

take a breath

IDEAS AND INSPIRATION ON USING NATURE
TO BOOST YOUR MENTAL WELLBEING

Featuring
**Harry
Judd**



For every download of this digital e-book, Simplyhealth will donate to the Blue Prescribing Project, a joint project between the Mental Health Foundation and the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust. This project aims to tackle the root cause of poor mental health through hands-on, nature-based activities and will see 300 people needing mental health interventions given access to wetlands nature.





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“Defining nature is down to your personal experience and how you connect with the natural world – listening to birdsong, stroking the cat, or looking at nature photos can be just as rewarding as a walk in the wilderness.”

Mental Health Foundation



foreword



Nature is so central to our psychological and emotional health, that it is almost impossible to realise good mental health for all without a greater connection to the natural world.

At the Mental Health Foundation, we know that by working with organisations like Simplyhealth, we can help reach more people to help them experience the benefits of our natural surroundings. With the challenges of the last year, there could not be a more important time to understand the links between nature and mental health.

Thank you to Simplyhealth for creating this wonderful digital e-book to help us all look after our mental health and benefit from the positive impact of embracing even small opportunities to #ConnectWithNature in protecting our mental health and preventing distress.

I encourage you, through this fantastic e-book, to find new ways to #ConnectWithNature in your local environment to help improve your mental health.

Mark Rowland
Chief Executive, Mental Health Foundation



introduction



Good health isn't just in the body, it's in the mind too. However, maintaining our mental health and wellbeing isn't always easy. We're living in tough times, amplified by the ongoing pandemic, which has dramatically changed the way we work, live and socialise. People are struggling, with rates of mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression on the rise.

But did you know that bringing nature into your daily life can make a difference to your mental wellbeing? A vast body of research supports the idea that spending quality time in and around nature can reduce stress and increase feelings of positivity. Simplyhealth and the Mental Health Foundation believe in the power of nature in both the prevention of and recovery from poor mental health.

For many of us, particularly those who live in urban environments, nature can feel out of reach, but you don't have to be surrounded by sweeping views or take a walk in the wilderness to feel its benefits. Just stepping outside and feeling the sun on your skin or noticing flowers in a neighbour's window can improve your mental wellbeing.

Packed with simple ideas, exercises and activities, we hope that this e-book inspires and encourages you to connect with and embrace the positive benefits of nature.

However, we recognise that some days may be harder than others. If any of these activities feel like a challenge right now, start gently. Even just looking out of the window and taking in more of the nature around you is a great place to start.

It's time to #TakeABreath.

Catherine Rutland
MA BChD IRMCert CMI Level 7 Clinical Director,
Simplyhealth



At Simplyhealth, we want to help people to stay healthy - now and in the long-term.

We believe in being proactive when it comes to our health, to prevent problems coming up in future.

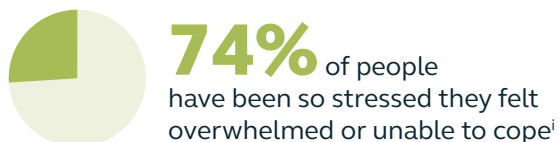
That's why we have partnered with the Mental Health Foundation - because prevention is at the heart of everything they do. Together, we will give people the tools to better understand their minds and manage their mental health - from spending more time in nature to getting more sleep.

what is mental wellbeing?

We all have mental health, which is just as important as our physical wellbeing. However, our mental wellbeing is a bit like the weather – a changeable thing. A scale each of us moves up and down on different days in different ways.

When our mental health is good, we feel emotionally well, able to look after ourselves and to engage with the things that we care about.

On the other hand, when we struggle with our mental health, we can feel overwhelmed and unable to cope, which can make it difficult to manage in our daily lives. For some of us, these difficulties may come and go, and for others they may be more long-lasting.



1 in 4 people will experience a mental health problem each yearⁱⁱ



1 in 6 people experienced a mental health problem in the last weekⁱⁱⁱ





When defining mental health, the World Health Organisation explains that it is about more than just the absence of a disease or disorder, but a state of complete emotional wellbeing.

Good mental wellbeing is essential for individuals, communities and society, in helping each of us to live fulfilled, productive and healthy lives. It is attributed to an enjoyment of work, relationships and day-to-day life. It is a part of the human condition and affects how we think, feel and act, making it essential to our relationships with others and with ourselves.

However, managing our wellbeing can be a delicate balancing act due to external factors beyond our control, such as:

- Employment status
- Bereavement or trauma
- Physical health
- Financial situation
- Family history of mental health problems
- Lifestyle habits

Unfortunately, mental ill health is more common than you might think, with 1 in 6 people^{iv} experiencing an issue in the last week.

If you are struggling with your mental wellbeing it can affect your mood and your behaviours. But that doesn't mean you have to feel at the mercy of your mood. The better you understand your mind, the easier it will be to navigate your emotions. When it comes to your mind, knowledge is power.

Just like looking after your physical health is important, it's essential to keep an eye on how you're feeling and to take care of yourself when things get tough. Thankfully, there are things that we can do in our daily lives that can help to support good mental wellbeing.

Connecting with nature is one of these things.



the science: does nature help our mental wellbeing?

Whenever our emotions are running high, we are often told to “get some fresh air” or to “take a walk”, but why? What is it about nature and the great outdoors that is able to give our mental wellbeing a positive boost?

Well, it all comes down to science. There is an abundance of research on ecotherapy which shows that the green spaces around us play a significant role in supporting our mental health, from reducing stress and easing anxiety to increasing positivity and inspiring creativity.

For many people, nature has offered a calming and safe space to turn to during the pandemic, when being confined to strict social restrictions and facing unpredictable circumstances, may have felt overwhelming. Indeed, research shows that mental wellbeing, particularly during trying times like these, relies on us being able to connect with nature^v.

Getting outdoors

was recognised as one of the top coping methods for stress throughout the pandemic^{vi}



59% of adults in Britain said that going for a walk helped them through their toughest times^{vii}

42% of the UK population found that being able to visit green spaces helped their mental health tremendously during the pandemic^{viii}



our connection to nature

Scientists have long evaluated why we have this innate connection to nature. In 1984, biologist Edward O. Wilson shared his “biophilia” hypothesis, which suggested that our strong connection with nature is due to survival instincts^{ix}. Wilson argued that during the evolution process, the human brain was shaped to respond positively to signs of enhanced survival such as trees, lakes and waterways.

This theory is a very interesting one. However, since then there has been further investigation into the psychology around our relationship with the natural world around us.



For instance, we now know the wondrous benefits that exposure to natural light can offer for positivity and happiness.

The feeling and warmth of the sun's rays on our skin can bring on an uplifting mood as natural sunlight triggers the release of the hormone, serotonin (aka the happy hormone) within the brain.

Low levels of serotonin are often associated with a higher risk of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), which is why stepping outdoors and getting enough sunlight is important^x.

Exploring the world around us

Science also shows that immersing ourselves in greenery can improve our cognitive abilities, with studies proving that participants walking in nature exhibited a significant boost to their memory in comparison to those walking in urban spaces^{xi}.

In addition, there is evidence to indicate that walking outdoors can improve sleep quality, particularly among men^{xii}. With sleep playing a fundamental role in supporting our mental wellbeing, taking a break and spending time outside each day aids the body and mind in fully resting at night.

Further research suggests that surrounding ourselves in nature triggers a sense of wonder, a hugely powerful tool in inspiring our creativity and imagination. This wonder not only allows us to take a step back from our daily lives and remind ourselves of the beauty of the world around us, it also feeds the mind with inspiration. By observing our environment, we can enhance our creativity and discover new outlooks^{xiii}.

In light of this evidence, it's time that we recognise these benefits and appreciate the nature around us to boost our mental wellbeing - whether that be bringing plants into your home, looking out the window at the beautiful flowers around you, visiting your local park or taking a stroll along the coast.

10 wellbeing benefits associated with nature

- 1 Reduces stress
- 2 Inspires creativity
- 3 Increases happiness
- 4 Improves memory
- 5 Creates a sense of wonder
- 6 Balances your mood
- 7 Reduces feelings of isolation
- 8 Promotes kindness
- 9 Improves sleep
- 10 Promotes positive social interactions



a personal story: Harry Judd - my journey with mental health



During the peak of my McFly days, my anxiety and OCD presented very difficult challenges, moments where I felt I couldn't cope. I felt isolated, frightened and irrational and was nervous about asking for help because I was worried there was nothing anybody could do.

Eventually, I found the courage to seek help. I spoke to a counsellor and instantly felt like I had a weight lifted off my shoulders. I also found a release in exercise and the great outdoors!

For me, working out is a form of meditation.

Whether it is in the park, at the beach or in the garden, I really believe that spending time outside, embracing the fresh air and getting your body moving can benefit our mental wellbeing and redress the balance in our lives.

Over the years, I've come to appreciate more and more the benefit that spending time in nature has on my mind. I love playing with the kids in the garden, going for a family picnic, playing golf or even just going for a run or a walk.

I am now a proud dad of two, and like any parent who has experienced ill mental health, I worry about passing on my anxiety to my children.

That's why my wife Izzy and I practice a bit of mindfulness with our children, to ensure they have the tools to help with any struggles they may experience. If I had known about the resources available, or had coping mechanisms in place, I feel like I could have managed my struggles before they escalated.

Mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, affect so many of us and we are all looking for ways to adapt and cope. I feel that it is so important to talk about the obstacles I have faced in case they help others who may be going through something similar and are unsure where to turn.

Embracing fitness and the outdoors led to a breakthrough with my personal mental health battle, and I want to help other people do the same.

That's why I've partnered with Simplyhealth and the Mental Health Foundation to create a 30 Days of Nature activity checklist, which offers a host of ideas interacting with and exploring the natural world and embracing the benefits it offers for the mind.

Harry Judd, McFly drummer and author of Get Fit, Get Happy

30 days of nature activity checklist

1 Set up a family sports day <input type="checkbox"/>	2 Try an outdoor Yoga class <input type="checkbox"/>	3 Volunteer at a community garden <input type="checkbox"/>	4 Go wild swimming <input type="checkbox"/>	5 Put food out for wildlife <input type="checkbox"/>	6 Watch the sun set <input type="checkbox"/>
7 Visit a botanical garden <input type="checkbox"/>	8 Take part in a paddle boarding class <input type="checkbox"/>	9 Enjoy a coastal walk <input type="checkbox"/>	10 Go camping <input type="checkbox"/>	11 Take a morning walk around the local neighbourhood <input type="checkbox"/>	12 Plan a family picnic <input type="checkbox"/>
13 Go for a bike ride <input type="checkbox"/>	14 Volunteer to take a neighbour's dog for a walk <input type="checkbox"/>	15 Try horse riding <input type="checkbox"/>	16 Attend a nature-inspired cooking class <input type="checkbox"/>	17 Learn a new skill at an outdoor painting class <input type="checkbox"/>	18 Visit the grounds of a stately home or castle <input type="checkbox"/>
19 Take up gardening <input type="checkbox"/>	20 Discover new walks <input type="checkbox"/>	21 Meditate in the outdoors <input type="checkbox"/>	22 Join a local sports team <input type="checkbox"/>	23 Learn to surf <input type="checkbox"/>	24 Try bird watching <input type="checkbox"/>
25 Go kayaking <input type="checkbox"/>	26 Join a running club <input type="checkbox"/>	27 Go fishing <input type="checkbox"/>	28 Try nature photography <input type="checkbox"/>	29 Do Pilates in a local park <input type="checkbox"/>	30 Get up early and enjoy the sunrise <input type="checkbox"/>

how to embrace nature

Good health starts with good habits – habits like moving every day and getting your daily dose of nature.

These habits can be as simple as resting for a moment on a bench outside, and listening to the birds or the tree leaves rustling in the wind.

Take time to observe your surroundings – look out for the first daffodils to come out in Spring or watch as the leaves change from the greens of Summer to the oranges of Autumn.

Creating a daily moment to actively notice the world around you can work wonders for setting you up for the day ahead or clearing your head after a busy week.

Immersing ourselves in nature can also aid with gaining perspective from the things which may be troubling us day-to-day – be it work, family or financial worries.

The next time you are feeling stressed or worried, go outside and ask yourself, what would the tree or sky think about this issue? If I stand by a flowing river or look up at the sky, how does it shift my feelings?

Ecotherapy, also known as nature therapy or green therapy, is a practice which is growing in popularity. Based on the idea that people are connected to and impacted by the natural environment, ecotherapy aims to improve your health through engaging in outdoor activities in nature.

Ecotherapy can be practiced with guidance from a trained therapist or can involve loosely structured activities that can be carried out individually.



5

ecotherapy activities to lift your mood



Savouring walk

Weave 20 minutes into each day to take a walk outside alone. As you walk, observe as many positive things around you as you can. Focus on the weather, the smell of the grass or the way other people interact as they pass each other in the street. Pause as you notice each thing and try to pinpoint what it is about that thing that makes it appeal to you.

Gardening

Digging soil, planting flowers and weeding garden beds allows you to connect to the earth in a simple and nurturing way. You could grow a vegetable patch in your garden, plant herbs or house plants indoors, or even start a window-box.

If you'd like a challenge, you could also look to apply for an allotment plot, where you could meet fellow growers, share gardening knowledge and feel a sense of community.

Forest bathing

Developed in Japan, Shinrin-Yoku – which translates as forest bathing in English – is an immersive nature therapy experience. More than a walk in the park, this practice encourages the mindful use of your five senses to take in your surrounding as you ramble through forests or similarly tree-heavy settings.

To immerse yourself in the experience, turn off your devices. Slow down and move slowly through the trees. Taking long deep breaths, take the time to stop. Use your senses to smell, listen, see, and feel everything that is going on around you.

Crafting

Spending time doing something creative focuses the mind and can be relaxing and meditative for people of all ages. If you are unable to spend time outdoors, embrace the therapeutic benefits of nature inside. Pick up a paintbrush and feel inspired by the bright colours of Summer or collect the fallen leaves to create an autumnal canvas scene.

Animal therapy

Animal therapy can help to mitigate boredom, develop our social skills, reduce stress and loneliness, and increase our activity levels. In addition, positive interactions with animals may lead to a more balanced mental and emotional state.

This can be as simple as taking your dog for a walk, watching squirrels, birds and other wildlife in your local park, visiting a local city farm or volunteering at an animal sanctuary.





take time to care for your mind

Our lives are busier and more complex than ever - so taking time to care for yourself can feel like a tough task. But little acts of self-care are the building blocks to better wellbeing.

Download the SimplyMe app today - it's a great tool for tracking your mental wellbeing. With daily mood and emotional health check-ins, it will show you how to make simple changes to your normal routine that will support your mental wellbeing in the long term.

Getting into the habit of looking after your mind each day will help you to stay calmer and more resilient in the face of anxiety or stress.



SimplyMe is available on the App Store and Google Play Store now.

52%

of SimplyMe users have seen an improvement in their mental health^{vi}

a guide to accessing nature

For most of history, humans have lived as part of nature. It is only in recent years that so many of us have settled and worked in busy cities or urban environments, and in a context that is largely separated from nature.

Urban living brings with it increased exposure to noise, pollution, and crowds, all of which can negatively affect mood, mental resilience, and cognitive capacity.

Nature is our great untapped resource for a mentally healthy future. It is important that everyone is able to share in the natural world.

However, embracing nature doesn't necessarily mean heading out on a mammoth walk in the countryside. You can reap the benefits wherever you live. Nature is virtually always accessible, in countless forms. We just need to know where to look for it, keep our eyes open and find it in our own way.



It is projected that by 2050,
66% of the world's
population will live in cities ^{xiv}



10 ways to find nature wherever you live

- 1 Bring fresh flowers into your home
- 2 Become an urban beekeeper
- 3 Get composting
- 4 Create an urban herb garden
- 5 Visit your local zoo
- 6 Practice 'Skychology'
- 7 Keep a nature journal
- 8 Ride your bike to work
- 9 Add a nature scene to your phone or computer background
- 10 Listen to nature tracks



exercise: practice skychology

Skychology is a new area of research exploring links between looking up at the sky and the experience of wellbeing^{xv}. The science suggests that it promotes connectedness and calm, facilitates mindfulness and leads to a greater sense of clarity and perspective towards immediate life challenges.

**You can practice
this yourself,
wherever you live!**

Simply go outside or find a window. Look up at the sky. As you do, take a few long, deep breaths, breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth. As you look up notice what you see, and any thoughts or feelings that come and go.

Continue for at least 60 seconds. While taking a few deep breaths, notice how you feel and if anything feels different from before you stopped and looked up at the sky.

No outside space? No problem

If you don't have easy access to outside space, it's time to get creative. Think about how you can bring a touch of the natural world inside. Potted plants can brighten up your home, as well as purify the air and lower levels of stress. Cacti, aloe vera, succulents and ferns all grow well with limited natural daylight, but there are lots of other choices.

If growing plants really isn't for you, consider faux plants, bunches of branches, a seashell collection or even displaying natural materials such as wood, wicker and stone. Or simply open a window and take the time to really look and listen for any signs of nature. Once you start noticing things – whether it's regular birdsong, an occasional butterfly or the changing leaves on the trees – you'll find it becomes easier to spot more and more.



mental health support and resources

We can do our best to make the most of nature and the benefits it offers for our mental wellbeing, but the truth is, life continuously throws challenges our way. You can't avoid hard times and you often don't have control over what happens to you. You can however control how you respond.

Research shows that people are better able to handle and move through hardship if they have positive coping skills. This is good news because it tells us that if you learn to adapt and deal effectively with stress, life can feel better.

We all have strengths that get us through challenging times, such as personal talents, strengths, hobbies, or loved ones. However, sometimes we forget to draw on them.

exercise: create a tree of strength

Lay your hand on an A4 sheet of paper, with part of your arm on the paper as well. Trace around your arm and hand, leaving the tips of the fingers open so that you have the outline of a tree. Your arm is the trunk and your fingers the beginning of the branches. At the end of your open fingers tips, extend the drawing to create more branches.

On these branches, draw various large leaves. Visualise the things that give you strength and resilience through difficult times in your life. Write each one in the leaves and decorate the tree as you wish.

The next time you are going through a rough period, visualise this tree and remember to lean on these strengths for support.



what to do when hardship hits

Talk

Find someone you trust and tell them how you feel.

Some people find it easier to confide in someone they know because it makes them feel more at ease.

Others prefer chatting to a trained counsellor. Whether you feel depressed, or have just had a bad day, talking problems through with someone can make a real difference.

Write

Don't feel like talking? Write down your feelings instead. Sometimes just getting your thoughts down on paper can take a weight off your shoulders.

Remove yourself from the situation

Remaining in a stressful environment can make it difficult to think and make decisions. Step away and give yourself a chance to gain clarity.

Reflect on how you've coped before

Remind yourself you have made it out alive before – and that you can do it again.

Remind yourself that you're not alone

Other people are facing similar challenges to yours. You might want to seek them out: even an online support group can help.

Seek help

If you or someone you know needs help, speak to an experienced health professional.





If you break your leg, you'll get an outpouring of sympathy. If you have depression, you might feel unable to tell another soul. However, mental health is just as important as physical health and the two are much more connected than many people realise.

While the way we think and, more importantly, talk about mental health has changed for the better, too many people still suffer in silence. For instance, 1 in 4 of us will be affected by a mental illness of some kind at some stage, yet almost two-thirds of us will never seek help.

We believe healthier minds must be met with open ones.

We are hoping to change conversations and encourage people to prioritise their mental wellbeing – whether that's taking small steps such as spending time in nature or seeking professional help when it's needed.

If you'd like more support with your mental wellbeing, there are a range of services and tools available to help.

These include:

- **SimplyMe**
- **Simplyhealth**
- **The Mental Health Foundation**
- **The Samaritans**
- **NHS website**
- **NHS 111**
- **The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy**
- **UK Council for Psychotherapy**

For more tips and information on looking after your mental wellbeing, visit www.simplyhealth.co.uk/healthy-living/mental-health

contributions

This guide was produced by Simplyhealth in collaboration with the Mental Health Foundation.



Simplyhealth

Since 1872, we've been helping people make the most of life through better everyday health. Our plans make sure individuals, families and employees can easily access in-person and virtual wellbeing services, and afford to stay healthy by claiming costs back on dental treatments, visits to the optician, complementary therapies and much more.

Today we're delighted to be the UK's leading health solutions company, with almost 1000 colleagues serving 2.3 million customers. We don't have shareholders, so we're led by our purpose of improving access to healthcare, for the many, for the long term. We're passionate about using our voice in public health affairs and partnering with charities to reduce health inequality – each year we commit to giving 10% of pre-tax profits to a range of community causes. And we ensure our business takes care of the planet too, achieving Carbon Neutral + status in 2021.

To find out more, visit www.simplyhealth.co.uk



Mental Health Foundation

The Mental Health Foundation works to prevent mental health problems. Helping people understand, protect and sustain their mental health. We will drive change towards a mentally healthy society for all, and support communities, families and individuals to live mentally healthier lives, with a particular focus on those at greatest risk. The Foundation is the home of Mental Health Awareness Week.

Harry Judd

Harry Judd is a member of the hugely successful bands McFly and McBusted, a much-loved former Strictly Come Dancing winner, regular co-presenter on The One Show, author of Get Fit, Get Happy and lead dancer in West End show Rip It Up. He is also a champion of openly discussing mental health, a fitness advocate, sport lover and collector of many, many cricket bats.

Spanning a 17 year career, McFly have achieved six top 10 albums and 10 million albums sold worldwide and are without question one of the most significant British pop acts of the 21st Century. Alongside band members Tom Fletcher, Danny Jones and Dougie Poynter, Harry has become a star and household name in his own right.

In 2011 Harry joined the celebrity line-up on Strictly Come Dancing and stole the hearts of the nation. He lifted the trophy in a stunning Blackpool final, won the title on the Strictly tour and to cap it all also won the coveted Strictly Christmas Special. Since then Harry has harnessed his love of dancing and in 2018 took a lead dancing role in theatre production Rip It Up, touring the country and ending with a four month run in the West End.

Throughout all of these success stories, Harry continues to suffer with bouts of anxiety and OCD problems that he overcomes through exercise and most recently running. Believing that this attitude towards tackling mental health could help many others in his situation, he shared his experience and passion in his book Get Fit, Get Happy, focusing on the message that even taking a short walk outside can raise your spirits and put you in a better place mentally. Harry has changed the way he thinks about exercise, focusing not on looking better, but on feeling better.

Most recently Harry was asked to co-present on the nation's biggest daily live TV show The One Show on BBC1. Presenting alongside Alex Jones, Harry has become a regular fixture on the show and is looking forward to pursuing more TV presenting roles.

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