



Nature and mental health

Explains how nature helps your mental health. Gives tips and ideas to try, and suggests where to go for more information.

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How can nature benefit my mental health?

Spending time in green space or bringing nature into your everyday life can benefit both your mental and physical wellbeing. For example, doing things like growing food or flowers, exercising outdoors or being around animals can have lots of positive effects. It can:

- improve your mood
- reduce feelings of [stress](#) or [anger](#)
- help you take time out and [feel more relaxed](#)
- improve your physical health
- improve your confidence and [self-esteem](#)
- help you [be more active](#)
- help you meet and get to know new people
- connect you to your local community
- reduce [loneliness](#)
- help you feel more connected to nature
- provide [peer support](#).

“Nurturing something else into life has really helped my wellbeing. Gently caring for something helped me learn to care for myself.”

We all have different experiences of nature, and different reasons for wanting to connect with it more. You might find you get something completely different from one activity compared to someone else.

Our sections on [ideas to try in nature](#) and [getting started](#) give lots of tips on how to bring some benefits from nature into your life, whatever your personal situation.

“I've been getting out into nature and walking, either on my own or with dogs, to manage my bipolar disorder for years. It helps to keep me calm and physically healthy, and I love taking the time to be mindful of all the beautiful green spaces around me, even when living in a city.”

Nature and mental health problems

Spending time in nature has been found to help with mental health problems including [anxiety](#) and [depression](#).

For example, research into [ecotherapy](#) (a type of formal treatment which involves doing activities outside in nature) has shown it can help with mild to moderate depression. This might be due to combining regular physical activity and social contact with being outside in nature.

Being outside in natural light can also be helpful if you experience [seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#), a type of depression that affects people during particular seasons or times of year. And people tell us that getting into nature has helped them with many [other types of mental health problems](#).

“Watching the birds and squirrels always has a calming effect and takes me out of my own head.”

Anxieties about climate change can also have a big impact on our wellbeing. If climate change is affecting your mental health, spending time connecting to nature may be helpful. You could also get involved with conservation activities or campaigns to protect the environment. See [The Wildlife Trusts](#), [Groundwork](#) and [The Conservation Volunteers](#) websites for suggestions.

“It is hard to explain the power of nature in relieving both my physical and mental stress. There is little more relaxing than sitting with a cup of tea looking at a hill through a window and hearing the nearby stream trickle away. There's something about the quiet calm of nature that is contagious, leaving a quiet calm in my mind.”

What nature ideas could I try?

This section has some tips and suggestions for enjoying nature. Don't worry if some ideas don't feel right for you. See if you can find some that do, or adapt one to suit you.

“I love watching the garden change. The difference I make when I dig a bed, plant something or even cut the grass. And honestly I'm no gardener! An easy way for everyone to connect with outside is to watch the birds. Put out a bird feeder to attract them. Otherwise just get outside, blow the cobwebs away, breathe deeply. Bliss.”

Grow or pick food

- **Create a growing space.** If you don't have access to a garden, you could plant salad leaves or herbs in a window box or plant pot.
- **Plant vegetables in your garden.** The [Carry on Gardening](#) and [Thrive](#) websites have information to help you get started.
- **Grow food together with others.** Apply to share an allotment, or look for community gardens or food growing projects in your local area. See the [National](#)

[Allotment Society](#), [Social Farms & Gardens](#) or [your local council's website](#) for more information.

- **Go fruit picking.** Look for local farms or orchards that let you pick fruit to buy. You might also find fruit growing in urban spaces, for example wild blackberries.
- **Learn to find edible plants, known as food foraging.** You could see if a foraging group meets in your local area. The [Woodland Trust](#) website has more information on [foraging](#).

Quick tip: if you're going fruit picking or foraging, be aware that not all wild plants are safe to eat. Before eating something you've picked yourself, make sure you know exactly what it is.

“I very much enjoy being part of a community garden. It gives me a regular weekly time to devote to being outdoors, to work alongside people of lots of different ages and nationalities. It teaches me new skills and techniques. It's fantastic to work as part of a larger group, to see positive results in terms of seed and plant growth. And to harvest and feel part of the natural cycle of life. To see biodiversity at work.”

Bring nature indoors

- **Buy flowers or potted plants for your home.**
- **Collect natural materials.** For example, leaves, flowers, feathers, tree bark or seeds. Use them to decorate your living space or in art projects.
- **Arrange a comfortable space to sit.** For example, by a window where you can look out over a view of trees or sky.
- **Grow plants or flowers on windowsills.** See the [Royal Horticultural Society](#) website for tips on [planting seeds indoors](#).
- **Take photos of your favourite places in nature.** Use them as backgrounds on a mobile phone or computer screen. Or print them and put them up on your walls.
- **Listen to natural sounds.** You could use recordings or apps that play birdsong, ocean waves or rainfall.
- **Watch videos of nature.** You could try virtual walks or livestreams of wildlife.

Quick tip: save glass jars and use them to make mini gardens (also known as terrariums). Use plants, soil, stones and anything else you'd like to include. Some people like to add seashells, or plastic toys or figurines.

“I started out by just finding an empty and unused space in the garden outside my window and tending to it.”

Do activities outdoors

- **Take a walk in green space.** For example, a local park.
- **Get creative.** Draw or paint animals or nature scenes, or let them inspire a poem or song lyrics. If you enjoy writing in a journal, try doing this outside.
- **Eat meals outdoors.** Have a picnic in a local park, or simply sit in a garden. This might be something you could enjoy doing with other people.
- **Watch the stars.** Use a stargazing website, app or book to help you recognise different stars, or simply enjoy looking at the night sky. Give your eyes time to adjust, as it can take about 20 minutes before you can fully see stars in the dark.
- **Exercise outside.** Run or jog through a local park, or do yoga outdoors. You could try it by yourself, or look for classes in your local area.
- **Join a local walking or rambling group.** See the [Walking For Health](#), [Ramblers](#) and [Black Girls Hike](#) websites for more information.
- **Follow a woodland trail.** See the [Forestry Commission England](#) and [Natural Resources Wales \(Cyfoeth Naturiol\)](#) websites to look for woodland near you.
- **Go beachcombing.** Visit the seaside and search the shoreline for interesting things.
- **Try geocaching.** Geocaching involves looking for items in hidden outdoor locations, using a mobile phone or tablet. The [National Trust](#) website has more information on [geocaching](#).

It can also be helpful to find out if your local area runs any [ecotherapy](#) programmes.

“Hill walking and camping help to keep depression and anxiety at bay for my partner, as does trekking and gentle hill walking for me. When you are in nature your mind is free of the daily stresses and you can spend your time being in the moment instead.”

Quick tip: if you're going out on your own for longer than you usually would, or walking somewhere you don't know well, plan ahead and remember to keep your safety in mind. It can be helpful to take your phone with you in case you get lost or need to check your route.

“I use photography as a creative outlet to express myself and support my health. It helps you to be mindful in the moment and rediscover the beauty in your own surroundings. Like noticing the resilience of a flower growing with determination through a crack in concrete, or capturing the beauty of raindrop patterns. The process of observing the outside world breaks the cycle of being caught up with negative internal dialogue.”

Help the environment

- **Go on a litter picking walk.** For example, in the park or on the beach.
- **Volunteer for a conservation project.** For suggestions see [The Wildlife Trusts](#), [Groundwork](#) and [The Conservation Volunteers](#) websites.
- **Plant helpful seeds.** For example, berry bushes for garden birds or flowers to help bumblebees. See the [Bumblebee Conservation Trust](#) website for more information on bumblebees.
- **Build an animal habitat.** For example, a [hedgehog house](#) or a [bird box](#). Or create a pond if you have space.
- **Try upcycling.** Get creative and find a new purpose for your rubbish. The [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds \(RSPB\)](#) website has suggestions on [upcycling for nature](#).

“I started volunteering on Saturdays when I was in a really low frame of mind, and it really helped me recover more quickly. I work full-time in an office during the week so doing something so active in such a different environment is a lovely contrast.”

Take notice of nature

- **Find things you can see, hear, taste, smell or touch.** For example, grass under your feet or the feeling of wind and sunlight.
- **Keep a record of what you notice.** Take photos or make notes in a diary or on your phone.
- **Set yourself challenges.** For example, you could try to notice three things in nature each day.
- **Listen to recordings of mindfulness exercises.** Our information on [mindfulness](#) and taking a mindful moment in nature have more tips.
- **Think about what you are grateful for.** It can be easy to take nature for granted. You could note your thoughts in a gratitude journal or take pictures.
- **Try to minimise distractions.** For example, you could listen to the sounds around you rather than putting headphones in.

“Crouching in the garden, getting dew and soil on my hands and smelling the lovely, earthy smells is one of the only times I can feel at ease without wanting earphones in to cancel the noise of my busy brain.”

Connect with animals

- **Watch out for wildlife.** If you don't live near open countryside, try visiting a local park to look for squirrels, fish, insects, ducks and other birds.
- **Visit a local community or city farm.** You might be able to help out by volunteering. See the [Social Farms & Gardens](#) website for more information.
- **Hang a bird feeder outside a window.** If there's space, you could build a small wooden nesting box on a tree or under a windowsill.
- **Try birdwatching.** You don't need any special equipment. See the [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds \(RSPB\)](#) website for more information on feeding, sheltering and watching birds.
- **Try pet-sitting or dog walking.** Offer to be a pet sitter in your local neighbourhood, volunteer to walk dogs for an animal shelter, or ask to borrow a friend's dog for occasional evening or weekend walks.
- **Take part in a nature survey.** This might involve counting birds, animals or insects in a particular time and place, or reporting individual sightings of wildlife. See the [Big Garden Birdwatch](#), [Bumblebee Conservation Trust](#) and [Big Butterfly Count](#) for examples of nature surveys.

“It gives you perspective and makes you feel connected with something much bigger than yourself, which I find very comforting.”

How can I get started?

Sometimes it can be hard to know how to connect to nature. It can be difficult to get started. And many of us with mental health problems face barriers that might stop us connecting with nature.

“You don't need to have gardening skills or knowledge to get involved in garden/horticulture projects. Just a willingness to get your hands dirty. I just love weeding and shovelling compost!”

Taking the first step

When we are feeling low or unwell, it can be hard to find the energy to go outside or try new things. Even if we know something might make us feel better, it can still be difficult to find the motivation to get started.

You might feel nervous about going outside, especially if you are used to spending a lot of time indoors. You might be unsure if it's the right time to start something new. Or you might be worried it won't work for you.

Here are some things you can try:

- **Start small.** Even small amounts of time in nature can boost our mood. Try spending five minutes [paying attention to nature](#). You can do this outdoors or [in your home](#).
- **Do what works for you.** Try different nature activities to find things you enjoy and that you can fit into your daily life. Try not to worry if something does not work for you.
- **Do things you find relaxing.** You might like to sit under a tree, look at the stars or do art activities in natural spaces. See our information on [relaxation](#), [mindfulness](#) and [ideas to try in nature](#) for more tips.
- **Work with your highs and lows.** Think about which times of day you feel most energised, and when you find things harder. For example, if [medication](#) side effects make you tired in the mornings, plan your activities for later in the day.
- **Remind yourself what works.** Each time you have a good experience in nature, write down how you feel or take a picture. Keep your notes or pictures on your phone or in a diary. You can then try using them as motivation for next time.
- **Try not to judge your feelings.** When we worry about our thoughts and feelings, it can be harder to take notice of our surroundings. Try to focus on what you can see, hear, smell, touch or feel. And try not to worry if you don't feel better straight away.
- **Set small challenges.** This can give you a goal to focus on. It can also help you regularly connect with nature. For example, you could try to notice three things in nature each day.

“I'd set my phone timer for five minutes, walk along Bournemouth gardens, take some photos. Then when the timer went off I'd go home and write about how I felt in my diary.”

Accessing nature

It can be hard to know where to find nature. Many of us do not have a garden. And those of us who live in cities or towns may not live near a park or green space.

You may be worried about the cost of transport, plants or gardening equipment. You might get tired easily or have difficulty doing physical activities. And green spaces are not always accessible for everyone.

Here are some tips and suggestions for you to consider:

- **Look for nature wherever you are.** Nature is everywhere, even in busy towns and cities. Walk around your local area or look out of your window and take notice of trees, birds, insects, the sky or the weather. [The Wildlife Trusts](#) website has information on where to spot urban wildlife.
- **Look for local green spaces.** Your local council may have information about parks or nature reserves near you. You can find your local park on

the [GOV.UK](#) website. Or you could use a walking app such as [Go Jauntly](#) to find nearby walks.

- **Ask your local Mind.** Your [local Mind](#) may be able to provide details of local projects or ways to connect to nature in your area, including organised groups so that you can meet other people.
- **Look for accessible green spaces or activities.** [The Wildlife Trusts](#) have information on accessible nature reserves. [The National Trust](#) and [The Outdoor Guide](#) have information on accessible walks. [Euan's Guide](#) has disabled access reviews for places across the UK, including parks and green spaces. [Carry on Gardening](#) provides information and tips for disabled gardeners.
- **Bring nature indoors.** If going outside isn't possible or feels difficult at the moment, you could try ways of [bringing nature indoors](#).
- **Look for free swaps or giveaways.** For example, you might be able to swap spare seeds with other gardeners at a seed-swap event.

It can be difficult to access some types of nature activities if you don't have the money to pay for them. See our [useful contacts](#) section for a list of organisations that provide different nature-based activities. It could be worth having a look through these for free activities.

If you are worried about money, our information on [money and mental health](#) may also be helpful.

“I would encourage everyone to look out for wildlife in their own local environment. Even in a busy city it can be surprising how many species of plants and animals are there if you take a moment to pause and look around.”

Hospitals and green space

If you're staying in hospital, ask the staff if there's a garden you can access.

Preparing to spend time in nature

There may be other practical issues to consider. You might be worried about safety. Some parks or green spaces may feel unsafe. You might be worried about crime, harassment or abuse, especially if you've had bad experiences in the past.

You might feel like spending time in nature is not for you. Or you may feel unwelcome or out-of-place in the countryside or other green spaces. You may not have the time if you are busy with work, studying, childcare or other responsibilities.

Here are some suggestions for you to consider:

- **Ask for support.** For example, if you feel anxious in new places or social situations, you could ask someone you trust to go with you at first.

- **Plan ahead.** Check the weather forecast and think about things you might need. This could include warm or waterproof clothing, sun protection, a water bottle or a map.
- **Fit nature into your routine.** Spend time in nature doing things that you already do. For example, you could make a phone call while going for a walk in nature. Or you could study, work or exercise outdoors rather than indoors.
- **Think about timing.** If you live in a busy area, you may want to go out at when it's quieter. Or you may feel safer going out when there are more people around.

“I volunteer with a local city farm. At first I was really nervous and my anxiety was sky high but I slowly built confidence. I made friends, learnt new skills and enjoyed being active and outside. Attending regularly built structure in my week and became something to look forward to.”

What if it doesn't work for me?

Try not to blame yourself if something you've tried doesn't work for you. Managing a mental health problem can be really difficult, especially when you're not feeling well. And different things work for different people.

There are many [other nature ideas you could try](#), and other options for [treatment and support](#). Our information on [seeking help for a mental health problem](#) could help you explore more options.

“Volunteering gives my life purpose and meaning which (whilst not being well enough to work right now) is vitally important for my recovery. It helps build a sense of hope for the future.”

Useful contacts

Mind's services

- [Mind's helplines](#) provide information and support by phone and email.
- [Local Minds](#) offer face-to-face services across England and Wales. These services include talking therapies, peer support and advocacy.
- [Side by Side](#) is Mind's support online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

We've collected together some useful contacts in the following areas:

Gardening, farming and conservation

Carry on Gardening

carryongardening.org.uk

Help for anyone with a disability to start or continue gardening.

The Conservation Volunteers (TCV)

tcv.org.uk

Runs a network of Green Gyms across the UK.

Grow Wild

growwilduk.com (English)

growwilduk.com/cy (Welsh)

Kew Gardens outreach initiative that aims to bring people together to enjoy wildflowers and nature.

National Allotment Society

nsalg.org.uk

National organisation that upholds the rights and interests of the UK's allotment community.

Royal Horticultural Society

rhs.org.uk

National charity for gardening and plantlife.

Social Farms & Gardens

farmgarden.org.uk

Information on care farming and community growing projects, including a network of local farms.

Thrive

thrive.org.uk

Charity that runs gardening projects for people with mental health problems.

Pets and wildlife

Big Butterfly Count

bigbutterflycount.org

Survey of butterflies in the UK.

Blue Cross

bluecross.org.uk

Animal charity that helps sick, injured and homeless pets.

Bumblebee Conservation Trust

bumblebeeconservation.org

Aims to protect and raise awareness of bumblebees.

Hedgehog Street

[01584 890801](tel:01584890801)

bighedgehogmap.org

Campaigns to help protect hedgehogs.

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)

rspca.org.uk

Animal charity working to prevent cruelty and promote kindness to animals in England and Wales.

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

rspb.org.uk

Campaigning and conservation projects to protect wildlife and restore habitats.

Places to explore

Canal and River Trust

canalrivertrust.org.uk (English)

canalrivertrust.org.uk/cymraeg (Welsh)

Looks after canals, rivers and locks in England and Wales.

Forestry England

forestryengland.uk

Works to protect England's woods and forests. Includes a searchable directory.

National Garden Scheme

ngs.org.uk

Lists gardens and walks open to the public across England and Wales.

National Parks UK

nationalparks.uk

Lists national parks across England and Wales.

National Trust

nationaltrust.org.uk

Lists walks and open gardens, parks and estates that you can visit.

Natural Resources Wales (Cyfoeth Naturiol)

naturalresourceswales.gov.uk

Oversees and protects natural sites in Wales.

Woodland Trust

woodlandtrust.org.uk

Protects trees and forests in the UK.

Walking, rambling and adventuring

Black Girls Hike

bghuk.com

Provides a safe space for Black women to explore the outdoors. Hosts nationwide group hikes, outdoor activity days and training events.

Parkrun

parkrun.org.uk

Organises free, weekly, 5km timed runs across the UK.

Ramblers

ramblers.org.uk

Supports people throughout England and Wales to spend time walking outdoors, through their programmes and community.

Walking for Health

walkingforhealth.org.uk

Supports a network of walking groups across England.

Wilderness Foundation

wildernessfoundation.org.uk

Offers facilitated courses in wilderness therapy.

Volunteering

Do-it

do-it.org

Lists UK volunteering opportunities.

Groundwork

groundwork.org.uk

Aims to help improve local communities and provides details of volunteering opportunities.

The Wildlife Trusts

wildlifetrusts.org

Organisation made up of local membership groups which care for nature sites.

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References are available on request.