

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Spending Time in Nature Promotes Brain Health and Performance

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain healthy lifestyle protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **Today, we look at the benefits of spending time in nature for brain, mind, and physical health, and overall well-being.***

Be honest: How much time do you spend staring at a screen each day? According to numerous reports, for most Americans, that number clocks in at more than 7 hours, youth and adults alike.

Society's increasing reliance on technology, combined with a global trend toward urban living, means many of us are spending ever less time outdoors—even as scientists compile evidence of the value of getting out into the natural world.

Including regular movement in your daily schedule is good for your brain. And movement outdoors while in nature, is even better. As neuroscientists Eva Selhub and Alan Logan mention in their book *Your Brain on Nature*, “Green exercise is like exercise squared.”

From a stroll through a city park to a day spent mountain biking or hiking in the wilderness, exposure to nature has been linked to a host of brain health and performance benefits, including improved attention, lower stress, better mood, and upticks in creativity, empathy and cooperation. Science also demonstrates that increased time in nature reduces risk of brain illness, including depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline. Most research so far has focused on green spaces such as parks and forests, and researchers are now also beginning to study the benefits of blue spaces, places with river and ocean views. Nature comes in all shapes and sizes, and psychological research is still fine-tuning our understanding of its potential benefits. In the process, scientists are charting a course for policymakers and the public to better tap into the healing powers of Mother Nature.

“There is mounting evidence, from dozens and dozens of researchers, that nature has benefits for both physical and psychological human well-being,” says Lisa Nisbet, PhD, a psychologist at

Trent University in Ontario, Canada, who studies connectedness to nature. “You can boost your mood just by walking in nature, even in urban nature. And the sense of connection you have with the natural world seems to contribute to happiness even when you’re not physically immersed in nature.”

Spending time in nature can act as a soothing balm for our busy brains. Both correlational and experimental research have shown that interacting with nature has cognitive benefits. In a 2019 review, University of Chicago psychologist, Marc Berman, PhD, reported that green spaces near schools promote optimal brain development in children and green views near children’s homes promote enhanced brain performance, including self-control behaviors. Adults assigned to public housing units in neighborhoods with more green space showed better executive functioning than those assigned to units with less access to natural environments. And [experiments](#) have found that being exposed to natural environments enhances many aspects of brain performance including improved working memory, cognitive flexibility and attentional control.

With so many brain health and performance benefits linked to nature, how much time outside is enough? One [report](#) by UK researcher Mathew White and colleagues found people who had spent at least two recreational hours in nature during the previous week reported significantly greater health and well-being. That pattern held true across subgroups including older adults and people with chronic health problems, and the effects were the same whether they got their dose of nature in a single 120-minute session or spread out over the course of the week.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Even knowing all these brain health benefits of spending time in nature, many people still find it hard to do. Here are some tips to improve your brain health and enhance brain performance while reducing risk of brain illness by spending more of your time outdoors.

- **GO OUTSIDE IN SMALL DOSES:** Spending time outdoors doesn’t have to take up your entire day. Take a short walk on your lunch break or spend some time in your backyard or on your patio before, during, or after a meal.
- **SAVE TIME BY THINKING AHEAD:** Pack a small bag with outdoor essentials and keep it near the front door for easy access when you’re inspired to go outside. Include a picnic blanket, brain healthy sunscreen, and a few bottles that you can fill with water, so you can grab it on the go knowing you’re fully equipped.
- **COMBINE CHORES, EXERCISE AND OUTDOOR TIME** by running your errands on foot or bike instead of driving.
- **TAKE A BOOK OUTSIDE:** Reading can be done anywhere, so why not take your book (or e-reader) outside and sit on the grass?
- **VISIT A PARK OR BEACH:** Whether you live in the city, coastal or rural area, there are parks virtually everywhere ([Manatee](#), [Sarasota](#)), so find one you like and go for a stroll. If you live near the coast, head to a beach.
- **START A NATURE JOURNAL:** A nature journal can be a great motivator for you to want to be outside and to explore new and different places. It’s basically just a

notebook where you write about the different places you go to and the animals, birds, flowers, views, and plants you saw there.

- **EXERCISE OUTSIDE:** If you already make time to exercise, moving your workout from indoors to outdoors can make a huge difference to your health and wellness. Instead of jogging, biking, or rowing on indoor fitness equipment go for a run, bike, or rowing experience at a nearby park, trail, or rowing facility. Or take your yoga mat to a pretty outdoor space like the beach at sunset. You can go swimming or rock climbing. Any number of exercises we usually do indoors will be more fun when done outside.
- **WORK OUTSIDE:** If you have the freedom or flexibility in your job, take your work outdoors. Bring your laptop and use nearby free Wi-Fi or bring your own. Conducting walking meetings or conference calls outdoors can be beneficial. A change of scenery keeps things fresh, engaging and interesting and can boost your co-workers' creativity, too!

BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:

- Stress resilience
- Nutrition
- Physical activity
- Sleep
- Social connection
- Emotional well-being
- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative, Inc. (BHI), a 501(c)(3) non-profit, uses a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is building brain healthy communities, cultures that promote brain healthy lifestyles, foster protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes at the individual and community level for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. ***Brain Health Matters and Lifestyle Makes a Difference.***