical or psychological stress, your sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is activated. Spending time in nature can calm you down and reshape your reactions to stressors. For example, it can reduce high blood pressure (often caused by too much cortisol—the stress hormone).

As well as reducing stress levels, research has shown that time in nature can increase self-esteem, reduce anxiety, and improve low mood. Being outside, under natural light, can also be super helpful if you experience seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

There are also notable physical benefits, including the enhancement of immune system function and lowering of type 2 diabetes. Neighborhood “greenness” is associated with a reduced likelihood of being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.^{1–4}

Be mindful of how you spend that time in nature. When outdoors, engage with your senses. Take note of what you see, smell, feel, and hear.

Ecotherapy and Connectedness

Ecotherapy, sometimes known as “green care,” comprises nature-based therapeutic interventions in a variety of natural settings.⁵ To practice ecotherapy, you may take part in these activities:

- Meditation in nature—This can be self-guided or as part of a group with an instructor. It may take place in a park or on the beach, for example.
- Green exercise—Physical exercise in a natural environment is a great way to spend more time outside while increasing your activity levels. Exercises outside may include walking, yoga, jogging, or cycling, to name a few.
- Conservation activities—Helping to restore or conserve the natural environment can assist in creating a sense of purpose and connectedness while also being eco-friendly. If done in a group, it can enhance your sense of belonging and togetherness.



A Nature Prescription

Nature prescriptions can be formally prescribed in clinical practice by doctors to encourage people to embrace the benefits of nature. They generally involve green exercise (physical activity in nature settings, as described above) as well as other methods to connect to nature in a personal way. Let nature nurture you.

Many organizations have incorporated nature prescription initiatives, inspired by the direct links between exposure to nature and a range of physical and mental health benefits.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Scotland, in collaboration with the National Health Service (NHS), conducted a pilot study of 350 people across all age groups, with participants receiving a nature prescription to improve mental or physical health (or both). Just under 75 percent of patients said there had been marked benefits after using the prescription, and 87 percent said they would continue using it.⁶

For example, Dose of Nature (based in Richmond, London, UK) provides a 10-week program, which can be accessed via a doctor's referral (<https://www.doseofnature.org.uk>). The program combines an assessment with a psychologist and one-to-one support from a guide, introducing people to the mental health benefits of spending time in nature, with the aim of encouraging lifestyle changes that can have a significant and, importantly, long-lasting impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Park Rx America (<https://parkrxamerica.org>) and Walk with a Doc (<https://walkwithadoc.org>) are also on board—encouraging clinical professionals to prescribe nature prescriptions as part of patient care in America.



Time in Nature: More Than a Walk

Going for a walk is a wonderful way to spend time in nature. You can walk solo, with a loved one, or in a group. You can walk fast or slow. You can walk in the city, countryside, or by the coast. But remember, there are many fun ways to incorporate more time outside:

- Water activities—Try swimming, rowing along the canal, or dipping your feet in the sea!
- Forest bathing—Try the peaceful Japanese practice of calmly and quietly observing the forestry around you, breathing deeply and mindfully, and simply being in nature.
- Nature journaling—Take a seat and see how many types of trees, flowers, birds, and insects you can spot!

- Composting—This will encourage you to spend more time outside with the added benefit of improving your sustainability!

What if I live in the city?

You can still connect with nature and feel the benefits:

- Spend some time researching nearby parks, woodlands, botanical gardens, riversides, and beaches.
- If you have outside space (even a small patio or balcony), aim to spend at least 15 minutes in that outside space each day, taking in the sights, smells, and sounds.
- Don't underestimate your windowed areas. Incorporate some house plants, grow some herbs, or maybe invest in a comfortable window seat and relax with the window open (weather permitting, of course!).
- Unplug and "be still." When outdoors, swap out your electronic devices for a book, magazine, or a pen to write or draw.

Take some time to reconnect with the natural world around you!

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Source: Copeland, R. (2022, May 19). *The benefits of spending time in nature* (B. Schuette, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options (WPO).

New Year, New You! Planning a Successful Year with Effective Goal Setting

Why set goals?

Science has shown that goal setting is the most effective performance-enhancing strategy available.

How it Works

- It helps in the discovery of new strategies and techniques. “Without goals, and plans to reach them, you are like a ship that has set sail with no destination.”—*Fitzhugh Dodson, Author*
- Goals direct attention and energy on the most important thing. “Man is a goal-seeking animal. His life only has meaning if he is reaching out and striving for his goal.”—*Aristotle, Philosopher*
- Setting goals helps sustain effort and motivation by focusing on short-term objectives. “I learned that if you want to make it bad enough, no matter how bad it is, you can make it.”—*Gale Sayers, NFL Hall of Famer*
- Goals provide a measure to evaluate progress and success. “You measure the size of the accomplishment by the obstacles you had to overcome to reach your goals.”—*Booker T. Washington, Civil Rights Leader*

Define your goal-setting mission.

This article will assist you with being successful and understanding the importance of goal setting, and it will guide you through the steps of setting effective and meaningful goals.

Goal setting is a process that builds from figuring out what you want to accomplish and continues to guide how you get there. The steps in the goal-setting process encourage action and commitment for pursuing meaningful goals in many areas of your life, whether physical, social, spiritual, emotional, family, or otherwise:

- Understand the importance of setting meaningful and relevant goals.
- Understand the steps involved in setting meaningful and relevant goals.
- Take time to reflect on what values and dreams are important to you.
- Put effective goal setting into practice.
- Understand the importance of spending time thinking about and seeing yourself accomplishing your goals.

“Be not afraid of going slowly, be only afraid of standing still.”—*Chinese Proverb*

Five Dimensions of Strength

Five key dimensions will serve as anchors to support your individual achievement throughout this planning process. These are as follows. (Note: Use them as a guide only; feel free to adapt them to reflect your own personal goals.)

Physical

Perform and excel in physical activities that require aerobic fitness, endurance, strength, healthy body composition, and flexibility derived through exercise, nutrition, and training.

Emotional

Approach life’s challenges in a positive, optimistic way by demonstrating self-control, stamina, and good character with your choices and actions.

Social

Develop and maintain trusted, valued relationships and friendships that are personally fulfilling and foster good communication, including a comfortable exchange of ideas, views, and experiences.

Family

Aim to be part of a family unit that is safe, supportive, and loving, and provides the resources needed for all members to live in a healthy and secure environment. (Note that “family unit” can be expanded beyond a traditional family to include any network that counts as family to you.)

Spiritual

Spirituality refers to one’s purpose, core values, beliefs, identity, and life vision. These elements, which define the essence of a person, enable one to build inner strength, make meaning of experiences, behave ethically, persevere through challenges, and be resilient when faced with adversity. An individual’s spirituality draws upon personal, philosophical, psychological, and/or religious teachings, and forms the basis of the person’s character.

Steps for Setting Effective Goals

Goal setting is a process that builds upon itself. The process below encourages action and constantly changes as you change. Once you set a goal it is not set in stone; you can always come back and reassess or change your goals. True goal setting is a dynamic and fluid process that should continue throughout your life.



Step 1: Define your dream. These are your outcome goals.

Step 2: Know where you are right now.

Step 3: Decide what you need to develop. These are your priorities.

Step 4: Make a plan for steady improvement. Include actions and affirmations.

Step 5: Set and pursue short-term goals. These are your daily to-dos.

Step 6: Commit yourself completely. What is your commitment strategy?

Step 7: Continually monitor your progress. Ask yourself questions like these:

- Did you accomplish your daily goals? Take pride in these accomplishments.
- If not, what obstacles did you face? Can you plan ahead for those obstacles the next day or week?
- Do any of your priorities or daily actions need to be adjusted? Setting and achieving goals is an ongoing process, so take time to enjoy the journey.

Download our Goal Setting Worksheet.

This goal-planning program is like a chain that becomes stronger with each link. Your actions mobilize effort on an immediate and regular basis to strengthen your priority areas, and your affirmations create a powerful attitude for accomplishing these behaviors. As each priority area improves, you move closer to reaching your outcome goal. The chances of success decrease when you set only one type of goal in only one dimension. Try to focus on the five dimensions of strength: family, social, spiritual, emotional, and physical. Tie together and encompass your entire life to get you to where you want to go.

Source: U.S. Army, Joint Base Lewis-McChord. (2013, July). Introduction (pp. 3–6). In Goal setting for personal and professional excellence. Retrieved October 8, 2020, from <https://www.lewis-mcchord.army.mil>



EXPERIENCING POST-HOLIDAY BLUES?

Call your EAP to schedule a
confidential appointment.



How To Be Happy: Tips for Cultivating Contentment

Ten Tips from the Science of Happiness

Behavioral scientists have done a lot of research into what makes people happy and what doesn't. It turns out that most people are quite bad at predicting what will make them happy. Wealth and possessions, for example, have far less impact on happiness than is commonly believed. For deeper, longer-term happiness, scientists have found that other things are far more important. These include some habits for living that can be learned and practiced. Most cost nothing and are available to virtually everyone.

Here are some lessons from the science of happiness that you can apply to your life. (One caveat: For people with clinical depression, anxiety disorder, or other mental health issues, these practices aren't a substitute for therapy, medication, and other professional support. They may be helpful as supplements to those treatments.)

1. Make time for friends and family.

Multiple studies have found that long-term, caring social connections are the biggest factor driving personal happiness. Friends and family support you when you need a lift, act as a sounding board when you need to process your feelings, and celebrate with you when things are good. And it can feel good to provide that support and emotional uplift in return. This isn't about how many social media friends you have. It's about that core set of meaningful relationships—maybe just one or two people—who love you for who you are and make you feel good. Think about the people who make you laugh and smile and who have been there for you when you've felt down. Make time for them, no matter how busy you are. Show them that you appreciate and care about them.

The flip side of this advice is to let go of grudges. Even the best relationships can hit rocky spots. Don't get stuck there. Harboring resentment takes energy and saps happiness. Reach out to forgive and move on.

2. Be kind and generous.

You've probably seen the bumper sticker: "Perform random acts of kindness." It sounds sweet and maybe a little sentimental, but happiness studies have found that it works—in an oddly selfish way. By being kind and helping others, you actually help yourself. Bring a smile to someone's face by giving a compliment, doing a favor, offering help, or just being kind. You'll make someone else's day brighter, and you'll be happier yourself.

In the same way, spending money on someone else is a surer path to happiness than spending it on yourself. And volunteering in ways that help others has been found to

boost the volunteers' psychological health.

3. Curb excessive self-criticism.

Self-talk is the feedback people give themselves, and it's often critical, undermining your happiness. Be kind to yourself in reviewing your own actions and behavior. Learn from the setbacks and move on from them, rather than blaming yourself and digging yourself into an emotional hole. If you find yourself being overly self-critical, imagine how a caring friend would talk to you, or how you would talk to that friend. Retune your inner voice to be as kind.

If you need a nudge to shift to more positive thinking, make a list of your good qualities—the reasons people like to be with you and choose to have you as a friend, your skills and talents, your most important strengths. Just the act of writing those qualities down is often enough to break a cycle of self-criticism.

4. Pay attention to the good.

Another key happiness habit is optimism—not the blind optimism of people who can't see both sides of something, but realistic optimism that accounts for the downside while looking for the upside and working toward that better outcome. There's truth in the adage, "Every cloud has its silver lining." When you find yourself having a knee-jerk negative reaction to something—an event, a change at work, or another person—step back and look for the positive. What good might come of the event or change? What might you learn from this that could help you in the future? How might you reinterpret another person's behavior in more positive ways?

Once you find the good in a situation, even if it's just a faint glimmer of hope, that gives you something to work toward. Optimism is the habit of finding the good in life, even in what may seem like negative circumstances. And cultivating an optimism habit can make you happier.

5. Practice gratitude.

Contented people take time to think about what they're grateful for. It's a simple exercise, and it can work wonders to boost your mood and your outlook on life. By thinking about what you're grateful for—what you appreciate in other people, small and large things that give you pleasure, and what's going well in your life—you can pull yourself out of negative thought cycles. It's easy to focus on what's hard and what's going wrong, and that can make you miserable. Practicing gratitude pushes you to step back and consider what's good and going right.

To get started on the habit of practicing gratitude, you might write down three things you're grateful for at the end of every day. Go to sleep with those positive thoughts and remind yourself of them when you wake up. Over time, this can become your gratitude journal. You'll get better at seeing the good in life with practice, and reviewing what you've written can give you a lift when you're feeling down.

6. Focus on the present.

Dwelling on the past and worrying about the future can make you anxious and unhappy. When you make an effort to focus on the present moment, you can pull yourself out of those unhealthy thought patterns. Being present is at the core of mindfulness and meditation, practices that have been found to reduce feelings of depression and anxiety. You can find an app or take a class in mindfulness or meditation, or simply carve out a quiet time in your day to spend a few minutes contemplating the here and now.

The goal of being in the present moment isn't to force yourself to be happy. This moment may not be a happy one. Instead, the objective is to recognize and accept your emotions, whatever they are. That acceptance is what calms you and can bring you a more positive outlook.

7. Find your purpose.

Another ingredient in the happiness formula is to find your purpose—to be true to yourself and engage in activities that are meaningful to you. Think about what excites and energizes you, what acts or accomplishments you're most proud of, and how you want others to remember you. These priorities are sometimes called eulogy values as opposed to résumé values.

Once you've given some thought to these deeper priorities, find ways to make more time for them. That might be by doing more for the people you love, volunteering to help those in need in your community, working on a creative talent, spending more time in nature, cultivating a passion for gardening or woodworking, or anything else that has significant meaning for you.

8. Get moving.

Regular physical activity is good for your body and mind. Whether it's a walk outside, a workout at the gym, or a yoga session, getting your body moving can lift your mood and sharpen your thinking. Exercise triggers the release of chemicals known as endorphins that make you feel calmer and happier. It reduces stress hormones, and it improves blood circulation throughout your body, including your brain. So, making a habit of regular physical activity can also be a happiness habit.

9. Resist the urge to compare yourself to others.

You can make yourself miserable by comparing yourself unfavorably to others—to their achievements, possessions, social ease, or beauty. It's a natural tendency, but taken



too far it can be damaging to your self-esteem and mental health. As the Dalai Lama put it, "We need to learn to want what we have, not to have what we want, in order to get stable and steady happiness." Many of the ideas offered here can help you get past unhelpful comparisons with others. Practicing gratitude is a wonderful way to focus on the good in your life, for example.

Be careful in your use of social media, too. Recognize that people don't present their whole selves—with all of their ups and downs—on these platforms. They tend to show an artificially sunny view of their lives by choosing only the happiest moments and pictures for their posts. You'll always come out the loser if you compare yourself to those carefully curated presentations.

10. Spend time in nature.

Studies have found that spending time in nature—even as little as 30 minutes a week—can reduce stress hormones and lower blood pressure. Other studies have linked the experience of awe—the feeling you might get from looking at the stars or noticing the beauty of a forest path—to more positive emotions. As you work more physical activity into your life, consider doing some of it in nature, giving yourself the flexibility to slow down and savor the natural environment.

As you can see from this list, greater happiness is within your reach. You don't have to be born with a sunny disposition or an optimistic personality. You can practice habits of thinking and being to make yourself happier. The goal isn't to be bright and cheerful every hour of every day. That would be exhausting, and life doesn't work like that. Everyone experiences setbacks and losses. It's human to be sad at times, even deeply unhappy. But the habits offered here can help you accept and cope with those negative emotions and, in time and on average, enjoy a happier life.

Source: Morgan, H. (2020, November). How to be happy: Ten tips from the science of happiness (C. Gregg-Meeker, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.