Nasya's Breath Woodland Workshops

There is a growing body of research demonstrating the health benefits of spending time in nature. The Mental Health Foundation (2021) states that "our relationship with nature, how much we notice, think about, and appreciate our natural surroundings, is critical in supporting good mental health and preventing distress."

Professor Miles Richardson developed the Five Pathways to Nature Connectedness, an evidence-based framework arising from research at the University of Derby (Richardson et al., 2019). This work demonstrates that it is not mere exposure to nature that is important, but the quality of an individual's connection with it. Engagement with these pathways has been associated with improvements in well-being, including reductions in depression and anxiety, as well as physiological benefits such as lowered blood pressure (Richardson et al., 2019).

Research by Richardson et al. (2019) further indicates that a stronger connection with nature is associated with enhanced well-being, including greater vitality, happiness, life satisfaction, and a stronger sense of meaning and purpose, as well as reduced anxiety, depression, and blood pressure. Supporting this, a large cross-sectional study conducted by Stephen Herber in collaboration with Natural England (2016) found that nature connectedness was four times as important as socio-economic status in predicting whether individuals felt their lives were worthwhile. Notably, the frequency of nature visits was less significant than the quality of this connection. This suggests that while spending time in nature remains beneficial, it is the depth of engagement, rather than mere exposure, that is the key determinant of positive outcomes. Overall, this evidence highlights the importance of relational and embodied engagement with nature, which appears to be more impactful than occasional or superficial contact.

The same body of research completed by Stephen Herbert and Natural England (2026) also demonstrates improvements in prosocial behaviour and body image among individuals with higher levels of nature connectedness. Furthermore, systematic reviews have shown that stronger connections with nature are associated with increased pro-environmental behaviours, suggesting reciprocal benefits for both human wellbeing and ecological health. These findings align closely with the foundational ideas of ecopsychology, introduced by Theodore Roszak. In *The Voice of the Earth* (Roszak, 1992/1995), Roszak argued that a profound and damaging separation exists between psychological health and ecological awareness. He proposed the concept of an "ecological unconscious", suggesting that humans possess an innate, though often unacknowledged, psychological connection to the natural world, and that distress may arise when this bond is disrupted.

Taken together, this body of evidence supports the view that nature connectedness is a legitimate, evidence-based approach to improving mental, emotional, and physical well-being. It challenges purely punitive or control-based models of care, instead emphasising relational, compassionate, and restorative approaches that recognise fundamental human needs, including safety, belonging, and connection to the natural environment.

Empirical findings further reinforce these perspectives. Steininger et al. (2026) found that exposure to natural environments is associated with reductions in self-reported pain. In addition, a systematic literature review by Smith et al. (2024) indicates that mindfulness and

nature exposure independently support wellbeing, and that their integration through nature-based mindfulness may offer effective self-management strategies for individuals experiencing persistent pain. These findings may be partly explained by the effects of natural environments on autonomic nervous system regulation.

Exposure to nature has been associated with increased parasympathetic activity and reduced physiological stress responses (Park et al., 2010; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018). Compared with urban environments, this is reflected in lower cortisol concentrations, reduced pulse rate and blood pressure, increased parasympathetic nerve activity, and decreased sympathetic nerve activity, as well as physiological changes that underpin the growing field of forest medicine (Park et al., 2010). Such mechanisms are particularly relevant to chronic pain, where dysregulation of the stress response and heightened sympathetic activation are known to contribute to pain persistence and sensitisation (Brosschot, Verkuil & Thayer, 2017).

In addition to the evidence base, lived experience is central to understanding chronic pain and its management. My own experience reflects the therapeutic potential of nature connection and its soothing components in alleviating persistent, severe pain. Following an injury, I developed debilitating chronic pain that gradually permeated every aspect of my life. I lost much of my mobility and independence, as well as, for a time, my career as a nurse (I have never returned to traditional nursing) and a core sense of identity. Daily functioning became increasingly difficult; I relied heavily on my children for basic tasks and experienced deep depression and anxiety, alongside a growing dependence on pain medication. I felt trapped and unable to imagine a future beyond debilitating pain.

After years consumed by pain and its cycles of temporary relief, only to relapse, I was informed that there were no further medical interventions available. I felt helpless; however, this ultimately marked a turning point. I began to explore alternative ways of living with pain, and made a promise to myself, a commitment that any insight gained would be used to support others shackled by this invisible and exhausting condition.

A pivotal moment occurred during a forest bathing session, when I experienced a temporary, unexpected absence of pain alongside a profound sense of peace. This prompted a deeper exploration of nature connectedness and mindfulness-based (MB) approaches. Over time, I observed improvements in both pain and overall functioning. Although I continue to live with chronic pain, I can now manage it effectively and always experience pain-free periods when immersed in natural environments. As my condition stabilised, I trained as a nature wellness facilitator, developed skills in MB practice, and began person-centred counselling training (qualification expected July 2026). Alongside this, I engaged in extensive study of modern pain science, with a particular interest in neuroscience and its application to pain management.

I made a commitment to myself, that any insight gained would be used to support others consumed by this invisible and exhausting condition, I began shaping my workshops around what I had learned. I was and still am driven by a lifelong calling to make a meaningful difference to the lives of others, this is something that living with unbearable chronic pain robbed from me for many years. I promised myself that if I could learn to manage it, I would use that understanding to help others who felt just as trapped and exhausted as I once did. As I began to recover, and find another way of being, this commitment led me to develop a 10-week outdoor programme for individuals living with chronic pain, transforming what once felt completely hopeless into something meaningful and transformative.

The 10-week workshops are informed by both lived experience and evidence-based practice, integrating pain education, mindfulness, nature connection, relational support, and an applied understanding of nervous system regulation (NSR).

Over the past two years, I have facilitated programmes in which individuals living with chronic pain were taken into natural environments. I sought local participants, pre-assessed them, and carefully evaluated their feedback and experiences. The model of care I have developed from my personal experience offers a novel, evidence-informed approach to chronic pain management, with these core components applied in an integrated and experiential way. This iterative process has contributed to the development of emerging practice-based evidence.

From my observations, connecting with nature appears to provide participants with a sense of space and containment that may not otherwise be accessible, enabling participants to see beyond the pain. These experiences also appear to facilitate reconnection with identity, meaning, and a broader sense of self, which is fundamental to further pain management. Such findings are consistent with research, suggesting that exposure to natural environments can support autonomic regulation, including increased parasympathetic activity and reduced physiological stress responses (Park et al., 2010; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018). This is particularly relevant in chronic pain, where dysregulation of the stress response and sustained sympathetic activation contribute to the persistence of pain and sensitisation (Brosschot, Verkuil & Thayer, 2017).

This perspective also aligns with the work of Miles Richardson, particularly his concept of a “broken relationship with nature,” which emphasises that meaningful connection, rather than simple exposure, is fundamental to human well-being. As Richardson (2020) observes, “we would never question whether a fish needs a river,” yet the importance of this relationship for humans is often underestimated.

Taken together, these observations and emerging practice-based evidence suggest that fostering meaningful connection with nature, supported by mindfulness, nervous system regulation, and psychoeducation, may offer a valuable complementary approach to chronic pain management. Beyond symptom reduction, it may also support the restoration of agency, identity, and overall well-being.

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