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SETTING OUT



The COVID pandemic affected us all in different ways. For me, living alone with only a tiny garden and working as a psychotherapist, it was often tough. As you can imagine, my workload didn't exactly drop off when COVID hit, and I had to manage my own mental health so I could keep supporting my clients. When the first lockdown came, I knew it would be a challenge.

Nature is a vital resource for me, and I'd developed a routine of taking one full day a week to immerse myself outdoors. Suddenly, that was no longer possible. I had just an hour a day to get my nature fix, so I had to make every minute count. Could I boost the depth of my connection to nature so that a single hour could offer the same nourishment as a whole day? Could I intensify the impact of a local green space to make it feel as restorative as a forest?

Luckily, I'd been studying and practising nature connection for years and had developed ways to quickly dive deep into nurturing. Some of the exercises I'll share in the coming pages helped me through those dark days. I learned how to open myself to the healing power of nature and soak up enough goodness to carry me through.

Hopefully, you'll have more time. But even if you're grabbing a quick break in a packed schedule, I'll help you make the most of it.

What's so special about nature connection?

If you've picked up this book, chances are you already feel a pull toward nature. But it's worth taking a moment to look at what the research says. Over the past couple of decades, we've learned much more about why nature is such a powerful healer and how we can make the most of that relationship. I'll explore not only how nature supports mental health but also how it helps us live more vibrant and meaningful lives.

Humans have been on Earth for around 300,000 years, and for 99.9% of that time, we lived in intimate contact with the natural world. Our wellbeing and survival depended on that connection. We had to find food and water, navigate the land, detect predators, and read the weather. As a result, we've evolved with a deep, instinctive affinity for nature—particularly the types of landscapes our ancestors preferred: savannahs dotted with trees and easy access to fresh water. In evolutionary terms, urban life is brand new, but our need for nature is primal and hardwired.

In truth, the phrase *nature connection* is a bit misleading. Humans are not separate from nature; we are nature. But many of us have forgotten that. As nature connection teacher Peter Cow puts it, “The idea that we're not part of nature is one of the most destructive, dangerous thoughts that we have” (*Embodied Pathways* podcast). This book is here to help you undo that illusion of separation and reclaim your birthright: to feel fully alive and whole.



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Throughout this book, I'll share imagined stories based on characters from the Stone Age. Archaeologists estimate that this period lasted for over 3 million years, covering nearly all of human history. Our ancestors had an intimate relationship with the other-than-human world, and reflecting on their lives can illuminate core principles of nature connection. You'll meet Nu and Fa, the prehistoric parents of two children, and share moments from their everyday experiences. These stories will bring the ideas and exercises in this book to life by rooting them in something fundamental and ancient.



Have you ever wondered why performers prepare in the “green room”? These rooms aren’t always green anymore, but they used to be. Green is soothing to our eyes. We see it more clearly than any other colour, and that may be why it’s calming. Green reduces stress, improves mood, boosts creativity, and enhances cognitive function. Blue, another colour we associate with nature, has a similar effect. It slows the heart rate and even reduces pain.

Nature is rich in patterns—visual, auditory, tactile—that are both fascinating and calming. Take fractals, for instance: those endlessly repeating patterns you see in trees, leaves, lightning, or snowflakes. Just looking at fractals can lower stress levels by up to 60%. Next time you’re feeling frazzled, try tracing the branches of a tree with your eyes. (I’ve made two videos about fractals. See the link at the end of this chapter.)

There's something profoundly soothing about birdsong, rustling leaves, or a gently flowing stream. Nature offers what psychologists call "soft fascination", the way it draws us in gently without demanding our full focus. Watching a movie or sports match can be fun, but it takes effort. Nature, on the other hand, restores us without requiring anything in return.

Time in nature lowers heart rate, reduces the stress hormone cortisol, and strengthens the immune system. That means a lower risk of anxiety and depression. In a study funded by the mental health charity MIND, half of the group went for a walk in nature while the other half strolled around an indoor shopping centre. Afterwards, 90% of those who walked in nature reported a boost in self-esteem. Meanwhile, over 40% of the shopping centre group felt *worse*. Overall, nature-based activities reduced anger, eased tension, and improved mood.

As a child, I spent hours—whole days!—playing outdoors. Sadly, that's no longer the norm for many kids. Some researchers believe this loss contributes to rising mental health problems. Young people living in urban areas who had everyday views of greenery scored better in working memory, impulse control, and concentration. Time in nature also helped them relax, boosted mood, and lowered the risk of being overweight. Richard Louv famously argued that ADHD may be a symptom of "nature deficit disorder." One study found that a 20-minute walk in the woods outperformed all then-available drugs for ADHD. The bottom line? Nature connection reduces anxiety, aggression, and depression and boosts mood and brain function.

Why nature connection matters

Time *in* nature is good, but nature *connection* is better. Here's a simple analogy: sitting near your loved ones is lovely, but having quality time with them is transformative. The same is true of nature. Quality time with the other-than-human world is what truly nourishes us. It takes a little more effort, but the rewards are immense.

If nature connection came in a pill, you'd think it was a miracle drug. It can make you happier, more creative, calmer, less stressed, and more compassionate. It enhances cognitive ability, increases vitality, boosts autonomy, and infuses life with meaning. And the best part? It's free. Nature connection is your birthright, and it might just be the key to our shared future.

The Three Keys to Nature Connection

This book is about making nature connection simple and accessible. The secret lies in three keys: **slow down, get curious, and use all your senses.**

Most of us live at high speed, and even when nature is all around us, we barely notice it. When was the last time you stopped to smell a flower or just watched the clouds? Slowing down is the first key. Even a single mindful breath can begin to shift your awareness and open the door to deeper connection.

The second key is to get curious. Children are masters of curiosity, and they can be our best teachers. We all still carry that child within us, the one who's ready to explore and play. And play isn't just for kids. It enhances relationships, sparks creativity, supports

learning, and promotes wellbeing. Curiosity also leads to awe, and research shows that awe is a gateway to flourishing.

The third key is to use your senses — all of them. We don't just have five; in fact, we have at least twenty! Later, I'll guide you in using more of your senses and using them more fully.

The naturalist Henry Thoreau spent months living alone in a woodland hut. Living in nature sharpened his senses so much that he was able to smell the first appearance of muskrats in the spring! I'm not promising that you'll be able to do that, but with practice, your senses will sharpen, too.

These three keys—slowing down, curiosity, and sensory awareness—overlap and reinforce one another. Slowing down sparks curiosity. Curiosity heightens sensory awareness. And sensory awareness, in turn, fosters mindfulness. Together, they form a spiral path, leading you deeper into connection.

As nature guide Hamish Mackay-Lewis explains, practices like these help us remember our wholeness:

“We come to our senses, we slow down, we start paying attention in a more embodied way: I can feel the leaves cracking underneath my feet. I can feel the wind against my skin... I'm part of this. I'm not separate” (*Embodied Pathways* podcast).

Setting Out

To begin, choose a place that's easy to reach. A local park is perfect; a woodland or beach is ideal. If you can, find water: a river, lake, pond, or shoreline. Places with variety are wonderful but don't get stuck chasing the perfect location. The most important thing is to simply go outside. Whether it's your back garden or a nearby pocket park, the three keys will help you connect. It's not *where* you are; it's *how you show up* that counts. Even a 30-minute nature break is worthwhile. If you've got more time, great, but stay mindful of your comfort and energy levels. Are you someone who enjoys short walks or full-day hikes? This book will meet you where you are.

You might take along a notebook to jot down thoughts or observations. As your adventures grow, art materials or a magnifying glass may come in handy. And do tuck a plastic shopping bag in your pocket—you'll see why later.

As the Arctic explorer Ranulph Fiennes once said, "There's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing." The key to staying comfortable outdoors is layers. Start with wicking base layers and add as needed. In summer, light sun protection (including a hat) is essential. In changeable weather, bring multiple layers you can adjust. A lightweight gilet is a great all-rounder. It's easy to carry and perfect for adding warmth in spring, autumn, or winter.

Now you're ready to begin your adventure. Head to your chosen nature spot, even if it's just your back garden, and let's get started!

GOING DEEPER

The QR code at the bottom of the page takes you to a full set of resource links: natureconnection.org.uk/book

Video guides:

- ▶ *Fractals in nature*
- ▶ *Fractals: A natural way to manage stress*

These are available on my YouTube channel: *Adrian Harris: The Embodied Pathways of Connection.*

Interviews on the *Embodied Pathways* Podcast:

- ▶ *Rewilding Our Lives: A Journey Through Nature Connection with Peter Cow*
- ▶ I speak with Hamish Mackay-Lewis in the *Seasonal Alchemy* episode

Books:

- ▶ Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*



