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HEALTH

'Forest Bathing': How Microdosing on Nature Can Help With Stress

The practice, long-popular in Japan, is gaining traction in the U.S. as a way of harnessing the health benefits of being outdoors.

By Rahawa Haile

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On first glance, it looked like a two-hour walk in the woods. Our guide had already tackled the hard part of finding a trail with minimal elevation gain and limited poison

poison ivy. This was a hill we were mindfully walking up.

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perhaps a quarter of our normal speed. To pay attention to the different shades of green we encountered, the snapping of twigs beneath our feet, the sudden vaulting of winged life—nothing was ornamental. Everything was in its right place, including us. The forest bathers and I had come to the woods in search of peace. All of us were to be present, focused solely on the moment. Our immersion in the natural world would act not only as a balm to everyday stresses but a catalyst: According to the event description, we had gathered outside that day to emerge, as flowers might after a long winter.

In 1982, Japan made *shinrin-yoku*, or “forest bathing,” a part of its national health program. The aim was to briefly reconnect people with nature in the simplest way possible. Go to the woods, breathe deeply, be at peace. Forest bathing was Japan’s medically sanctioned method of unplugging before there were smartphones to unplug from. Since *shinrin-yoku*’s inception, researchers have spent millions of dollars testing its efficacy; the documented benefits to one’s health thus far include lowered blood pressure, blood glucose levels, and stress hormones.

I showed up at Joaquin Miller Park in Oakland, California that afternoon for the purported mental-health boost. The four other attendees and I exchanged pleasantries by the trailhead as the sun baked our arms. All of us were women—although San Francisco’s “Forest Bathing Club” Meetup group boasts 428 members across the

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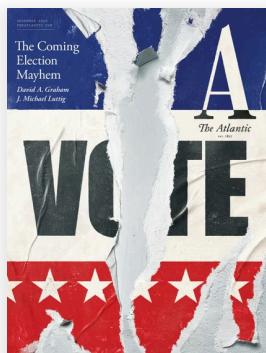
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