

Forest therapy is more than a walk in the woods

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Imagine you're in the forest.

"Close your eyes, take a breath, then another, notice your breathing. Bring your attention to where your feet are standing on the ground, give your fingers a wiggle, adjust your position if you like; now bring your attention to your sense of hearing; notice the sounds closest to you, maybe the leaves moving around your feet.

"Now bring your attention to the sounds that are further away, all around the forest. Take those two circles of sound and bring them together. Now bring your attention to your sense of smell, notice how the forest smells today, can you pick up any scents in the air?

"Open your mouth slightly and breath in through your mouth; see if there's any tastes out here. Now bring your attention to your sense of touch – notice how the air feels against your clothing and against your skin. Bring your hands in front of your face to create a wall in front of your eyes. Open your eyes slowly and take a look at the forest before you."

Are you feeling calm and relaxed?

This was the beginning of my recent experience with local forest therapy guide, Fran Mills, and I was definitely feeling a sense of both calm and awe. Mills was guiding me through the first in a series of "invitations" that are designed to provide a therapeutic connection to nature.

As a nature lover and avid outdoors person, I think of myself as someone who probably experiences "forest therapy" every time I'm out for a walk or ski in the woods or a paddle along a quiet river.

It turns out, what I'm used to doing in the outdoors is quite different from a forest therapy experience. Mills explained the difference.

"The key difference is that when we're out for a walk or hike in nature, we're usually concentrating on the destination – where we are going, and sometimes how fast can we get there. With a forest therapy walk, you are concentrating on what is right before you and that's where you want to be – in the moment," said Mills.

"It's about self-care" she added. "The idea is to take your time to open up all of your senses."

A walk with a forest therapy guide generally lasts about two-and-a-half to three hours, during which time the participants are given a series of invitations – or opportunities – to connect with the forest.

The invitations explore the sights, sounds, smells, motions and sensations within the forest. The walk itself is done in silence, except for the guide's direction. Typically, at the end of a walk a tea ceremony is held with opportunities to share experiences and express gratitude to the forest.

While it is a common belief that time in nature is good for us, what is really interesting are the studies that show scientifically how forest therapy contributes to our health.

Forest therapy began as a practice in Japan during the 1980s as a way to counteract the high levels of stress related to work. Studies showed that people living closer to nature were healthier and scientific studies reinforced how nature positively affects the body.

"They found that cortisol levels drop, blood pressure drops, and a sense of awe increases with time in nature. The studies also found that the effects went beyond the actual time spent in the forest and continued for days," said Mills.

The term, "forest therapy," comes from the Japanese "shinrin-yoku." Shinrin in Japanese means "forest," and yoku means "bath." So shinrin-yoku means bathing in the forest atmosphere, or taking in the forest through our senses.

For Mills, becoming a forest therapy guide was a natural progression.

"I feel like I've been in a conversation with nature my entire life. Even as a kid, I would always find a place to sit in the forest. And when I was a student at York University, I could often be found in the arboretum."

On her rural property in Ramara, she spent a lot of time in the woods and it's where she went to grieve after the death of her partner.

"One day I was out on the trail with my dog and I said, if I could find a way to share this with people, I'd be so happy."

Within hours, up popped an ad on her computer for a forest therapy training group. At the same time, her baking business (including the popular "Franni Granola" products she sold at the Orillia Farmers' Market) was winding down. Intrigued, Mills went on a walk with the group.

"Within 10 minutes my stress was gone and I knew this was for me and signed up for the training."

Mills became a certified Forest Therapy guide with both the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy (ANFT) and the Global Institute of Forest Therapy (GIFT). She began to offer walks from her Elder Tree Farm location in Ramara.

"The amazing thing about experiencing forest therapy is that it is transferable, no matter where you are, you can get the same benefits. It's something you carry in your pocket and take with you."

Mills added that it's good to go through a guided walk because you're giving over responsibility, freeing yourself up for the experience. She also stressed that forest therapy guides are not therapists; the forest is the therapy.

"As guides we just hold the door so people can enter," she explained. "Once you've got the tools, whenever you're out in nature, you can practise any of the invitations and it will bring you right back to the present moment."

"Some people say it's about learning how to be in nature. But I think that it isn't so much about learning, but remembering. We, as a species, grew up in nature, as a part of nature. Only recently have we become separate. Bit by bit, we've become separated, living on concrete and driving our cars," said Mills.

The joy for Mills as a forest therapy guide is seeing the responses from participants. She's had people tell her that the experience made them feel like a child again, or helped them remember a lost loved one, or understand their own thoughts. She says she is also compelled to encourage people to connect with nature because "our world is in serious trouble."

"You only save what you love and you only love what you know," said Fran.

"It all comes back to something a fellow guide told me. I had mentioned that we need nature but nature would be fine without us. She responded by speaking of an 8 Shields Lakota teaching that says all beings on earth have their gifts to give – food, medicine, shelter, beauty; the gift that humanity brings is gratitude. Being grateful for all the gifts bestowed upon us by nature creates the connection," Mills explained.

"That really resonated with me and I have been cultivating gratitude ever since. Nature connection gives me the opportunity to plant some seeds of gratitude in others. That makes my heart sing."

As a first-time forest therapy participant, I look forward to using the tools I now have in my back pocket. My next walk, hike, or paddle in nature might be all about the experience and not just the destination.

