

Go Take a Bath in the Woods

“Forest Bathing” -- or *Shinrin-yoku* in Japanese -- is the new trend in reducing stress and depression, lowering blood pressure, boosting immunity, and improving overall mental and physical health. For those unacquainted with the term, it essentially means taking a quiet, leisurely, mindful walk in the woods. No water is involved; just soaking up the forest “atmosphere.” That this type of activity would be good for both the mind and body should come as no surprise. People have been extolling the benefits of spending time in nature for centuries and modern studies just keep confirming it.

Unfortunately, we spend most of our time indoors. A key figure in a 2001 study entitled The National Human Activity Pattern Survey (NHAPS) is that Americans spend 87% of their time indoors and an additional 6% in an enclosed vehicle (on average).^{*} That doesn’t leave much time for taking a relaxing soak in the forest.

At some level, we all intuitively know that the increasing use of computers, smart phones, televisions, and other technology, is pulling many of us away from the natural world. “It is increasingly normal to spend little time outside,” the NHAPS report notes. The fact that we are basically an indoor species has only been exacerbated by COVID-19. But if ever there was a need to unplug from technology, slow down, and de-stress, it’s been this past year.

The good news, as reported in a 2019 scientific report, is that spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing.^{**} Two hours a week is certainly doable, and you don’t have to leave our neighborhood to find a forest for some bathing. Here’s three suggestions:

- The recently opened **Forest River Conservation Area Connector** is a new trailhead that links Swampscott to Salem’s Forest River

Conservation Area (FRCA). Located behind the Swampscott Cemetery on Essex Street, and down the steps from the dog park (where you can find limited parking), this new trailhead leads into the extensive 2.5-mile trail network of Salem's FRCA. Covering over 97 acres, the FRCA encompasses tree groves, dense woodlands, a salt marsh, and Eagle Hill with its impressive views. Trail maps are available on the Conservancy's website at swampscottconservancy.org under "Special Places."

- The **Harold A. King Forest** is a beautiful, undeveloped woodland in the northwestern corner of Swampscott adjacent to Lynn and Salem. It includes 47 acres of natural forest and wetlands with abundant flora and fauna as well as glacially-deposited boulders. A marked loop trail affords hikers the opportunity to explore these areas. Public access to the forest and a small paved parking area can be found at the end of Nichols Street.
- Nestled in a residential area of Swampscott, **Charles M. Ewing Woods** is a 7.3-acre parcel of public conservation land adjacent to the Stanley School. The woods can be accessed from the end of the Forest Avenue extension, or from the parking lots of either the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn or the Stanley School, whenever school is not in session.

Our neighborhood has some terrific spaces for seeking calm and renewed vitality. So what are you waiting for? Go take a bath in the woods.

**NHAPS: A Resource for Assessing Exposure to Environmental Pollutants.*

** www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-44097-3#citeas