



# THE GREAT OUTDOORS

## Engaging with Nature for Mental Health

Veteran Guide

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# INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, more and more people are living in cities as opposed to rural or suburban areas. While there are benefits to living in cities, there are also some minuses. One common drawback of urban living is less access natural environments. As a result, people are spending less and less time outdoors and in nature. One purpose of this guide is to share why spending time in nature is good for your health and well-being. Another purpose is to help you get out and enjoy nearby natural environments. You can use this guide on your own or with a clinician who can guide you through a brief, nature-focused treatment.

Research shows that nature-based activities can help Veterans in many ways. They can build skills, nurture positive emotions, and improve well-being. They can also support Veterans adjusting to civilian life. This guide focuses on helping Veterans have positive, healthy experiences in nature. It emphasizes activities that are low cost, local, and can be included in your daily routines.

## **THIS GUIDE HAS TWO MAIN GOALS.**

1. Increase the amount of time that you spend doing positive activities in nature. To help you increase your time in nature, you will first learn about the benefits of being in nature. You will also review your motivations, set goals, and then get active in nature.
2. Enhance your time in nature and build your sense of connection to nature. You will be introduced to audio exercises that can support this goal. These exercises may also help you manage your emotional distress. You may also experience greater well-being. This guide may be particularly helpful for rural Veterans who live near nature that they can enjoy. Veterans who live in more urban areas may use the guide to discover new ways to engage with nature.

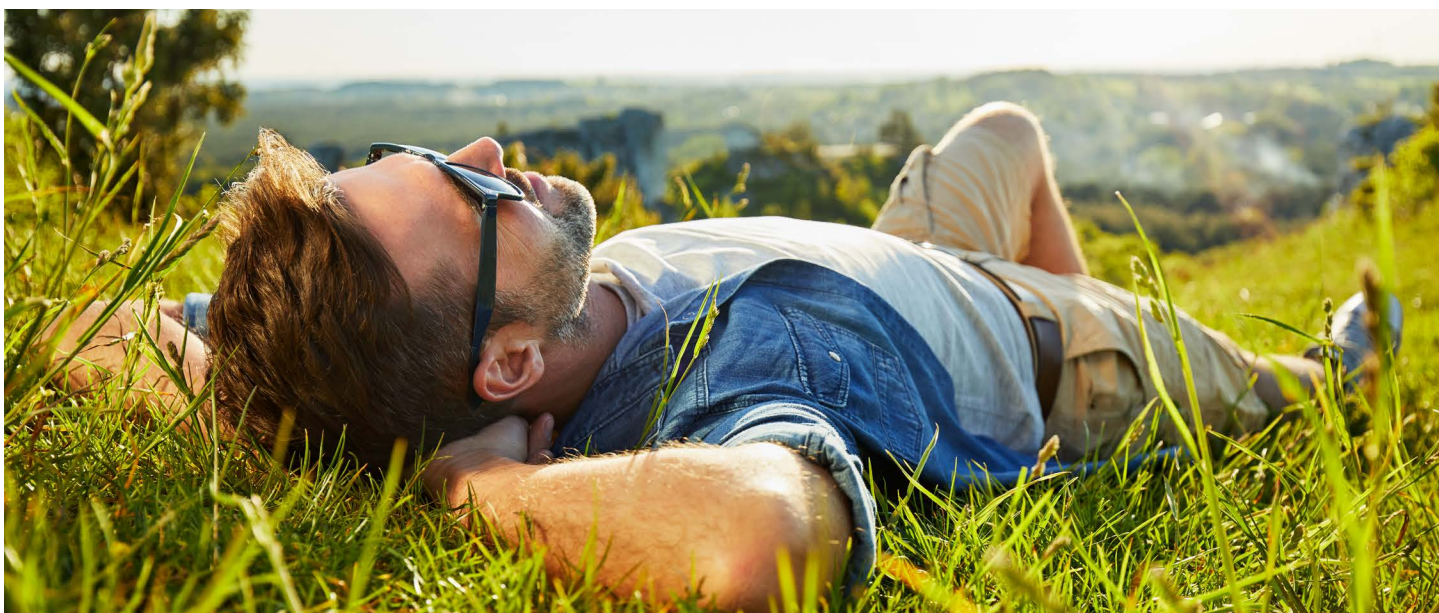
This guide uses a strategy called behavioral activation. Behavioral activation includes finding positive activities to engage in, planning those activities, and then carrying out those plans. Behavioral activation can help with emotional challenges such as low mood or stress. Having too few positive activities in your daily life can lead to distress. Behavioral activation in this guide focuses on positive and meaningful activities in nature. You can use the guide to plan and keep track of the healthy nature activities you enjoy. Besides behavioral activation, this guide has other helpful skills. The audio exercises in the back of the guide can help you relax and manage your emotions.

This guide also includes ideas from lifestyle medicine, which focuses on health behaviors. Lifestyle choices, such as being in nature, eating healthy, exercise, sleep, and social interaction can improve health. Making a healthy lifestyle choice can sometimes lead to even more healthy lifestyle choices. For example, being in nature often involves physical exercise with other people. Exercise and relationships are both important for our mental and physical health.

Engaging with nature fits within the Department of Veterans' Affairs Whole Health approach to care. You can learn more about Whole Health online (<https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/index.asp>). Whole Health focuses on making healthy lifestyle choices and avoiding unhealthy behaviors. Activities in this guide can impact many key ingredients from the Circle of Health, such as Surroundings, Working Your Body, Recharge, Spirit & Soul, and Family, Friends & Coworkers

Here is a summary of the rest of the guide.

- **Why “The Great Outdoors” is Great** – Learn about the scientific findings on the benefits of spending time in nature.
- **Reflecting on Your History of Nature Engagement** – Reflect on your history of engaging in nature. Consider your attitudes and values related to spending more time in nature. Also, explore the factors that make it more or less likely to spend time in nature.
- **Assess Your Motivation** – Reflect on your desire to spend more time in nature-based activities.
- **Engage With Nature** – Set goals for doing nature-based activities. Carry out those goals and track your progress.
- **Positive Psychological and Behavioral Activities** – Use audio exercises to improve your time spent in nature. These can support your well-being and increase your sense of connection to nature:
  - Mindfulness in Nature
  - Savoring
  - Guided Imagery Exercises



# WHY “THE GREAT OUTDOORS” IS GREAT

People are not spending as much time outdoors or in nature as they used to. Many people are living in cities without easy access to nearby natural environments. Yet our individual choices also impact how much time we spend in nature. Modern comforts such as air conditioning and an endless supply of digital media make it easier to stay inside than ever before. Reduced access to safe natural spaces may also contribute to staying inside. While there are many reasons why we spend less time in nature, the downward trend is clear.

While we need more research, studies have shown many benefits of being in nature. These include better immune functioning, better attention, relaxation, psychological well-being, and reduced blood pressure. Nature-focused experiences and activities have been used for Veterans for many years. These experiences were used to help Veterans manage stress, recover from painful past experiences, and succeed as civilians. These nature activities often involve multiday trips. The trips are also often very physically demanding. Yet, milder, and briefer nature experiences can also be helpful. Even just paying more attention to the natural environments you are already in can be helpful.

Although there are benefits of engaging with nature, scholars do not understand all the reasons why being in nature is helpful. Researchers have discussed many different reasons. Some of those are described here:

**ATTENTION RESTORATION.** Our ability to keep our attention on our daily tasks can wear down over the day. Our mental energy can wear down. Some research shows that spending time in natural environments can restore attention. This is like letting a muscle rest after overuse. Attention restoration may occur because natural environments are visually interesting, peaceful, or fascinating. Scholars also think it is because we do not have to use much mental effort to observe and enjoy nature.

**NATURAL PREFERENCE TOWARD NATURE AND POSITIVE MOOD.** Some scholars think that humans are naturally interested in life and living things. This may explain why we have positive emotions when engaging with nature. Some research supports this idea when people show a preference for nature images over other images. Overall, studies show that being in nature brings about positive mood.

Interestingly, even Disney films are less nature focused than they used to be. Researchers have found that natural environments are less common in Disney films today. When natural environments are shown, there is less biodiversity (types of plants and animals) in the scenes. This is more evidence to show how our relationship to nature has changed.

Some research has shown that even just looking at images of nature can have a small positive impact on mood. Thus, activities that involve only viewing nature may support well-being. This creates more chances to engage with nature when your mobility or access to nature is limited. However, activities that involve actually being in natural settings will likely be the most helpful.

**CONNECTION WITH NATURE.** Feeling connected to nature is another reason why engaging with nature might be helpful. This includes feeling "one" with nature and enjoying time spent with plants and animals. One study showed that spending more time in nature can increase a person's connection with nature, which predicts positive mood. Overall connection with nature seems to support well-being across a number of studies.

**SAVORING.** Some research has shown that being in nature often involves savoring. Savoring is usually used to describe enjoying food and drink. It can also describe other enjoyable experiences, such as enjoying nature. Savoring nature includes being interested in one's surroundings, focusing on the senses, and sharing positive experiences with others. When people savor nature, they also tend to be happier. As a result, being in nature might promote savoring and positive emotions.

**STRESS REDUCTION.** Time in nature can reduce stress. Being in nature or the outdoors can also affect heart rate and blood pressure. Natural environments might be useful to help with coping during times of emotional distress.

**STOPPING RUMINATION.** Being in nature might be helpful for stopping rumination. Rumination is thinking again and again about negative events. This type of thinking can lead to emotional distress. Researchers believe that, since nature is captivating to us, it can interrupt negative thinking.

**EXPOSURE TO BIODIVERSITY.** There is evidence that being around the organisms in nature can improve mental and physical health. Exposure to biodiversity can even reduce the risk of getting sick from infections.

**SUNLIGHT AND VITAMIN D.** Vitamin D is essential to healthy functioning. Throughout human history, the UVB rays emitted from the sun have interacted with human skin to produce it. Some foods naturally have Vitamin D, such as fish. In addition, Vitamin D has been added to other foods (e.g. milk, juice). Yet many Americans (about 41%) still have a Vitamin D deficiency. Vitamin D deficiency has been linked to bone weakness, cancers, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, and heart disease. It has also been linked to depression. Sensible exposure to direct sunlight can increase levels of Vitamin D. Sensible exposure means not getting so much sunlight that you get a sunburn. To avoid getting a sunburn, use sunscreen and protective clothing. The face and head can always be covered because that area of the body produces little Vitamin D and is prone to skin cancer. The amount of sun exposure required depends on skin color and where you live. Your decisions about how much time you spend in direct sunlight exposure should be made with a doctor.

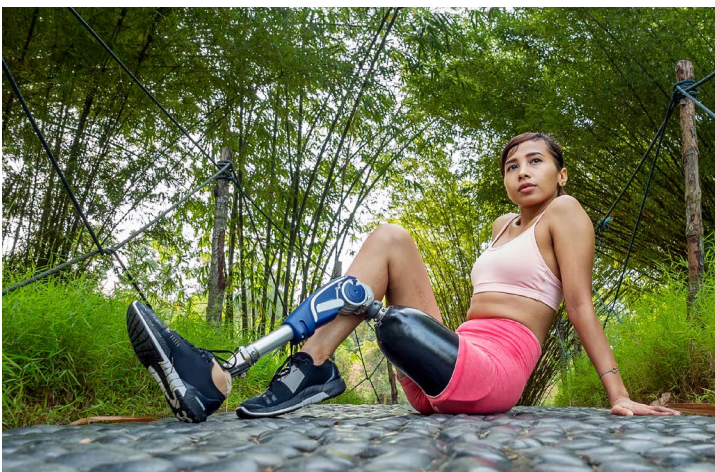
**SLEEP-WAKE CYCLE.** The human sleep-wake cycle is tied to physical and mental health. One of the primary parts of the cycle is how much exposure we have to light and darkness. Issues with this cycle have been linked to mood problems. Being in sunlight might be helpful for improving sleep. Even on cloudy days, time spent outside can be helpful in setting up healthy sleep patterns. Morning light can help those who have difficulty falling asleep. Evening light can help those who wake too early.

**PHYSICAL ACTIVITY.** Exercise can help treat mild-to-moderate depression and anxiety. It can also help those with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use disorders, and eating disorders. It can improve brain health and depression for those with brain disorders (e.g., Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, Huntington's disease). It also predicts happiness and positive mood. Those who live by natural environments tend to be more physically active. Spending time enjoying nature is associated with increased physical activity in daily life.

**SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT.** Researchers think socializing is one of the indirect benefits of being in nature. Our relationships affect our physical and mental health. One study showed that, when people enjoy nature, they often do it with other people. By spending more time in nature, you may also have more social interactions. These social interactions can support your health and well-being.

**SPIRITUALITY.** Many people see nature as part of their spiritual life and personal growth. Religions often include stories that involve nature. Leaders and followers went up mountains, into forests and gardens, or onto lakes. Nonreligious individuals also often feel that spending time in nature can be special. People who are involved with spirituality or a religion tend to have healthier habits and better health. You can consider including positive spiritual practices, like prayer or meditation, into your time spent in nature.

Note: This guide has not been tested as a treatment for severe mental distress. However, many of its components have been tested before; and it should be helpful for managing mild psychological distress and improving well-being.



# REFLECT ON YOUR HISTORY OF NATURE ENGAGEMENT

This part of the guide can help you consider how you have spent time in nature. This will include recent activities and activities from the past. The following questions may help you see your favorite types of nature engagement. You can consider whether you would like to spend more time in nature. Lastly, you can look for healthy nature-based activities to add to your life.

1. What nature activities do you engage in during the week? Activities can occur in a variety of places (e.g., parks, fields, yards, rivers, lakes, mountains, beaches, forests). If you cannot think of any, move on to the next questions.

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2. How would you describe your relationship to nature? Do you feel close to nature?

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3. What thoughts and feelings come up when you think about being in nature?

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4. Has your attitude toward nature changed over your life?

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5. What experiences or people shaped your feelings toward nature?

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6. Do you wish you spent more or less time in natural settings? Why?

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# ASSESS YOUR MOTIVATION

You have reviewed the benefits of engaging with nature and your own engagement with nature. You can now consider what changes you would like to make related to nature engagement. If you already feel highly motivated and prepared to do more nature activities, you can go to section 5, "Engage with Nature." However, you may feel unsure about whether you would like to do more nature-based activities. If you feel unsure, the decisional balance form can help. You will look at the positive and negative sides of being in nature and staying inside. Start with the top left box and move from #1 to #4 in a clockwise direction. Start by listing the good things about staying inside for example, "The temperature is comfortable," and "I can watch TV." Then select a number about how important each of these reasons is to you: from a 0 (not important at all) to 10 (the most important).

## DECISIONAL BALANCE FORM

1. Good things about staying inside	Importance (0-10)	2. Not so good things about staying inside	Importance (0-10)

4. Good things about spending more time in nature	Importance (0-10)	3. Not so good things about spending more time in nature	Importance (0-10)

Thinking about what you've written in the decisional balance form, **how important is it for you to do more activities in nature right now?** Circle the number that matches the level of importance to you.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Not			Somewhat					Very		

Based on the decisional balance form, how important is it for you to spend more time in nature? If this feels like a very important change (7-10), move on to the next question about your confidence level.

If it seems moderately important (3-6), your motivation may increase as you consider your values in a later section.

If making this change is not important at all right now (0-2), that is understandable. You may have some other behavior changes that could improve your health and well-being. Consider contacting a healthcare clinician to discuss what other actions you might take for your own wellness. Also, the VA has other materials related to Whole Health that you might find helpful as well (<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>).

Next, ask yourself, **how confident are you that you will be able do more activities in nature?** Circle the number that matches your level of confidence in making this change.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
-----										
Not			Somewhat					Very		

How much confidence do you have to make changes in this area of your life? If you feel confident in your ability to make these changes (7 to 10), continue to the values assessment.

If your confidence is lower (3 to 6), the rest of this guide can still help you succeed in making these changes. The later exercises can help you make meaningful behavior changes. You will learn more about setting manageable goals and solving problems. And you may find your confidence increases as you complete the different sections of the guide.

If you have very low confidence (0 to 2), consider reaching out to your healthcare clinicians (including those from your primary care, mental health, or whole health teams) – they can help you make these or other healthy lifestyle changes.

**Values assessment** A factor that can increase your motivation to change is better understanding your values. Values are the parts of our lives that we care most about. Values are what we think about when we ask the following questions: What type of life do I want to

live? What type of person do I want to be? What legacy do I want to leave behind? Our social relationships, our upbringing, and our membership in groups can influence our values. Our top values may be the same values that others care about, but that is not always the case. As you continue with this section, try to focus on the values that are most important to you. The following values clarification chart can help you reflect on the role that values play in your life.

### VALUES CLARIFICATION

Values	How much do you value this (0 – not at all; 10 – the most you can value something)
Work	
Self-education/learning	
Volunteering	
Intimacy/romantic relations	
Family	
Friendship	
Religion/spirituality	
Entertainment/recreation	
Physical health/fitness/mental health	
Other: _____	
Other: _____	

Reflect on your responses to that chart. Ask yourself,

“How well have my actions in the past month aligned with what I say is most important to me? Are there some priority values that I have been ignoring?”

While it is not always possible to live up to values perfectly, this guide could help you to better live up to those values. We will focus on doing positive, value-based activities.

Ask yourself another question: “Can any of my values be supported by nature-based activities?” For example, walks in nature can improve **physical health**. Picnics at the park can build **family** relationships. See if you can think of at least one type of nature activity that could support your top values. You can write those activities next to the *values clarification* table and in the *activity list* table in the next section. Nature activities that support your top values may be especially impactful to you.

# ENGAGE WITH NATURE

The next step is to create a plan for engaging with nature more. First, you will create a list of positive nature activities. Then you will select some of those activities to complete first. Afterwards, create a plan for carrying out those activities. Finally, you will review and track your experiences.

## ACTIVITY IDENTIFICATION

There are many types of nature-focused activities. This section can help you identify some Nature-focused activities can vary in the required resources, time, and abilities. Your personal interests will play a big role in picking activities. See the list of example activities below for some ideas. Feel free to circle those that look appealing to you. You may also be reminded of other activities you have previously enjoyed or would like to try. Write those down on the *activity list* below.

- |                                                                              |                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Go on a bike ride                                                            | Have a picnic                                       |
| Sit on the shore and watch the water                                         | Fly a kite                                          |
| Watch clouds float by (and look for shapes)                                  | Play an outdoor sport                               |
| Swim in a natural body of water                                              | Watch long grass or trees blow in the wind          |
| Take a walk around your neighborhood                                         | Plant/tend to a garden                              |
| Go fishing                                                                   | Go geocaching                                       |
| Go golfing                                                                   | Visit an overlook to view the surrounding areas     |
| Listen to a body of water                                                    | Read a book outside                                 |
| Build sandcastles                                                            | Go boating/kayaking                                 |
| Look for interesting rocks/shells                                            | Take your dog on a walk or to a park                |
| Watch birds or other wildlife                                                | Examine/Explore plants                              |
| Warm your body in the sun (apply sunscreen and be careful to avoid sunburns) | Visit a rose garden, arboretum, or tropical garden  |
| Close your eyes and feel the breeze on your skin                             | Set up a bird feeder                                |
| Have a campfire                                                              | Do a photo scavenger hunt                           |
| Go surfing/boogie boarding                                                   | Go on a run                                         |
| Walk along a shoreline                                                       | Close your eyes and listen to the sounds around you |
| Go on a hike                                                                 | Volunteer with the parks and recreation department  |
| Go camping overnight                                                         |                                                     |

Clean up trash at a nearby park or body of water  
 Enjoy a sunset or sunrise  
 Enjoy a playground with your young family members  
 Go hunting

Use outdoor exercise equipment  
 Join an outdoor oriented club  
 Draw or paint a landscape  
 Watch the trees or weather from a window  
 Watch a nature documentary

This guide focuses on engaging with nearby natural environments. One important step is finding nearby natural environments; these may be around your home or the homes of family and friends. You may know of other nearby settings, like *parks, lakes, trails, or gardens*. The internet can also be a great resource. For example, you can search parks, trails, gardens, or other related words along with the name of your city/town on the website [www.google.com/maps](http://www.google.com/maps).

Write the nature-focused activities that are most appealing to you in the following list. The list is organized by level of difficulty. It is usually helpful to start with activities that are easier to carry out. Once you have completed those activities, you can build work on doing more difficult activities. The list also includes a column for identifying values that each activity supports. Spend some time completing this list. At a minimum, identify two to three activities that are easy to complete. It might be best to pick activities that you could do at least once a week. This will help you build a nature-engagement habit.

### ACTIVITY LIST

DIFFICULTY	ACTIVITY	VALUE(S)
Easy		
Medium		
Difficult		

## ACTIVITY SCHEDULING

After creating a list of activities, you can begin scheduling them. Select one or two activities from the “easy” category that you can do during the following week.

The next step is to plan when, over the next week, you can do these activities. The *Behavior Scheduling and Monitoring Form* can be used to plan these activities. It can also help you track your behaviors. You can write how enjoyable the activity was and any comments you have about the activity. The most enjoyable or meaningful activities should be done more regularly. This form is also important because tracking behaviors is an important strategy to changing behavior. The Behavior Scheduling and Monitoring Form will help you to create SMART goals. SMART stands for goals that are:

- **S – Specific:** Avoid vague goals like “be outside more.” A better goal would be to “visit the park down the street.”
- **M – Measurable:** Make goals that you can count. Avoid a goal like “walk in the neighborhood for a while.” A better goal would be, “Walk for 15 minutes in the neighborhood.”
- **A – Achievable:** Pick goals that are very doable, and then work your way up to more challenging goals. “Plant a whole garden” might be too big a goal. Start with a smaller goal, like, “Plant three tomato plants and three pepper plants.”
- **R – Relevant:** Try to avoid goals that you are doing just because someone else expects you to. Try and find goals that are connected to your values.
- **T – Time-limited:** These first goals will be designed to be completed in one week or less. Other goals (e.g., train to complete a five-mile hike) might have a longer duration but could have smaller weekly goals. Either way, set a time by which you hope to complete each goal.

SMART goals are a better way to set goals. As you fill out the form, see if you can try to create SMART goals.

### Example goals:

1. *This week, I will walk around the block with my spouse on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evening.*
  - This goal is **specific** because it describes when, where, and how it will take place. It also describes who might be involved.
  - This goal is **measurable** because it lists how many times the activity will take place. It also describes the length of the walk (around the block), although it could have also been measured by time, such as a 10-minute walk.
  - This goal is **achievable** for the Veteran in the example. Pick goals that are achievable for you.

- This goal is **relevant** to Veterans as they want to be more physically fit, enjoy their neighborhood, and spend time with their spouse. Pick goals that are relevant to your values and life.
  - This goal has a **time limit**: “this week.” Time limits can vary, depending on the goal.
2. *Every morning this week, I will take 15 minutes of quiet time to drink my tea on the back porch.*
- This goal is **specific** because it describes when, where, and how the activity will take place.
  - The goal is **measurable** because it lists how many times the activity will take place (every day). It also says how long it will take each time (15 minutes).
  - This goal is **achievable** for this Veteran, as they have time in the morning to drink tea and have a back porch.
  - This goal is **relevant** to Veterans as they want to practice quieting their mind and meditating. Others might do this activity to enjoy the sights, smells, and sounds of nature.
  - This goal is **time-limited** because it mentions doing the activity “this week.”

There is another point to consider. Nature activities that involve other people and physical activity may be extra helpful. Talking with a friend during a brisk walk at the park might be extra meaningful and restoring. Consider how your activities can involve other people or physical activity. At the same time, solitary and relaxing nature activities can be helpful as well. Those activities might be good at providing you time to reflect or meditate.

## SAFETY CONCERNS

Engaging in nature can sometimes bring risks. To help reduce those risks, you should prepare. Having proper gear can be helpful. The National Park Service suggests bringing the [10 Essentials](#) when engaging with nature. They are:

1. Navigation systems (e.g., GPS/map app on a phone)
2. Sun protection\*
3. Appropriate clothing\*
4. Light sources
5. First-aid supplies\*
6. Source of fire
7. Repair kit and tools
8. Food
9. Hydration\* (water or appropriate drink)
10. Emergency shelter



However, it is clear that not all forms of nature engagement will require each of these, for example, gardening at home or walking in a tree-lined neighborhood. Yet the list has some items that are important in almost every outdoor activity: sun protection; appropriate clothing; access to first aid supplies; and, especially, water or a beverage. Hiking, biking, and water sports will likely require more supplies.

Three other points should be emphasized. First, when doing outdoor activities away from home, try to go with someone. This will likely make the experience more enjoyable and can also provide additional safety. You can also help each other avoid injury and overexertion. You may want to have a solitary nature experience. If so, let someone know where you are going and when they should expect to hear from you. That way they can be prepared to get you help if needed. Second, match the type of activity to your physical ability. Do not overexert yourself out of eagerness. Rather, build up your physical conditioning over time. Engage in warm-up and cool-down periods if exercising. This can help prevent injury and support recovery. Consult with your healthcare professional before participating in any strenuous activities. Third, pay attention to the weather. Avoid overheating. Avoid heavy rain, wind, or thunderstorms. See these sites for more information:

<https://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/safety/safety.shtml>

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/hiking-safety.htm>



## INCLUDING AUDIO EXERCISES

Doing positive activities in nature is the main goal of this guide. Another major goal is to enhance those activities. A series of audio exercises is included in the guide for that purpose. Using an audio exercise involves listening to prerecorded instructions. These instructions might guide you to focus on your breathing or noticing what is around you. Mindfulness and savoring exercises can enhance your time spent in nature. They will help you focus on the environment and be present. The guided imagery exercises can be used, even while indoors. Guided imagery involves bringing up positive images to your mind that can reduce stress or improve your mood. These types of audio exercises have been shown to support mental health and well-being. Review the exercises in the next section. Then schedule one or two of them into your week. There is a column on the Behavior Scheduling and Monitoring Form to track your use of these exercises.

# Behavior Scheduling and Monitoring Form

What am I committing to do?

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

How often will I do it? (Times per week/day)

## SCHEDULING

What am I doing and when?	
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	
Sunday	

## MONITORING

Enjoyment (0 to 10)	Meaning (0 to 10)	Comments	Audio Y/N

**Moving forward.** You can print more copies of this form to help you set new goals. Do what you can to continue to add healthy nature-based experiences into your daily life. Focus on completing some of the easier activities first. Then you can consider scheduling more difficult nature activities into your week. It is often helpful to break down complex activities like “go camping” into easier steps. For example - first you might look online for a campground and make a reservation. Then you might print a packing list and prepare a shopping list. This may be followed by cleaning your gear and so on.

**Problem solving.** As expected, we are not always successful at accomplishing our goals. Sometimes goals that may have seemed achievable may end up being more challenging than we thought. Sometimes, the goal being too ambitious is the cause of a setback. These goals can often be adjusted to make them more doable. For example, rather than a 30-minute nature walk, change the goal to a 10-minute nature walk. Some particularly difficult goals can be turned into sub goals. For example, if the goal is to hike a certain trail, plan separate steps for each visit. First, go to the park that has the trails and sit on a bench. On the next visit, go to the park and walk up to the trailhead. Then go to the park and walk part of the trail. And, finally, walk the whole trail.

Sometimes a lack of motivation might be a challenge. In these cases, you might invite your family or friends to join you. For example, you could bring a child with you on your walk around the neighborhood. Or maybe a friend can join you when you volunteer to clean up trash once a month at a nearby park. Shared experiences are often more fun. They can also provide accountability and increase your desire for additional positive experiences.

If you are struggling to remember your goals, placing written reminders where you are sure to see them can be helpful. For example, you could put a sticky note or the tracking form taped to your bathroom mirror. Creating alerts or reminders on your phone can also help you remember your goals.

If you are feeling stuck, consider reaching out to a VA clinician to get guidance on moving forward. Behavioral health clinicians in primary care or specialty mental health clinics might be available to help. A Whole Health coach is another person to consider meeting with.



# POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND BEHAVIORAL ACTIVITIES

This guide has three types of guided audio exercises that research has shown to be beneficial. These can help build your connection with nature and enhance your time in nature and your well-being.

## A. Mindfulness in Nature

## B. Savoring

## C. Guided Imagery

Web links have been added to this guide so that you can easily play and/or download the files. Try various exercises and find the one(s) that are most enjoyable and helpful for you.

### GUIDED AUDIO EXERCISES

Mindfulness in nature exercises	Duration	Link
Mindfulness Check-in	5 Minutes	<a href="https://tinyurl.com/yrzsd2k9">https://tinyurl.com/yrzsd2k9</a>
Mindfulness of a Leaf	4 Minutes	<a href="https://tinyurl.com/5n8234at">https://tinyurl.com/5n8234at</a>
Body Scan	14 Minutes	<a href="https://tinyurl.com/a922j8s3">https://tinyurl.com/a922j8s3</a>
Mindfulness of the Breath Exercise	10 Minutes	<a href="https://tinyurl.com/3j68tv2c">https://tinyurl.com/3j68tv2c</a>
Mindful Walking	9 Minutes	<a href="https://tinyurl.com/mtsmf2w6">https://tinyurl.com/mtsmf2w6</a>
Savoring activities		
Savoring Exercise	12 Minutes	<a href="https://tinyurl.com/2snbd6x3">https://tinyurl.com/2snbd6x3</a>
Guided imagery exercises		
A Positive Memory in Nature	10 Minutes	<a href="https://tinyurl.com/ah2ryptd">https://tinyurl.com/ah2ryptd</a>
A Nature Connectedness Exercise	5 Minutes	<a href="https://tinyurl.com/ypuk88e7">https://tinyurl.com/ypuk88e7</a>

## A. MINDFULNESS IN NATURE

Mindfulness techniques are becoming popular in health care settings. Mindfulness involves paying attention to the present moment. It also includes trying to let go of judgments about your experiences. Mindfulness may improve mental health and well-being in a number of ways. It may help you regulate your emotions. It can also help you avoid negative patterns of thinking. This can help you to engage with life in more meaningful ways. You can become more mindful by practicing mindfulness exercises. Mindfulness exercises can be quite simple, for example, spending a few minutes paying attention to your breath. These exercises might also enhance the time that you spend in nature. Mindfulness in natural settings tends to be more beneficial than mindfulness indoors. However, mindfulness in both settings can be helpful.

Mindfulness practices can be formal or informal exercises. Formal exercises involve setting aside time to be mindful without doing anything else. You might sit for five minutes and notice your breathing. Or you might observe the sounds in your environment. Formal exercises involve taking time out of your routine.

On the other hand, informal mindfulness practice can occur during your day-to-day activities. You can ask yourself the following question. When showering, washing the dishes, or playing with a pet, how often is your attention actually focused on that task? Unless a particularly tough food stain will not come off the plate or your dog accidentally scratches your arm, you might often “not be there.” Rather, you might be thinking about other events, things that happened in the past, or things that may happen in the future. In informal practice, try being fully present with your sensations. For example, while showering, can you pay attention to the smell of the soap? Can you feel the water or steam on your skin? Can you notice the droplets of water on the curtain or wall?

In both formal and informal practice, the idea is not to have an “empty mind” or to get rid of one’s thoughts. A major part of mindfulness practice is noticing when one’s attention has wandered away. At that point, you can kindly bring your attention back to the sensation or activity of interest. Overall, mindfulness practice can strengthen your ability to be more mindful. Being mindful means being present. It means not being driven by emotions or thoughts. And it means being freer to act according to our values.

If you are not familiar with mindfulness and would like information, these are some good options:

- What is Mindfulness? ([Video](#))
- Mindfulness Coach App ([Video overview](#)) ([Link for downloading](#))
- Whole Health: Mindful Awareness ([More information](#))

Usually, the best introduction to mindfulness is trying it. So, some mindfulness exercises are available below. To try a mindfulness exercise, simply click on one of the links to those audio files. Once you do so, you will be given some simple instructions to follow.

## MINDFULNESS CHECK-IN (FIVE MINUTES; [LINK](#))

This is a simple practice to help you experience mindfulness. It involves paying attention to different senses. You may find that it helps you come to the present moment.

*This is a brief mindfulness check-in exercise. During this exercise you will pay attention to your senses for a few minutes. To begin, find a comfortable position. If you're sitting, place your feet flat on the ground if possible and sit with a straight, but not stiff back with your neck and head in line with your spine. Settle into your position and if you're willing, close your eyes for the rest of the exercise, otherwise, relax your gaze on a point in front of you.*

*We will begin by exploring various sensations you might be having in your body such as differences in temperature, pressure, tingling, tightness, or tension. At any point in this exercise, if you, due to injury or loss of limb, cannot feel any sensations in certain areas, feel free to explore sensations in other areas of your body or your breath until you can join the exercise again. You can first notice your feet on the ground. Feeling the ground support you. You can move up from your feet to your lower legs noticing what's there – any physical sensations. From there move to your knees, your upper legs, with the back of your legs making contact with your chair. Then move to your hips and to your lower back, your abdomen, your upper back, and your chest. Feeling your breath and the other sensations in your torso. Then you can notice your shoulders, your upper arms, down through your elbows and forearms, and wrists. Your palms and fingers. And all the various sensations there. Then move back up your arms and shoulders to your neck. Noticing your jaw, your lips, your nose, cheeks, ears, eyes and area around your eyes, your forehead, the sides of your head and back of your head and then the top of your head. And for a moment, sit here and notice all the sensations occurring in your body.*

*Now you can shift your attention to the sounds in the area you're in. Notice what sounds you can hear. Some might be close, some might be further away, some might be distant. Some may be constant, and some may be occasional. Just notice those sounds, and then notice the changes in the sounds.*

*Lastly, bring your attention to your breath. You may notice your breath in your nose as the air comes in and out. Or in your throat. Or your chest or your abdomen as they expand and contract with each breath. Pick one of those areas of your body and simply notice the breath moving in and out of your body. Just notice it as it flows in and out, somewhat like waves on the shore.*

*And to wrap up this exercise, imagine what the environment looked like before you closed your eyes and when you're ready, you can slowly blink and open your eyes. As you go throughout your day, remember that attending to in-the-moment sensations like physical sensations, sounds, or your breath can be a helpful way to recenter yourself.*

## MINDFULNESS OF A LEAF (FOUR MINUTES; [LINK](#))

This is another introductory exercise. It provides you another concrete way of experiencing mindfulness. You will find and examine a nearby natural object, such as a leaf or a small rock. This object will be the main target of the mindfulness exercise.

*This exercise will be a way to practice mindfulness by exploring a leaf with your senses. Often times this is done with a leaf from a common tree or bush, which is a great object to practice with, but if there are no leaves around a small rock, stick, blade of grass, or flower could work as well. Take a moment to find a leaf or other natural object that can fit on the palm of your hand. Get in a comfortable position to rest while you explore this leaf. As with all mindfulness exercises, when your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to exploring the object.*

*Hold the object in the palm of your hand. Take a moment to examine this small piece of nature, trying to focus on the visual features you notice rather than judgments about the object, such as “this is ugly,” or “beautiful,” or “misshapen.”*

*Can you notice the weight of the object in your palm? Can you feel where the object makes contact with your palm.*

*Explore the edges of the object. What do you notice?*

*Pay attention to the colors you see in the object. You might bring it close to your eyes or further away, getting different perspectives on this object. How do the colors change from one part of the object to another? And how does light affect the object.*

*Explore any differences between the front and back of the object.*

*Explore the texture of the object in your fingers. What do you notice? Is it rough, smooth? Bumpy? Hard or soft?*

*Does this leaf, or rock or other natural object make any sounds when you move it with your fingers? Does it have a smell?*

*As you come to end this exercise, recognize how much you noticed about that object that you would not have otherwise paid attention to. Reflect on how this mindful approach to exploring this object might extend to other areas of your life. If you were mindful like this in other aspects of your day today, what might you notice in your relationships, your work, your hobbies, your surroundings, or your body that you would otherwise miss? As you go about your business today, take moments to really explore your senses in the present moment.*



## BODY SCAN (14 MINUTES; [LINK](#))

The body scan exercise helps you notice physical sensations. Practicing this exercise can train you to stay in the present more often. Being "here and now" is often better than dwelling on errors in the past or fears about the future. The body scan may also help you notice the physical effects of painful emotions. By practicing, you can learn to watch the emotions rise and fall without getting caught up in them. To feel anger without yelling or sadness without isolating is very helpful. You may also feel relaxed while engaging in the body scan exercise. This is not the primary purpose of the exercise, but it can be a nice side-effect.

*This is a guided body scan exercise. For the duration of this exercise, we will practice focusing our attention on various physical sensations in different parts of our bodies. We often have sensations of which we aren't aware. Sometimes these sensations are signs of emotional distress and, by practicing paying more attention to these sensations, we may become more aware of the physical side of our emotions. It is helpful to see the link between emotions and physical sensations. This exercise offers the additional benefit of suspending our judgment and our effort to make the sensations go away. So, when harmless, yet uncomfortable, physical sensations arise related to anxiety, frustration, fear, sadness, or anger, we can improve our ability to accept these sensations and not be overcome by them.*

*To begin this exercise, make sure that you are in a comfortable position. Sitting upright is preferred to reduce drowsiness. However, this exercise can also be helpful for falling asleep, so if you are using it for that purpose, you can do it lying down. For those sitting, if possible, have your feet flat on the ground. See if you can sit up straight. Have your back be firm, but flexible. Rest your hands in your lap in a comfortable way. If you're willing and able to close your eyes, gently do so. Otherwise, rest your gaze on something in front of you, maybe a spot on the ground or a nearby surface. Relax the muscles around your eyes.*

*Take a few breaths that are a bit deeper and slower than usual. See if you can feel the air coming in your nose, into your lungs, down into your belly and then back out of your nose. Breathe in... and out... You should notice your abdomen rising and falling with each breath.*

*At any point in this exercise, if you, due to injury or loss of limb, cannot feel any sensations in certain areas, feel free to explore sensations in other areas of your body or your breath until you can join the exercise again. Begin by noticing the bottoms of your feet from the front, back and sides. Notice what it feels like, the pressure and the contact between your feet and the ground. There may be tingling, tightness, vibration, pressure, or variations in temperature. From there, move around to the tops of your feet and explore that area of your body, again noticing whatever sensations arise.*

*Then move up from the tops of your feet to your ankles. Feel all around your ankle and notice the sensations. At some point you may notice pain in parts of your body. Bring your attention to that pain and explore it more fully. Where does it start, and where*

*does it stop? Where is it most intense and where is it least intense? Is it shallow, deep, or both? Is it constant or changing? If pain arises, see if you can explore it, without needing to change it.*

*From your ankles move up to your calves. Then move to the front of your legs, to your shins. Can you notice anything in your lower legs? Any sensations, potentially contact with your clothing, or tightness, or tingling. Move from your calves to your knees. Noticing the bend in your leg at the knees. Examine the front and the back and the sides of your knees.*

*From there move up to your upper legs. The front of your upper legs, which may have contact with your hands or arms. And the back of your upper legs, which may have contact with your chair or other surface you're on. Explore the sensations of that contact. Where does it start? Where does it stop? Is there pressure, or tingling, or temperature? From there move up through your hips. Noticing the bend in this area of your body if you're sitting. Explore this area and then move up to your lower back. It is possible there is some stiffness or pain here – see if, just for now, you can allow it to be as it is. Noticing and exploring any sensations of pain or other sensations you experience.*

*Then move your abdomen. You may be able to feel your abdomen rise and fall with each breath. See if you can notice anything else there. And from there move up to your mid back, potentially making contact with the chair or bed. Noticing where the contact starts and where it stops. From there move to your upper back. And your chest. Noticing any rising and falling. And then move up to the front of your shoulders. The top and the back of your shoulders. The sides of your shoulders. At any point during this exercise, your mind may begin to wander. When you notice that wandering, see if you can bring your attention back to the exercise.*

*From your shoulders move down to your upper arms. Explore all around your upper arms and then move down into your elbows noticing the bend in that area of your arm. Your forearms, possibly making contact with your legs or with armrests. Your wrists. The palms of your hands. Front of your fingers. And the tips of your fingers. Notice the sensation here. Tingling, vibration, pressure, or contact with other things. And then from there move to the backs of your fingers, the backs of your hands, and then taking a path up your wrists, lower arms, elbows, upper arms, shoulders and then into your neck. See what sensation you can notice in the front of your neck. The back of your neck. Often the back of your neck or upper shoulders will have some tension. See and notice if you have any tension there.*

*Move up from your neck to your lower jaw, another place where we often hold tension. Explore sensations in your lips, your teeth, and the inside of your mouth. Your upper jaw. Your nose as your breath comes in and out of your nose. Your cheeks. And your ears. Your eyes and the area around your eyes. Your forehead. The sides of your head. The back of your head. The back of your head. And the top of your head.*

*And now that we have moved from the bottoms of your feet to the top of your head, see if you can take a few minutes and try to hold your whole body in your awareness. Noticing all of the sensations we explored and any others that you notice.*

*If your mind starts to wander, gently bring it back to explore the different physical sensations around your body.*

*Now, as we begin to come to a close for this exercise, see if you can remember what the surrounding area looked like before you closed your eyes. When you're ready, you can slowly blink and open your eyes. Feel free to move your fingers hands, toes, and feet. Stretch your body. This is a great way to take care of yourself by learning how to be more aware of your physical sensations, accepting those sensations, and staying in the present moment. As you go through your day, look for more opportunities to practice those skills.*

## **MINDFULNESS OF THE BREATH (10 MINUTES; [LINK](#))**

The breath is a common sensation to focus on in mindfulness. It has natural fluctuations that you can pay attention to. You breathe in, pause, breathe out, and so on. This flowing nature of the breath gives you the chance to practice staying in the present moment. You "follow" the breath as it moves in and out. While trying to pay attention to the breath, a wide variety of internal experiences may occur. Feelings, memories, or thoughts may take you off track. When your attention wanders, bring it back to the breath with a gentle and kind attitude. Mindfulness is not about avoiding all distractions. It is about noticing the distractions and bringing your attention back to your point of focus. Try to avoid negative judgments about these distractions and yourself. It is human nature for your mind to wander. The more you practice, the better you can mindfully follow the breath.

This skill is important because you likely have the same distractions in your daily life. Painful emotions can take you off track. Negative thoughts can distract you from your goals. Physical sensations, like pain, can overwhelm you. If you practice mindfulness, you can increase your ability to respond to these difficulties in a helpful way. You can notice thoughts, memories, emotions, or physical sensations like pain without being trapped by them. Mindfulness can help you watch distracting thoughts come and go. You can feel emotions rise and fall in day-to-day living. With mindfulness, you are not trying to get rid of these sensations. Rather, you want to relate to them differently. You can bring an attitude of openness to them. Being open to them saves the energy it takes to try to avoid them. You can then focus your energy on living according to your values.

Overall, mindfulness can help in three ways. 1) It can help increase your awareness of your internal experience. 2) It can help you save your energy by not trying to control your internal experiences. And 3) it can give you more freedom to live out your values in daily life.

*This is a guided mindfulness of the breath exercise. It is an exercise that can be done without this audio for those familiar with mindfulness, but it can be helpful, especially for those who are still learning about mindfulness, to have some instructions. Put simply, we will be paying attention to our breath. The exercise involves two main parts. The first is to try to focus our attention on the breath. The breath is always changing, flowing in and out. By keeping your attention on your breath, you can build your ability to stay in*

*the present moment, which is where life happens. It is easy to get caught up in the past through regret, guilt, anger, or shame, and caught up in the future through fear and anxiety. But we can miss out on life right now if we allow ourselves to get too involved with the past or future. Along with focusing on your breath, the other goal is to notice when you have stopped paying attention to our breath and are doing something else, like thinking, remembering, daydreaming, getting caught up in emotions, or noticing other physical sensations. When you have succeeded in noticing when your mind has wandered, recognize the sensations for what they are – you can mentally give them a label such as “thinking” or “remembering.” Then the next step is to gently bring your attention back to the breath – just like every repetition of lifting weights makes your muscles strong, repeatedly bringing your attention back to the breath makes you mentally strong. The hope is that by practicing this technique, you can use a similar strategy and do the same thing in your daily life when you find yourself caught up in thoughts, memories, emotions, and sensations in a way that keeps you from being engaged in life. When this happens, you can notice these various internal experiences for what they are and then recognize your ability to come to the present and choose to engage in life in meaningful ways.*

*So, to begin, it is recommended that you sit upright, with a relatively straight back, and your neck and head in line with your spine. Your spine does not need to be rigid, but rather firm and flexible, rising from your hips up to the top of your head. If possible, place your feet flat on the floor. Rest your hands in your lap in a comfortable way, with palms either up or down. If you feel comfortable closing your eyes, please do so. Otherwise, rest your gaze on a point out in front of you – either on the ground or on some other surface.*

*Begin by taking a few deep breaths through your nose. The breaths can be longer than normal, maybe four to six seconds for breathing in. Then exhale slowly for about six seconds. One key with deep breathing is that you should start your breath at your belly – you should feel your belly expanding with each inbreath and contracting with each outbreath. Feel free to rest a hand on your belly for a short time to see if you are breathing deeply into your belly. You should notice your hand rising and falling with your abdomen as you take these deep breaths.*

*Now allow your breath to return to normal pace, breathing through your nose if possible. Explore the areas of your body where you can notice your breath. You may notice your breath at the tip of your nose, where the breath enters and leaves your body. Can you notice differences in temperature between the in breath and out breath? Or notice your breath in your throat as the breath moves from your nose into your lungs. Or your chest, with a slight rising and falling. Or your abdomen, as it expands and contracts with each breath. When you breathe naturally, where can you most easily notice your breath in your body?*

*For the next few moments, we will continue to watch or notice our breath. Continue exploring what it feels like to breathe in that area of your body, either your nose, throat, chest, or abdomen – just noticing the sensation. When your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to your breath.*

Questions or thoughts may arise, “Am I doing this right?” Or “This is odd.” When those come up, try to recognize them, label them as “thinking,” and bring your attention back to your breath. Like waves on a beach, watch your breath as it moves in and out.

Has your mind wandered; where did it go? You can label it either as thinking, feeling, or remembering. And then come back to the breath. One breath at a time.

Continue watching your breath, noticing the natural rhythm. Recognize you benefit when you notice your mind has wandered – and then be kind to yourself and bring your attention back to the breath.

As we draw near to the end of this exercise, allow yourself a just few more breaths. See if you can remember what your surroundings looked like before you closed your eyes and when you are ready, slowly blink and open your eyes. Feel free to move your feet, legs, hands, or arms – stretch as needed. Now notice your breath again. It is always with you and as you go about your day and find yourself getting pulled into the past or future in a way that is not helpful, come back to your breath. It can act like an anchor to the present moment – the place from which you can act in a purposeful and meaningful way.

## MINDFUL WALKING (NINE MINUTES; [LINK](#))

Your degree of mindfulness changes throughout the day. For example, you can brush your teeth mindlessly while thinking about the day ahead. Or you can try brushing your teeth mindfully. Can you experience the minty smell of the toothpaste? Notice the taste and the texture of the bubbles on your tongue and teeth? Feel the bristles against your gums? By bringing your full attention to the task at hand, you can slow down and experience life in the present moment. There are definitely times you need to plan ahead or reflect on past events. Most of us do this too much and suffer because of it. This mindful walking exercise is one way to better engage with the present moment. The exercise may be particularly beneficial if the walk is in a natural setting.

*This is a mindful walking exercise which can be carried out in different ways. For example, you can try to be mindful of your walking as you go about your business at a normal walking pace. On the other hand, you can also intentionally slow down your pace of walking, sometimes very slowly at about one step for every 20 to 40 seconds. While that may sound quite odd, it can be a very interesting experience, worth trying at least once. Walking – something many of us take for granted, just like breathing – has many aspects to it, which makes it a great activity for practicing mindfulness. The goal of this mindfulness practice is to increase your ability to be in the present moment and to do so without judgment.*

*To begin this practice, stand for a moment. Feel the breath moving in and out of your body. Notice your feet making contact with the ground, the ground supporting your feet and your legs supporting the rest of your body. And when you're ready, begin by lifting one leg up and moving it forward to begin walking. If you can walk a bit slower than your normal pace, it may help you attend to the many sensations involved in walking.*

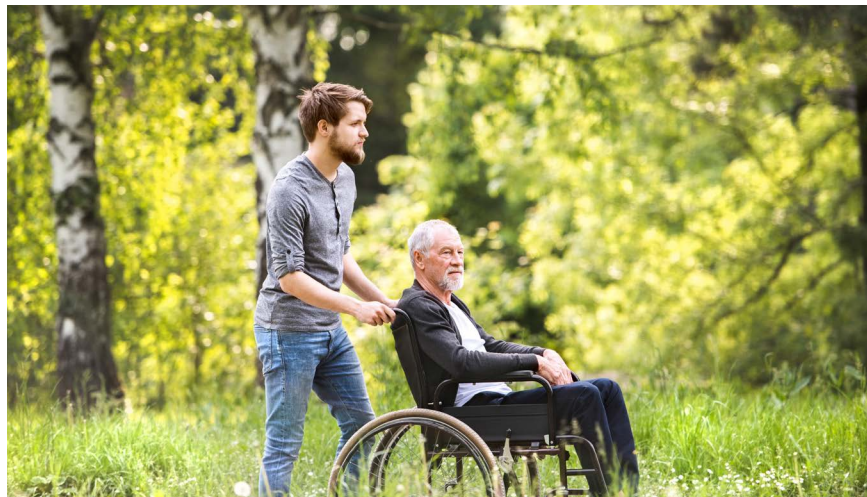
*With each new step, notice where your foot first makes contact with the ground. What part of your foot first makes contact with the ground? Notice how more of the foot gradually makes contact with the ground over time. Be aware of how the weight shifts from one part of the foot to many areas of the foot. Over time, as your body moves forward, the weight begins to shift away from the back foot onto the front foot. What part of the back foot first leaves the ground? Pay attention to the process of your foot leaving the ground. Notice how the weight shifts from one part of the foot to another and then as you step with the other foot, the process of taking your weight from one foot to another. There may be sensations such as stretching, bending, tensing, and relaxing at different times. With each step, notice all the sensations in your feet as you walk.*

*As is likely, your mind will wander. You may start thinking about things you see, smell, feel, or hear. You may have memories or thoughts about the future. As those come up, notice them and then, with kindness to yourself, bring your attention back to the physical sensations of walking.*

*Next bring your attention to your legs. Notice the bending in your knees with each step that you take. And then gradually a straightening of the leg at the knee. Spend some time noticing the bending that occurs at the hips with each step that you take. Notice the muscles that work to pull and push your legs forward. Notice your leg lifting and being put down with each step. While you continue walking for the next minute or so, notice the changes in your legs as you take each step, and notice any other physical sensations you have as you walk.*

*Now bring your attention to your whole body as you walk. Notice any shifting or turning in your hips. If walking at a more normal pace, notice your arms as they swing back and forth as you walk. Notice any slight changes in your body, maybe in the shoulders, neck, or head. Really feel what it is like to walk by keeping your attention on all the physical sensations occurring.*

*You may continue this practice for as long as you would like while you're walking. You can expand your awareness to your other senses; what do you see, smell, hear, feel, or taste? Try to stick with what is happening right now as you walk and, when your mind wanders, bring your attention back to any of these physical sensations. Mindful walking is a good way to practice mindfulness while taking care of daily tasks at home, at work, or in other settings. Building your ability to stay in the present moment with this and other mindfulness exercises may reduce stress and improve your sense of well-being.*



## B. SAVORING

Humans tend to focus on the negative parts of surroundings or circumstances. Scholars argue that this stems from our species' history. We needed to be aware of threats to survive difficult environments. Today, even when there are no immediate threats to our survival, we often focus on our weaknesses or difficulties. Too much of this can bring emotional distress. It can also impact our physical health. One approach to reducing this negative outlook and to promoting well-being is savoring. When most people hear the term *savoring*, they think about food. We take a bite of a delicious meal or a mouthful of a favorite drink and savor it. To savor, we take time and effort to bring our attention to the look, taste, smell, texture, and even sound of the food. The goal is to fully experience the moment. By savoring, we have a more enjoyable and stimulating experience.

Scholars have applied savoring to other activities in life. Like savoring food, you can savor other positive experiences. To do so, you focus on the pleasurable aspects of an experience to gain the most enjoyment from it. You can allow yourself to appreciate the breeze on your face on a cool fall day. Or sit in awe at a tall mountain or broad lake. When savoring, you fully explore and take time to appreciate these positive moments.

Savoring exercises might help you in both challenging and easier times. These exercises can help you find balance in your mood. You might find your stress reduced. They can also enhance the positive experiences you have. One researcher describes savoring as a skill that can be developed with practice. You can use the savoring activities described below in your day-to-day life.

### SAVORING EXERCISE (12 MINUTES; [LINK](#))

The following savoring exercise can enhance a nature experience. You may be at a park or on a hike. You may be on your porch or in a forest. Any enjoyable nature experience can work. During the exercise, slow down. Notice what you most enjoy in this environment. Try to savor your favorite parts of the experience.

*This is an exercise to enhance your experience of a natural environment. As humans, our minds are very good at spotting and trying to solve problems. However, they can become so problem-focused, that sometimes all we see are challenges, difficulties, setbacks, and barriers to happiness. While these things certainly exist, it may help to take the opportunity to focus your attention to parts of your experience that are positive, enjoyable, or fun, not to ignore the challenges we face, but to open ourselves up to all aspects of living.*

*Begin by taking a few deep breaths. Breathing down into your belly. If you are sitting still, this may be easier than if you're being active; but either way, bring your attention to your breathing, and just notice what it feels like to breathe. See if you can be here in the present moment, noticing your breath. With each in breath, notice your belly expanding; and then with each out breath, notice your belly contracting.*

*Your eyes may already be open, but see if you can really open your eyes and notice the environment. What do you notice around you? What can you see? Shapes... color... motion? Trying being somewhat like a little child, who, with curiosity, is seeing this environment for the first time. As you look around, is there anything that you find particularly interesting, beautiful, mesmerizing, or relaxing? Make note of it.*

*Now how about smells? Can you take in some deep breaths through your nose to try and sense what smells are in the area? Can you pick up anything that you hadn't previously noted? Any smells from the earth, plants, water, or other parts of the natural environment? Is there anything you especially like? If so, again, make a note of it.*

*And now we move to the sensation of touch. Are there any sensations on your skin or your face? You may notice a cool breeze, a light mist, the warmth of the sun. You may feel the earth under your feet – firm rock or dirt, soft sand, or vegetation. Your hands may be in contact with some part of the natural environment. Are there any of these sensations that you find pleasing or relaxing? Make a mental note of those.*

*Moving on to sounds. What can you hear? When we pause and bring our attention to the sounds around us we may notice sounds of which we weren't previously aware. Are there any nearby sounds? Sounds that are far? Or sounds that are very distant? Are there constant sounds, and are there fluctuating sounds? If you're walking, can you hear your feet making contact with the ground with each step? Are there sounds that you find interesting or enjoyable? Make a note of them.*

*For the next few minutes, see if you can revisit those aspects of the environment that are most enjoyable or interesting to you. Are there sights you could spend a few moments studying in more depth? Are there smells you'd like to linger on? Any sensations of touch that feel good that you can welcome? And sounds that are worth more of your attention? Allow yourself to experience these sensations fully. If that means changing your position, moving to get a better smell or look, please do so. When your mind wanders to other things, gently bring it back to these positive experiences. Spend the next few minutes really enjoying the different aspects of this environment.*

*Like many individuals, you may find yourself avoiding the process of savoring the present moment and avoiding the good feelings associated with savoring. While there are many reasons we might keep ourselves from fully enjoying the moment, see if you can allow your resistance to these positive emotions to relax. Even for just a minute, put your guard down and open up to the positive aspects and feelings related to your experience. Our minds wander many times to other events, which is normal, but just for these few minutes, intentionally bring your attention back to the positive parts of the environment you have chosen to reflect on. You can even tell your mind, "We will almost certainly have time to reflect on the other parts of this experience later, but for right now, I'd like to experience the most enjoyable parts. The sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch-related sensations that bring positive emotions."*

*We cannot force a positive experience, just like we cannot force a seed to sprout. But, just as we can create a garden that welcomes and supports the growth of a sprout, we can create an internal environment that welcomes positive experience. With that in mind, while engaging in this savoring exercise, be intentional about noticing what is happening right here, right now, rather than what you expect to happen in the coming seconds, minutes, or hours. Your mind may wander to events from your past or in the future, but while engaging in this type of savoring, see if you can gently, and with kindness, bring your attention back to the sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and sensations of your current nature setting.*

*As you notice the different aspects of the environment, is there something for which you can express gratitude? It may feel odd, but you can say, “I’m feeling grateful for \_\_\_\_”? Or “I appreciate \_\_\_\_”. And it can include the warmth of the sun, the sky, the wind on your face, or the ground supporting you. See if you can allow this appreciation to grow. In fact, it may expand to more than one aspect of the environment.*

*If you’re with others in this experience, see if you can at some point let them know that you value being with them and are happy that you can share this experience together. If you’re alone, express appreciation for the opportunity to take care of yourself and promote your personal development through this positive exercise.*

*As you continue with this nature experience, see if you can continue to explore aspects of the environment that are especially appealing to you. Be curious about it. Enjoy it and allow yourself to experience it fully. Though the formal exercise will end now, you can continue to take opportunities to notice and enhance the positive aspects of this nature experience.*

Some research has shown that we enjoy sharing our positive experiences with others. It makes them more impactful. Consider sharing the experience you savored with someone else. Tell them what you enjoyed most. Share what sensations you felt. It gives you a second chance to savor the experience after it is complete.

Another form of savoring is **anticipatory savoring**. This involves thinking about future positive events. For example, imagine you have a trip planned to visit your favorite beach or mountain. You can take moments throughout the day to think about that trip. What do you most look forward to about that trip? What sensations or experiences might you have?

A third form of savoring is **reminiscent savoring**. This involves taking time to reflect on positive memories. For example, you could look at old photographs from a family trip. Or you could engage in conversations about past camping excursions. Journaling about a positive memory in nature is another option. The first guided imagery exercise in the section below is also a form of reminiscent savoring.



## C. GUIDED IMAGERY

Guided imagery exercises are a part of many treatments. They can help improve mental health and well-being. In guided imagery you often use your imagination to visualize positive environments. The exercises in this guide emphasize positive nature environments. You can do imagery exercises on your own, but having guidance can often be helpful.

The guide provides two imagery exercises. The first is a more traditional exercise, where you imagine a past nature experience. The experience is one that you remember being positive. It might have been relaxing, fun, comforting, or enjoyable. You can do this exercise during times of distress. It may be helpful when enjoying nature in-person is not possible. By working through this exercise regularly, you may build up a new habit. You might be able to better bring up positive images into your day-to-day life.

The second exercise is newer and more experimental. The goal of the exercise is to promote a sense of connection with nature. You will do this by imagining the ways in which humans rely on nature.

### A POSITIVE MEMORY IN NATURE (10 MINUTES; [LINK](#))

*This is a guided imagery exercise focused on a positive past experience in nature. Let's take a minute and identify a positive memory from your past which occurred in a natural environment. Can you think of any enjoyable moments from your life that took place in nature? These could be childhood experiences, adolescent or young-adult experiences, or recent experiences. They can be from exciting trips, nearby parks, or right where you live. It could involve a beach, forest, lake, stream, river, field, mountain, park, or other natural space. See if you can identify a positive memory.*

*The hope is that this exercise will promote a sense of relaxation, peace, and contentment. Even if the reduction in stress is not significant by the end of the exercise, just taking a few minutes to allow your body to rest and to breathe more deeply can be good. Your mind may wander during the exercise, and that wandering is not a problem. In fact, noticing the wandering is a helpful skill we can practice now and apply throughout the day. So, when you notice your mind wandering, gently lead it back to the exercise.*

*The exercise can be carried out while sitting up or laying down – just recognize that if you are laying down, you may begin to feel tired and start dozing off. If you want to sleep, then that is great. If, however you want to be attentive throughout the whole exercise, then sitting up may be ideal. So, if laying on your back, have your arms rest along the sides of your body but not touching the rest of your body. If sitting, see if you can have your feet flat on the ground, your back straight, but not rigid, firm, but flexible. See if you can have your head resting on top of your shoulders, looking straight ahead. Try and find a comfortable position, and then settle in for the exercise.*

*Now, for this and other exercises, many individuals find it helpful to close their eyes. If you feel comfortable closing your eyes, please do so. Otherwise, find a spot on the ground in front of you or a plain wall, and relax your gaze. Relax the muscles around your eyes and rest your gaze on that spot.*

*Begin by taking some breaths, lower and slower than you would normally. Rather than having a lot of expansion in the chest and shoulders, you should notice your abdomen rising and falling as your lungs fill with air. With each in-breath your abdomen expands and with each out-breath your abdomen contracts. Take a few more of these deep breaths. Now continue breathing into your belly, but allow your breath to return to a normal pace.*

*At this time, I would like you to begin to open up to your memory of the past experience in nature. Consider how old you were and what you were most interested in about this environment. In your mind, see if you can picture what the environment looked like. Was it a beach, forest, mountain, field, or other environment? What was right around you within arm's reach or at your feet? Can you remember or imagine what the ground looked like? What do you notice right in your nearby environment? Is it morning, mid-day, evening, or night? Looking out further, what can you see? Are there features of the environment that are interesting to look at? Is there motion? What colors do you see? What does the sky look like?*

*What can you feel physically? Do you notice the breeze on your face? The warmth of the sun? How would you describe the temperature of this environment? See if you can remember what physical sensations you might have been feeling.*

*What can you smell? Are there salty ocean breezes, or the smell of the earth, trees, grasses, flowers? Explore the smells in this memory.*

*Can you taste anything? Were there foods or drinks that you brought with you?*

*What can you hear? Can you hear the sounds of animals, insects, birds? Can you hear water or wind, trees or plants blowing? Are you with anyone? Can you hear them or others in the area? Are the noises loud, quiet, or somewhere in-between? Take a minute to notice all the sounds you can remember in this nature experience.*

*With all of these sensations and experiences, can you take a few moments and just rest in this natural environment? Continue breathing, breathing in the air of that place. Allowing any positive feelings such as joy, contentment, peace, happiness to come and go as they may. Rest in this place.*

*As you continue to rest, recognize that this is a place to which you can return. By nature, most of us spend much of our waking hours remembering difficult events from the past or imagining possible challenges in our future. This exercise reminds us to balance that tendency with imagery focused on positive memories. So, as you go throughout your week, know that you can return to this place or another place through an imagery exercise.*

*So, begin to say goodbye to this memory of nature. The sights, sounds, smells. Let them go and start to imagine what the room looked like before you closed your eyes. Begin moving your fingers and toes. And, when you're ready, slowly blink and open your eyes, coming back to the room. As you feel like it, stretch out your muscles; and get ready for the rest of your day.*

## **A NATURE CONNECTEDNESS EXERCISE (FIVE MINUTES; [LINK](#))**

*This is a brief exercise aimed at enhancing your sense of connection to nature. Feeling connected to nature has been linked to improved well-being and mindfulness. See if this exercise helps you feel more connected to nature and, if so, consider using it as a way to build that sensation.*

*First, as with many imagery or mindfulness exercises, we start by drawing attention to your breath. Notice how, without consciously thinking, our brain and body take care of breathing for us. There is a natural rhythm to our breath as it flows in and flows out. Although there are a variety of molecules that comprise the air we breathe, oxygen is essential for our bodies. With each breath, in, our lungs take in the oxygen, which then enters our blood stream. Our hearts push that oxygen-rich blood throughout our bodies to help our essential organs function. About two thirds of the human body is made up of oxygen. And then, with each breath out, our body expels carbon dioxide into the air. All on its own, with trillions of cells working together, our body takes in oxygen and expels carbon dioxide so that we can move and live.*

*At the same time, throughout the earth, plants, algae, and ocean bacteria, use the energy from the sun to take in carbon dioxide and send out oxygen. This is the same oxygen that is in each breath we take. In a partnership of shared air, we and the plants in our environment work together to sustain life. Consider how every life-giving breath you take is dependent on the plants and algae on earth – including those right around you. Even in the winter, when the plants in many areas no longer produce oxygen, plants and algae in warmer climates make up for it. Your in-breath is the out-breath of plants. Your out-breath is the in-breath of these different organisms. Take a few moments to breathe in and out, imagining how your breath, and the breath of every person and animal around you depends on the production of oxygen from plants and algae. And, in turn, plants, algae and some bacteria depend on the carbon dioxide we breathe out and the light of the sun.*

*Consider how the life-giving breath you're taking in now is supported by plants and other organisms. Consider how your next outbreath supports the life of those same organisms.*

*At this point we will wrap up this exercise. As you move through your day, pause now and then, take a breath. Take a moment to remember your interdependence with the natural environment – remembering that even if you're in a winter environment, your oxygen comes from distant organisms. See if you can take a moment to appreciate that interdependence and allow yourself to feel that connection with nature.*