

## Nature as Healthcare

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Perhaps you have experienced this – venturing onto a trail in the mountains, walking on the beach or simply relaxing in a local forested park and feeling .... Calm... Less Tired... Able to Focus More. Studies have confirmed what our bodies are already telling us – being in nature is good for us. This article will highlight the cognitive, physical and mental health benefits of being in nature<sup>i,ii,iii</sup>, efforts to prescribe nature as healthcare, and resources to support you in getting outside.

### Health Benefits of Spending Time in Nature

**Cognitive Benefits** - Spending time in natural environments acts as a salve for our over-stimulated brains allowing our sympathetic nervous system (the fight-or-flight response) to regulate. This helps reduce stress and cortisol levels and boosts energy. When we are in a regulated or relaxed state, our bodies and minds can passively focus on other tasks, leading to improved short-term memory, ability to focus, and ability to adjust to changing situations and shift attention to different tasks – known as cognitive flexibility.

**Physical Benefits** - Access to green spaces encourages overall physical wellness. Those with access to natural environments are more physically active, and those who exercise outdoors tend to do so for longer periods of time and at greater intensity. Spending time outside positively affects every system of the body from our heads to our hearts to our guts and is linked to improved sleep quality, lower blood pressure, and reduced risk of chronic disease. In addition, research shows that simply being outside in a green or blue space (think Lake Tahoe) for as little as 5 minutes yields benefits.

**Mental Health Benefits** - In addition to reducing stress, research shows being in nature can help those mild mental health concerns, such as irritability and anger, as well as those with chronic mental health illness<sup>iv</sup>. Nature-based therapy programs are used to address post-traumatic stress disorder, prevention of toxic stress from adverse childhood experiences<sup>v</sup>, depression, anxiety and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Experiencing nature is also associated with positive social interactions, reduced loneliness and a sense of meaning in life. Many studies highlight that being in nature invokes a sense of “awe” and connectedness to the world.

### Prescriptions for Nature

The growing evidence on the benefits of spending time in natural environments has led to interventions that increase access to the outdoors for those who may not otherwise.

**Park Rx: Stay Healthy In Nature Everyday (SHINE)** is a program with UCSF Center for Nature and Health and the East Bay Regional Parks that trains medical providers to “prescribe” nature and provides low-income families opportunities, including transportation, to engage with nature and receive environmental education<sup>vi</sup>. SHINE lists ten healthcare organizations as partners in the Park Rx program. UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital Oakland has embedded Park Rx into the



electronic medical system and trained volunteers to follow up with families to schedule park visits when a prescription is ordered.

**Nature Rx** is a partnership with UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services and the UC Davis Arboretum and Public Garden, this program incorporates spending time in nature as part of a holistic approach to healthcare<sup>vii</sup>. Once a student receives a prescription for nature from their healthcare provider, the Nature Rx program encourages participants to spend a set amount of time in nature each week and provides supportive resources such as suggested nature-based activities and maps identifying natural areas to explore.

### Local Data and Resources

Many Truckee/North Tahoe residents take advantage of our proximity to nature and on average participate in outdoor activities every other day<sup>viii</sup>. Very impressive, let's keep it up! The next time you are feeling stressed, fatigued, unable to focus or lonely take a moment to step out into our beautiful environment. As for me, I am heading out to Tyrolean Downhill, just what the doctor ordered.

### Upcoming FREE Events and Resources:

**Forest Bathing with Tahoe Forest** - July 24 5:15 to 6:30 at the Donner Party Picnic Area lead by Justine Nelson, Certified Integrative Wellness Coach: <https://www.tfhd.com/wellness/events/free-event-introduction-forest-bathing>

**Trails for EveryBODY** – a Sustainable Truckee awareness campaign that supports all-inclusive, universally designed trails for all shapes, sizes and physical abilities: <https://www.visittruckee Tahoe.com/things-to-do/trails-for-everybody>

**Free California State Park Adventure Pass** and the **Every Kid Outdoors** are free passes for all 4<sup>th</sup> graders and their families to access amazing state parks throughout California (<https://www.parks.ca.gov/adventurepass>) and natural wonders and historic sites throughout the United States (<https://everykidoutdoors.gov>).

**AllTrails** is a free app for everyone that can help you find trails for walking, hiking and biking near you. Set up an account and you have access to over 400,000 hand-curated trail maps – be sure to filter for options such as difficulty and length and read reviews and trail descriptions to find the trail for you <https://support.alltrails.com/hc/en-us/articles/360022657592-Can-I-use-AllTrails-for-free>.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://mcpres.mayoclinic.org/mental-health/the-mental-health-benefits-of-nature-spending-time-outdoors-to-refresh-your-mind/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4204431/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/04/nurtured-nature>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1807504116>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.acesaware.org/managestress/nature/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.ebparks.org/programs/hphp/shine>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://healthy.ucdavis.edu/news/nature-prescription>

<sup>viii</sup> [https://www.tfhd.com/sites/default/files/CHNA-FINAL-pages%20updated\\_0.pdf](https://www.tfhd.com/sites/default/files/CHNA-FINAL-pages%20updated_0.pdf)