

## **The Curious Observer: Nature Journaling and Meditation for Wellness**

Walking in nature and keeping a journal are activities that any health professional might recommend to improve one's wellbeing. We invite you to join us in a creative practice that can improve your physical and mental health as well as hone your skills as a naturalist!

### **How does it work?**

When we use our five senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch) and bring our attention to the present moment, it calms anxiety, lowers blood pressure, and promotes rest and healing in our bodies. Plants and trees release particles into the air called phytoncides, which improve our immune system activity when we breathe them in. Stress hormones decrease even with short walks in nature, and blood sugar has been shown to be regulated by time spent out in the woods. How can we benefit from these wonderful effects?

The answer lies in one of the most important skills of the naturalist—curious observation. We can stay in the present moment, paying attention to what we notice, without need for judgment, evaluation, or a specific outcome. When we are still and curious, we might notice the gleam of light on a spiderweb, the warmth of a ray of sun, the sound of an insect buzzing by our ears, or the smell of the air after rain. As we observe the natural world around us, we can sense that we are part of nature and nature is part of us.

We invite you to create a journal to record your observations and reflections as you connect with the natural world around you. You may wish to write, draw, paint, scribble, paste, use prose, poetry, or bullet-point lists. You can start by taking a walk around the nature center today! Take this journal with you on a daily walk in nature, and record your experiences and insights. Instructions on how to create a journal are included on a separate page.

You can use the writing prompts to guide you as you discover the natural world all around you.

## Creating Your Journal

You can use the sample journal in this kit as a guide while you are making your journal.

1. Choose 5-6 pages of **paper** and fold them in half.
2. Choose a piece of **cardstock** to use as your cover. Fold that in half and put the paper inside it.
3. Use the **hole punch** to punch 3-6 holes along the spine of your journal.
4. Use pieces of **twine or string** to tie your journal's pages together.
5. Decorate the cover however you choose with the **art supplies** in the kit
6. Now you are ready to choose your first walk!

### **The Grounding Walk**

As you begin your walk, start by using your five senses. This can help calm your energy and keep you focused on what is happening right now.

- LOOK**            Name 5 things you see, observing their shape and color
- LISTEN**        Name 4 things you hear—birds singing, leaves crunching, or an airplane flying by
- FEEL**            Name 3 things you feel with your body—a breeze, the sun, your feet on the earth
- SMELL**         Name 2 different scents you can smell—a flower or the leaves around you
- TASTE**         Name 1 thing you can taste, perhaps something you have recently eaten

As you walk, repeat this exercise several times at your favorite points along the path. What did you notice? How did you feel?

### **The Breathing Walk**

As you walk, pay attention to your breath. Notice how it feels to breathe—the temperature of the air in your nose as you breathe in, the expansion and contraction of your chest and shoulders. What scents are in the air around you? How does the rhythm of your breathing change as you move? Consider the plant life around you, exhaling oxygen and communicating with each other through scents they release. How does breathing link you to the life you see around you?

### **The Body Walk**

As you walk, bring your attention to your body. Starting with your feet, notice the sensations you feel as you walk along: the earth beneath your feet, the rocks and roots you step over, and the sensation of contact with and separation from the ground. Stay here, or move your attention throughout your body, working up to the top of your head and the tips of your fingers. As you walk through nature, remembering your body is also a natural part of the landscape. How do you feel towards your body? What do you notice about your body as you walk?

### **The Sound Walk**

As you walk, notice what you can hear around you. You may notice birdsong, movement in the underbrush, running water, and wind through the leaves, noises from both living and nonliving aspects of the natural world. What stands out to you today? When you get lost in thought, gently redirect your attention back to your ears. What sounds are you contributing to the chorus?

### **The Color Walk**

As you walk today, notice the colors you see around you. What colors can you see on the forest floor, along the path, in the canopy, in the meadow or the sky? Do any bright jewels of color or light catch your eye today? Can you find the full rainbow of colors?

### **The Light Walk**

As you walk today, notice how light illuminates the natural world around you. Does it filter through the leaves of the trees? Is it bright or overcast today? Notice the shade and the shadows. As you see and feel the light of the sun, consider how light is the energy source for the complex cycles of life visible around you.

### **The Texture Walk**

As you walk today, notice the textures you see and feel around you. Look for and touch a smooth pebble from the stream, the rough bark of a tree, the softness of a leaf, the sponginess of a rotting log. Pick up several objects. Hold them in your hand and pay attention to how they feel. How could you describe these experiences to someone who has never held those things?

### **The Scent Walk**

As you walk today, pay attention to the scents around you in the air. What can you smell? How do the smells change as you walk along? Find some things to sniff, such as a plant with which you are familiar. Scents are strongly associated with memories. When you smell the moist dirt of the forest, crushed grass, a birch leaf, or a hickory nut, what pops into your mind? What emotions do you feel?

### **The Leaf Walk**

As you walk today, pay attention to the leaves you see around you. Notice the shapes, colors and patterns leaves create. Notice how they are different and how they are the same. What do the shapes remind you of? Perhaps choose some interesting leaves and do a leaf rubbing in your journal, noticing the delicate veins and shapes and traits of each leaf.

### **The Brush Walk**

As you walk today, explore the underbrush. What plants, animals, and fungi are living alongside the path? What small worlds are hidden inside the brambles? What can you see or hear today living and growing in the shrub layer? Maybe consider your own role and how you are perceived as you interact with this part of the forest ecosystem.

### **The Bug Walk**

As you walk today, be on the lookout for insects, spiders, and bugs. What winged creatures can you spot today? Perhaps they are moths—both drab and colorful, whining mosquitos, or just the gnats accompanying you as you walk. What insects can you hear? What tiny creatures are crawling and burrowing on the forest floor? What would the forest look like to an insect?

### **The Creative Walk**

As you walk today, notice the natural artistry of nature. There are colors and patterns everywhere! What moments of beauty, feeling, or meaning are with you in the woods today? We are all artists. We all interact and communicate expressively. What inspires your appreciation and creativity? Use your journal to record a visual memory of your walk or experiment with a medium or style you might not normally try.

**The Pattern Walk**

As you walk today, see if you can notice any patterns around you in the environment. What repeating shapes and textures can you find? Perhaps you notice the alternating leaves on a plant or the loops of a spiderweb. See what else you can spot. Over time, what repeating cycles or patterns can we sense around us?

**The Tracking Walk**

As you walk today, be on the lookout for tracks, trails, and clues. You are a nature detective! What creatures have passed this way? What plants and fungi may have lived or spread seeds and spores here? Maybe consider how relationships between plants, animals and fungi help even stationary life forms move through the landscape over time. What can you notice now that you might have missed before?

**The Naming Walk**

As you walk today, see what you can name around you. What plants, trees, birds, mushrooms, rocks, animals, and insects can you name? What stories and knowledge do you have about these creatures, and how did you learn it? Perhaps consider how it feels to be on familiar terms with these beings, and how those names came to exist. How do you feel towards those you cannot name?

**The Growing Walk**

As you walk today, pay special attention to what is growing around you. Some growth happens very slowly or is hidden beneath the ground. Slowly through time, or perhaps below the soil, the growth continues. Is that true for you as well? Are you growing in ways that other people may not be able to see yet? In what ways are you growing, changing, and adapting?