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[The surprising science-backed reason being in nature makes you feel good](#)

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The surprising science-backed reason being in nature makes you feel good

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Spending time outside isn't just a hobby for 28-year-old Tori Murphy. It's a healing experience. Like many people, Murphy sometimes isn't that happy with her body and can have self-critical thoughts — she especially dislikes the stretch marks on her thighs. But being in nature, whether that means taking walks with her children, going on hikes alone or just looking out her car window, provides much-needed perspective about her appearance.

"No one says, 'That tree's ugly because it fell and the other ones are standing up,'" said Murphy, a content creator based in Juneau, Alaska. "Just because it isn't perfect, doesn't mean it's not beautiful."

Decades of research suggests there are many positive mental and physical health effects of spending time outdoors, from boosting mood to improving blood pressure. Now, [a new study published in Environment International](#) found a potential new benefit: Contact with the natural world seems to be linked to higher levels of life satisfaction, in part because it helps people develop a more positive body image.

The link between nature and body image

Spending time in or near nature has many potential benefits. A [2021 review](#) found that being in nature (especially while engaging in physical activity) is linked to improved cardiovascular health, lower blood pressure and reduced risk factors for chronic diseases like Type 2 diabetes.

A growing body of research suggests nature is associated with reduced feelings of stress, anxiety and sadness, plus an increased sense of purpose and overall well-being, according to Gregory Bratman, an associate professor of environmental and forest sciences at the University of Washington. (But exactly why is "still an open question," Bratman said.)

"A lot of progress has been made recently in potential mechanisms that help explain those outcomes," Bratman said.

In [the new study](#), the researchers looked at survey data from 50,363 participants in 58 countries around the world and found nature contact to be associated with greater body appreciation via two potential pathways: increases in self-compassion and perceived restoration.

"Spending more time in nature benefits body image and in turn promotes greater life satisfaction. That wasn't surprising," said study co-author Viren Swami, a professor of psychology at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, England. "What was a little surprising was how stable that relationship was across all the 58 countries represented in our survey."

The online survey included questions about everyday nature exposure while also assessing participants' feelings of connectedness to nature. Participants also completed surveys that measured their levels of self-compassion and how restorative experiences in nature felt to them. Along with questions on overall life satisfaction, the 10-question body appreciation section measured how participants "accept, hold favorable opinions toward, and respect the body, while also rejecting media-promoted appearance ideals as the only form of human beauty."

The survey results found nature contact to be associated with increased self-compassion and perceived restoration in nature, which led to more positive body image and greater life satisfaction. There are many reasons nature may contribute to these positive changes, including "cognitive quiet," or nature's ability to promote a calmer mental state, which may in turn quiet negative or distressing thoughts.

Nature can also offer a break from the constant onslaught of beauty-focused messaging in the media, which Swami calls "body-image threats."

"When you're in nature, you're not being judged," said [Holli-Anne Passmore](#), an associate professor of psychology at Concordia University of Edmonton and director of the [Nature-Meaning in Life Research Lab](#). "It doesn't care if your hair is a mess or how much you weigh."

Nature can also help you feel connected to something greater than yourself. "Your perspective changes. You're suddenly realizing you're connected to this huge system

of life," Passmore said. "But at the same time, you realize your problems really aren't that big of a deal at this moment."

5 ways to get more out of time outdoors

A few simple, expert-backed interventions can help you feel more connected to nature — and potentially boost your overall well-being and body image along the way.

Put away your phone

You're more likely to benefit from nature if you're actually paying attention to it. "If you spend time on your phone in nature, the benefits are canceled out, or the same as spending time indoors," Swami said. "Studies show this." If you can, skip the outdoor screentime so you can enjoy — and get the most out of — your natural surroundings.

Focus on quality, not quantity

If you're busy, don't stress about planning hours-long hikes in the forest or venturing out of town to go to the beach. In her research, Passmore said, people who feel more connected to nature benefit more from it — [not necessarily people who spend more time outside](#). Instead, just try to be present, whether you're walking your children to school or gardening in your backyard.

Practice mindfulness when outdoors

One way to boost your nature-connectedness is practicing mindfulness, or simply paying attention to your surroundings. Next time you go outside, Passmore recommends [noticing three good things about nature](#) — say, beautifully colored leaves, calming bird sounds or the sensation of grass on your bare feet.

Observe how nature makes you feel

Another one of Passmore's studies focused [noticing nature](#) and how it makes people feel. When you're outdoors, pause to consider this. Do you feel peaceful? Refreshed? Grateful? If you can, take a picture of what you noticed and write down your thoughts and feelings to help you remember them.

Find common ground

Murphy's go-to exercise is reflecting on connections between her own body and what she sees in nature. "Every time I start to go down a rabbit hole with negative thoughts about my body, nature gives me a comparison," she said.

Identifying commonalities, Passmore said, can help you feel more connected to it. Think about your own [character strengths, and then reflect on how nature exhibits them](#), too. For example, if your favorite thing about yourself is persistence, ask

yourself how nature also exhibits that trait (maybe it's "Squirrels are persistent at getting into bird feeders.") "It helps you connect a part of yourself to that part of nature," Passmore said.

No matter where you live or what you can reasonably do outside on a regular basis, know you don't have to make huge changes to your routine to see real benefit. "Look out your window. Look at plants in your house. If you're going to work, look at the tree at the bus stop," Passmore said. "It's all so incredibly helpful."

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