

A close-up, low-angle shot of a woman with long, light brown hair lying back in the passenger seat of a convertible car. Her right arm is raised high, reaching towards the top of the frame. She is wearing a blue and white plaid shirt. The car's interior and window frame are visible. The background is a dense, out-of-focus green forest, and bright sunlight filters through the trees, creating a warm, golden glow and lens flare effects. The text "INTO THE" is overlaid in the upper right quadrant.

INTO THE

woods

COULD YOU BENEFIT FROM
SPENDING SOME TIME IN
NATURE? CHARLOTTE BARKLA
EXPLORES THE CONCEPT OF
FOREST THERAPY AND ITS
HEALTH BENEFITS

Looking for an excuse to pack up your troubles, ditch your job in the city and head to the forest? Well, it might be just what the doctor ordered.

Based on the Japanese practice of shinrin-yoku (forest bathing), forest therapy is a research-based medical practice that supports physical and mental health through guided immersion in forest and natural environments. The practice is gaining popularity, with the latest figures from the International Nature and Forest Therapy Alliance (INFTA) estimating that Australia will need up to 1000 certified forest therapy guides over the next 10 years.

Forest therapy most recently came into the public eye in the '80s in Japan, when it was introduced as a program to combat societal stress. However, Dr Dieter Kotte, Secretary and International Strategic Advisor of INFTA, says forest therapy has roots much earlier in history. "Ninety-nine percent of our evolution as human beings took place in forested areas, so the need for being in the green is genetically enshrined," says Dr Kotte. "Only in the last little bit – the past 250-300 years – have we developed more urbanised living styles. That is a fraction compared to the remaining part of our old evolutionary traits."

Slowing down to de-stress

A forest therapy session typically begins with a process of tuning the senses, where the guide brings the group's attention to their different senses, by simply allowing them to stand, »

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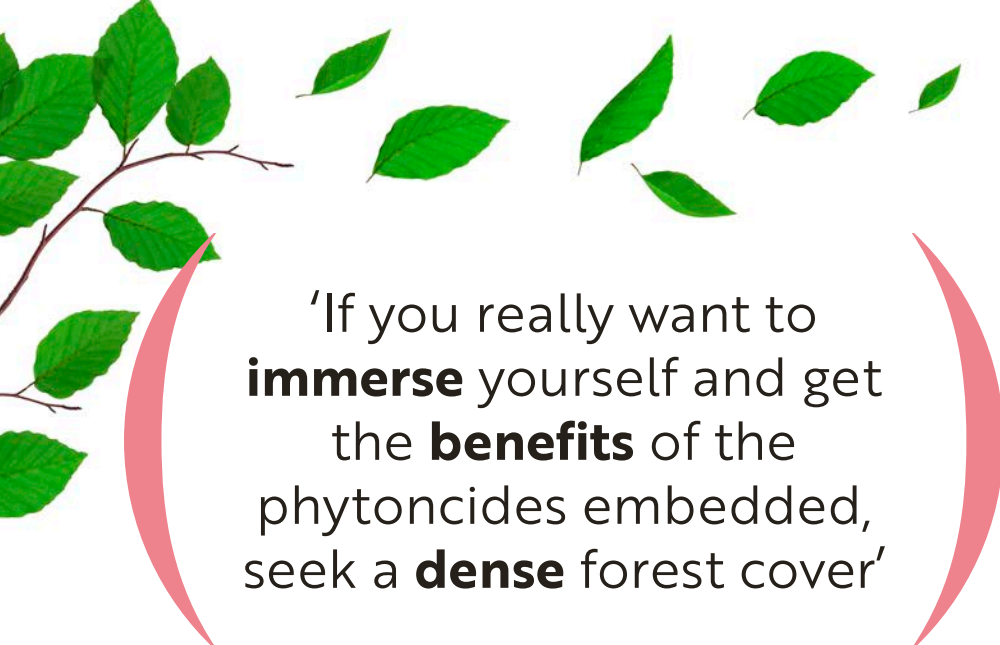
● be informed

● be nourished

● be energised

● be inspired

● simply be



'If you really want to **immerse** yourself and get the **benefits** of the phytoncides embedded, seek a **dense** forest cover'

breathe, and calm down. The next step is quiet, aware walking, where the guide leads participants through a series of activities such as focusing on textures, shapes, sizes, colours and smells in their surroundings. By focusing mindfully on each step, and using all the senses to become aware of the experience, Dr Kotte says the mind can be taken away from the ordinary baggage that a person brings, from home or office.

"After 20 minutes, people like to pull out their smartphones because they're so used to these hectic lifestyles, but after an hour and a half, people really are immersed in the forest, completely away from the ordinary routines," he says. "And that's what matters."

Taking place over a two- to three-hour period, forest therapy walks have numerous positive physiological effects, including reduced blood pressure, lowered pulse rate and reduced cortisol

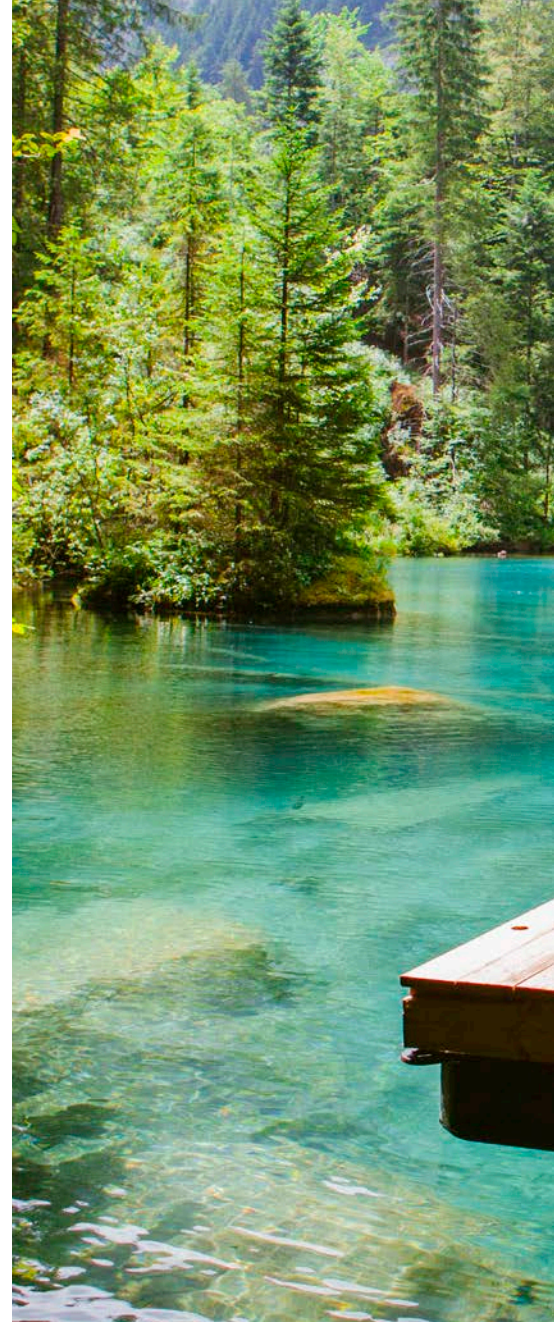
levels, the hormone responsible for stress. Psychological benefits include increased happiness, enhanced energy and better concentration.

Under the canopy

The dense canopy afforded by a forest setting has additional health benefits, due to the production of phytoncides, a volatile organic chemical found only in the air of forests. Dr Kotte says these phytoncides, produced by the leaves and bark of trees, have been found to increase the activity of cancer- and tumour-fighting blood cells ('natural killer' cells). "If you walk in the forest, you inhale these phytoncides," he explains. "Thereby enhancing your own immune system. So you have a higher likelihood of fighting off tumours and cancer."

So, while simply spending time in your local park is undoubtedly good for health and wellbeing, it's the dense forest environment that allows the greatest health benefits. "As much green as an urban park may have, they lack the canopy," says Dr Kotte. "The canopy is relevant because the number of leaves is responsible for the density of phytoncides. You do reap benefits from being in a park, that's clearly understood, but if you really want to immerse yourself and get the benefits of the phytoncides embedded, then you should seek a dense forest cover."

Hannah McQuilkan, a medical herbalist and forest therapy guide, has been leading walks for more than a year. She says that by slowing down and paying attention to their



environment, participants in her walks often notice details that they haven't seen before.

"Some of these people have spent a lot of time in nature, but they say they've seen more on my walks than they've ever seen in their life," says Hannah. "People notice simple things, like the way the light falls on the trees, the way an ant moves, the way the bark feels. But there's something in that simplicity that when we stop taking it for granted, it enriches our lives."

Experience nature

Hannah, who also runs forest therapy retreats, says her sessions don't usually cover much ground – typically around one kilometre over a two- to three-hour period. But the benefits outweigh the





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distance covered. “People experience a deep and profound connection with nature,” she says. “They often feel relaxed and inspired afterwards.”

Zoe Broomhead, who participated in a forest therapy session in Victoria for the first time earlier this year, agrees. “I felt more relaxed and peaceful,” she says. “It was a really engaging way of being mindful. You couldn’t not engage in the environment you were in.”

One of the activities Zoe most enjoyed was a sound map, where participants were encouraged to spend time sitting by the water, drawing symbols to represent each sound they heard.

“It makes you hear the sounds so much more,” she says. “I actually went bushwalking again over the past few weeks and did the activity again, and I’ve recommended forest therapy to others, too.”

Forest therapy as a public health practice

With 30 national healing centres in South Korea and 60 forest therapy bases in Japan, forest therapy as a public health initiative is firmly established in areas of Asia.

“In South Korea, anyone who is stressed can go to the GP and get a prescription, and then spend the next week or weeks in a forest therapy healing centre,” explains Dr Kotte. “It’s a national incentive supported by government.”

Dr Kotte says INFTA, established as a not-for-profit in Melbourne in 2017, aims to bring forest therapy to where it’s supposed to be in Australia – namely, a public health practice. The first positive step towards this occurred at the beginning of 2019, when forest therapy walks started being offered at the Royal Botanic Gardens.

“This has picked up so rapidly,” says Dr Kotte. “We don’t have enough guides to do it. It’s very much sought after.”

And, with such a positive uptake in Melbourne, INFTA hopes to expand the reach and availability of forest therapy to residents across the country.

Solo walk or guided session?

While simply taking a walk in the park has numerous health benefits, the benefit of a guided forest therapy walk is in the guiding process itself, which allows participants to become more mindful. “If you go out for a walk, no doubt your GP will be very happy with you,” says Dr Kotte. “However, quite often people think when they walk. This sort of thinking is still stress – the cortisol levels are still high. If there is no guide, you are still too much immersed in your own self. Your body might be slowing down through slow walking, but your mind needs to be slowed down too.”

“People aren’t used to walking slowly,” he says. “But in forest therapy the exercise is to really physically slow down, and become more conscious of each step.”

