

Your experts in Aging Well in King and south Snohomish Counties

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## The healing power of nature



As many of us have discovered throughout our lives, spending time outdoors isn't just "nice." It often feels fundamentally healing, no matter our age.

Research supports this. Time spent in nature has been shown to decrease cortisol, a stress hormone, and boost the immune system. It can reduce depression and improve attention. It can lower blood pressure and improve sleep quality. The studies are so compelling that some

doctors have even written prescriptions for a weekly outing. If you're feeling stressed, consider a little nature therapy.

**How does it work?** Researchers aren't exactly sure. Some believe it's the physical activity that usually accompanies time in nature. Walking, for instance. Others point to being in natural light. Some suggest it is exposure to better air quality, because plants process and filter out pollutants. (But be wary of pollens if you have allergies, of course.)

Overall, it seems that focused *awareness* of nature, separate from one's daily concerns, provides the greatest benefit: stress reduction *and* mood enhancement.

**Forest bathing.** A Japanese practice called *forest bathing* is particularly effective and has been growing in popularity. In essence, it's a guided trip through a forest, experienced in silence. Instead of talking, participants pay attention to sights, smells, and sounds. They are encouraged to breathe deeply and sometimes simply sit still. Some sessions also include light muscle-relaxation techniques.

Try this on your own, without a guide. In a green space of your choice, consciously take a break from your worries. Focus on each of your senses, one at a time. Ask yourself, "What can I smell right now?" Breathe deeply and observe. "What sounds do I hear?" Quiet your inner voice so you can hear the natural world. "How does the light move through the leaves?" Let yourself see things in a fresh way.

**Accessible nature.** You don't need to venture into remote wilderness to experience these benefits. Choose a location that fits well with your needs and physical abilities at this stage in life. A stroll in a neighborhood park can be just as restorative. Being near a stream or pond is a bonus. And you don't need to spend all day outside—just two hours per week, even spread across several short visits, can provide the same benefits as a longer trip. Perhaps consider inviting a friend along. One study showed that a dose of nature is even more helpful to older adults when it's combined with a feeling of social connection.

**Are the changes of aging getting you down? We can help you strategize for quality of life. Give us a call at 206-456-5155.**



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Aging Wisdom supports individuals and families in King and south Snohomish Counties as they plan for aging.



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