# Dose of Nature’s outdoor therapy cuts GP visits by 40% and boosts mental health



In the serene surroundings of Pensford Field in Kew, west London, a unique initiative is reshaping mental health support through nature. Spearheaded by psychologist Dr Alison Greenwood, the charity Dose of Nature, established in 2018, has emerged as a beacon of hope for those facing various mental health challenges, including depression and addiction. The charity operates on a simple yet profound principle: reconnecting individuals with nature can foster significant improvements in mental well-being.

Dose of Nature invites referrals from general practitioners (GPs) and offers a therapeutic approach that stands out for its integration of professional mental health support and direct interaction with the natural environment. Through the programme, individuals receive initial assessments conducted outdoors—irrespective of the weather—by Greenwood or another psychologist. Greenwood asserts that such exposure, even under less-than-ideal conditions, can be beneficial, stating, “Getting wet, getting cold can be really good for the brain and body.”

Central to this model is the role of trained volunteer "nature guides" who accompany participants on their journeys. These guides provide support, ensuring that participants feel safe and can discuss their experiences confidentially. This aspect not only fosters a stronger connection with nature but also alleviates some of the burdens placed on traditional mental health services.

The cost-effectiveness of Dose of Nature’s services has made it particularly appealing in the context of the current NHS landscape, which is grappling with lengthy waiting lists and strained resources. Whereas a ten-week course of cognitive behavioural therapy through the NHS can cost approximately £1,350, Dose of Nature offers its programme for between £400 and £500. Greenwood notes that independent studies have shown a 40% reduction in GP contacts among patients who have completed the programme, highlighting its potential to ease the demand on healthcare providers.

The success of the charity is not merely anecdotal. Research, including a study from the London School of Economics, has demonstrated substantial improvements in participants' mental health, with marked decreases in anxiety and depression scores. In a recent assessment, participants reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and a greater sense of purpose compared to a control group awaiting treatment.

The therapeutic principles underlying Dose of Nature echo international movements advocating for "forest medicine" or "forest bathing," a practice that emphasises immersive experiences in natural settings to promote health and well-being. This concept, widely recognised in countries such as Japan and South Korea, draws on substantial scientific evidence that supports the mental and physical health benefits of spending time in nature. Research highlights that exposure to natural environments can significantly lower stress levels and boost immune responses, suggesting a profound connection between our mental states and the natural world.

Individuals who have participated in Dose of Nature's programme have shared transformative experiences. For instance, Elaine Lester, who has battled mental health challenges following years of abuse, describes the open-air activities as pivotal in fostering self-confidence she never believed possible. Similarly, Tom Krumins, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, notes the clarity and grounding provided through the natural surroundings, which have helped manage his symptoms more effectively.

This innovative charity continues to thrive by gathering support from local authorities, NHS partnerships, and charitable donations, ensuring its services remain accessible and free for participants. As urban environments increasingly consume natural spaces, initiatives like Dose of Nature remind us of the essential role nature plays in nurturing mental health.

Emphasising that the therapeutic potential of nature is a phenomenon experienced across cultures and centuries, Greenwood highlights the project’s mission to inspire lasting lifestyle changes through deeper engagement with the natural environment. It serves not only as a remedy for individual distress but also as a community-driven approach to mental health, where the healing power of nature can indeed lead to collective well-being.

The model pioneered by Dose of Nature is a compelling example of how reconnecting with our natural surroundings can foster not only personal growth and healing but also potentially alleviate some of the systemic pressures faced by conventional healthcare systems. As the exploration of nature's therapeutic benefits continues to gain traction, Dose of Nature stands at the forefront, offering hope and tangible support to those seeking a pathway towards improved mental health.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
2. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 6
3. Paragraphs 4, 5, 6
4. Paragraphs 4, 5
5. Paragraphs 6, 7
6. Paragraphs 6, 7
7. Paragraph 4

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## Bibliography

* <https://www.ft.com/content/a30e242b-c8a4-431a-8076-b9ce7aa18c3f> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
* <https://www.doseofnature.org.uk/> - Dose of Nature is a UK-based charity established in 2018 by psychologist Dr. Alison Greenwood. The organization offers nature therapy programs aimed at improving mental health through enhanced connection with the natural environment. Operating from Pensford Field in Kew, London, the program accepts GP referrals for individuals dealing with various mental health challenges, including depression and addiction. The intervention features individualized support from trained volunteer 'nature guides' and outdoor therapy sessions, emphasizing nature as a therapeutic element itself. The program's cost-effectiveness—£400-£500 for a 10-week course compared to £1,350 for equivalent NHS Cognitive Behavioural Therapy—makes it an attractive alternative for the NHS, evidenced by a 40% reduction in GP visits among participants. Data suggests it outperforms traditional NHS treatments, especially for complex cases. Inspired by international forest medicine practices, the approach leverages scientific findings linking nature exposure to improved immune responses and reduced stress. With support from local authorities, the NHS, and charitable donations, the program is free for patients and has shown transformative effects on individuals, fostering greater well-being, confidence, and life satisfaction.
* <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/can-forest-therapy-enhance-health-and-well-being-2020052919948> - Forest therapy, also known as forest bathing or shinrin-yoku, involves immersing oneself in a forest environment to promote health and well-being. Research indicates that spending time in nature can reduce stress levels by lowering cortisol, a hormone associated with stress. A Japanese study demonstrated that individuals who spent three days and two nights in a forest experienced a rise in natural killer cells, which play a role in fighting viruses and cancer. This benefit lasted for more than a month after the forest trip. Additionally, a study in the United Kingdom involving nearly 20,000 people found that spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature improved self-reported health and well-being. These findings suggest that forest therapy can be a valuable tool in enhancing mental and physical health.
* <https://time.com/4405827/the-healing-power-of-nature/> - Research has shown that spending time in nature, known as forest bathing or shinrin-yoku, has numerous health benefits. It can lower blood pressure, increase feelings of awe, promote cancer-fighting cells, help with depression and anxiety, and may alleviate ADHD symptoms. Studies found that being in nature reduces stress hormones and boosts immune function. For instance, walking in a forest can lower cortisol levels and increase natural killer cells, which aid in combating infections and cancer. Even short periods in nature improve mood and mental health. Additionally, exposure to nature, like fragrant phytoncides from trees, can lower blood pressure and inflammation. Urban green spaces also enhance communal well-being. Furthermore, even simulated nature experiences, such as looking at pictures or listening to sounds, can positively impact health. Enjoying natural settings, whether through physical presence in the woods or simply having a plant in a room, is beneficial.
* <https://www.ft.com/content/f14bc9bd-434b-4c7a-9a23-e96a29a81360> - This article, part of FT Globetrotter's Vancouver guide, explores the concept of forest-bathing at Lighthouse Park in Vancouver. Originating from Japan in the 1980s to combat overwork stress, forest-bathing integrates mindfulness and meditation within a forest setting. Jessica Rawnsley, the author, shares her experience participating in a session run by Talaysay Tours, which involves standing still, connecting with nature, and combing through old-growth temperate rainforest. The benefits of forest-bathing include reduced stress, lower heart rate, enhanced immunity, and a stronger connection to nature. This practice, known as shinrin-yoku, has gained worldwide recognition and is particularly suited to Vancouver's lush forests. Forest therapy trails and academic research in Canada further support its purported health benefits. Additionally, the practice serves as a cultural reclamation for some, like the guide Taylor McKee, who aligns it with her Japanese heritage. The session ends with participants sitting still on cliffs, witnessing the undisturbed natural environment.
* <https://time.com/5259602/japanese-forest-bathing/> - Forest bathing, or shinrin-yoku, is a Japanese practice that involves immersing oneself in a forest atmosphere, focusing on the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch to connect with nature. It is not about exercise but simply being in nature, which helps reduce stress and promotes relaxation. Research shows that spending time in nature can improve overall health by restoring mood, increasing energy levels, and reducing stress. As modern life becomes increasingly urbanized, forest bathing offers a way to reconnect with nature and experience its benefits. The practice can be done in various environments, and it does not require extensive physical activity. Dr. Qing Li, a leading researcher on forest bathing, suggests that even a short, mindful walk in a natural setting can significantly impact well-being.
* <https://www.axios.com/2019/08/21/green-space-boosts-mental-health-cities> - Recent research indicates that contact with nature can significantly enhance psychological well-being and mitigate risks of certain mental illnesses. Governments often increase green spaces to improve physical health, but fewer recognize the mental health benefits. A study in 'Science Advances' highlights the growing evidence supporting these psychological advantages. The economic impact of these mental health benefits is substantial; for instance, the benefits derived from London's parks are estimated at 7% of their total economic value, equating to £6.8 billion ($8.3 billion) over 30 years, according to a VividEconomics report. However, as urbanization increases, opportunities to interact with nature are diminishing. In response, cities like Los Angeles are taking steps to address this by appointing officials dedicated to green spaces, such as a forest officer.