

HOW TO FOREST BATHE

► Begin with basic breath work (see below), then lean into the quiet as you wander. The key is to open yourself up to all your senses: the sound of your feet, the sight of a bird overhead, the feel of the wind.



What it *really* feels like

I Tried Forest Bathing—and Found My Bliss

This trendy new way to meditate has some surprising benefits.

By LIZ KRIEGER

→ I'M WALKING ALONG A snowy carriage road in upstate New York, trying to focus on my breath in the icy air. I'm here with Nina Smiley, PhD, director of mindfulness programming at Mohonk Mountain House, to learn how to forest bathe, a form of moving meditation first popularized in Japan.

Forest bathing involves immersing yourself in nature in a mindful way—no nudity required. According to the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs (yes, that's a thing), the benefits are many: lower cortisol, boosted immune system, and improved mood.

I'm a to-do list-making, type A woman, and I'm starved for moments of mindfulness. Many of us are: We head out for runs with music or podcasts playing in our ears; we drive while talking (hands-free, of course) on the phone. Even hiking, how often do you stop gabbing with your friends and just listen to the sound of your feet?

Smiley starts me off with a series of full, gentle inhales and exhales of about four counts each. Apparently, just breathing in this manner will activate the more restful, parasympathetic nervous system—as opposed to the sympathetic system, which keeps you in that clenched-up, fight-or-flight mode.

We begin to walk, under a cloudless sky. I'm supposed to try viewing my thoughts as logs floating down a river, with me on the bank, simply letting each one pass by. But it's hard to stay right there—to not seek additional stimulation. I feel compelled to chatter, hum, or start untangling some problem in my head.

Just when my thoughts begin to rush faster and faster, we stop and stare upward. I see the height of the old trees, look at the variations in the bark, and notice the shades of lichen growing on the trunks. I even pass my hand over the undulations of a slick icicle. I can't remember the last time I did that.

As my forest bathing experience comes to a close, I am profoundly grateful. Not only have I learned how to bring more mindfulness into my time outdoors, but for the first time I've come to see real beauty in winter, a season I normally don't enjoy at all. That's something no spin class has ever done.