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FOREST BATHING: NATURE'S DE-STRESS THERAPY

By

Wan Nordini Hasnor Wan Ismail
Faculty of Pharmacy, Universiti Teknologi
MARA, Pulau Pinang Branch, Bertam Campus
13200 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia.

nordini.hasnor@uitm.edu.my

EDITOR: DR. NURLIYANA MOHAMAD

Stress has become an all-too-common companion in our fast-paced, technology-driven world. Our minds and bodies frequently suffer the consequences of chronic stress as we juggle work, family, and personal responsibilities. To combat this modern ailment, a novel and effective treatment has emerged: forest bathing. Forest bathing, also known as *Shinrin-Yoku* in Japan, is a practice that involves immersing oneself in nature's healing power to decrease stress and increase overall well-being. This article investigates the concept of forest bathing as a stress-reduction therapy and its benefits, which are supported by scientific evidence.

Forest bathing originated in Japan in the 1980s, when the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries promoted it as a way to reconnect with nature while also improving one's health. Numerous studies have since been conducted to investigate the physiological and psychological effects of forest bathing, highlighting its potential as a natural stress-reduction strategy.

The presence of phytoncides, which are antimicrobial organic compounds emitted by trees and plants, is one of the main reasons why forest bathing is effective in relieving stress.

When we inhale phytoncides while forest bathing, our bodies respond by decreasing the production of stress hormones like cortisol while increasing the production of relaxation-inducing hormones like serotonin. This hormonal shift promotes calmness and relaxation, which helps counteract the effects of chronic stress.

The Centre for Environment, Health, and Field Sciences at Chiba University in Japan conducted research that demonstrated the stress-relieving effects of forest bathing.

Their study indicated that participants who participated in a two-hour forest bathing session had considerably lower levels of cortisol, reduced blood pressure, and improved heart rate variability compared to those who spent the same time in an urban setting.

These findings imply that spending time in nature can significantly reduce stress-related physiological markers while also promoting cardiovascular health.

Furthermore, woodland bathing has been shown to improve mental wellness and cognitive performance. A study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences demonstrated that those who spent time in nature, notably forested areas, had lower activity in the prefrontal cortex—a brain region associated with rumination and recurrent negative thoughts. This implies that forest bathing can help calm the mind, reduce anxiety, and improve overall mental health.

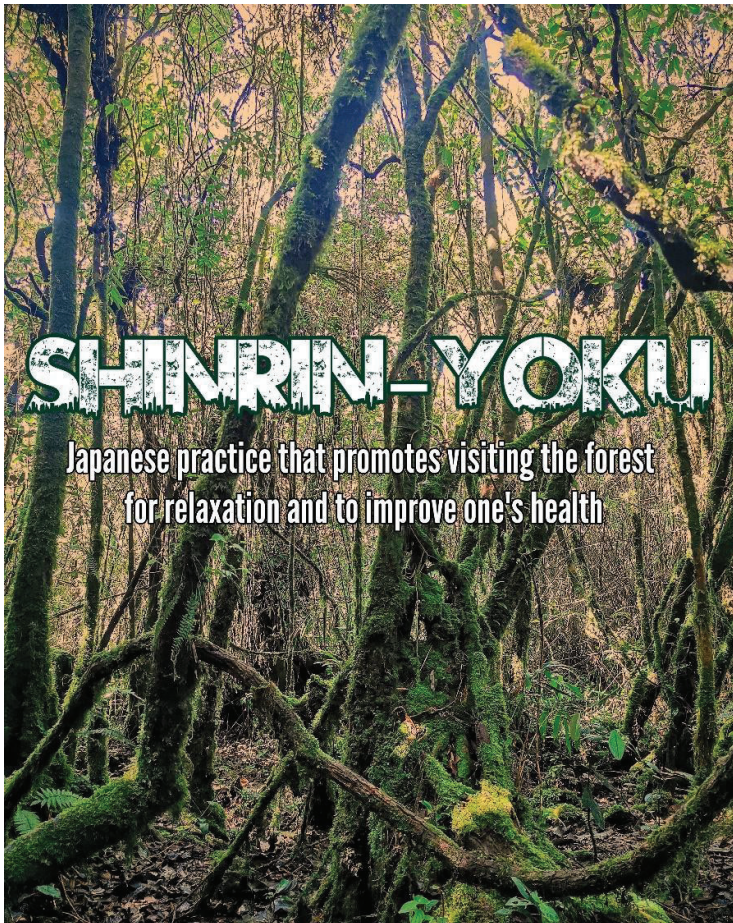


Figure 1: Mossy Forest of Gunung Berembun, Pahang.
(Source: Author's personal collection).



Figure 2: A small stream in Botanical Garden, Penang.
(Source: Author's personal collection).

The visual and auditory stimuli present in natural environments play an important role in stress reduction. The sights and sounds of lush greenery, sunlight filtering through the trees, and birds chirping, or leaves rustling create a relaxing ambiance. These natural stimuli have a calming influence on our mental and emotional states, reducing tension and anxiety.

Forest bathing is consistent with the biophilia hypothesis, which contends that humans have an innate affinity for nature as a result of our evolutionary history. Spending time in natural settings not only provides a break from the urban jungle, but it also reconnects us with our primal roots. By immersing ourselves in the beauty of nature, we tap into our intrinsic connection with the natural world, which can have tremendous benefits for our well-being.

Forest bathing does not require great gestures or lengthy vacations to be included in our lives. The benefits of this therapy can be obtained simply by spending time in a local park or forested area. Engaging with nature mindfully, whether through a leisurely walk, meditation, or simply sitting quietly, can help us experience the fullness of forest bathing.

As society becomes more aware of the therapeutic benefits of nature, many countries have begun to incorporate forest bathing into their health and wellness initiatives. Japan has designated a number of forest therapy bases where trained guides assist individuals in fully experiencing nature's healing effects. Forest bathing has gained popularity in other parts of the world as a form of ecotherapy, in which mental health professionals incorporate nature-based activities into their treatment plans.

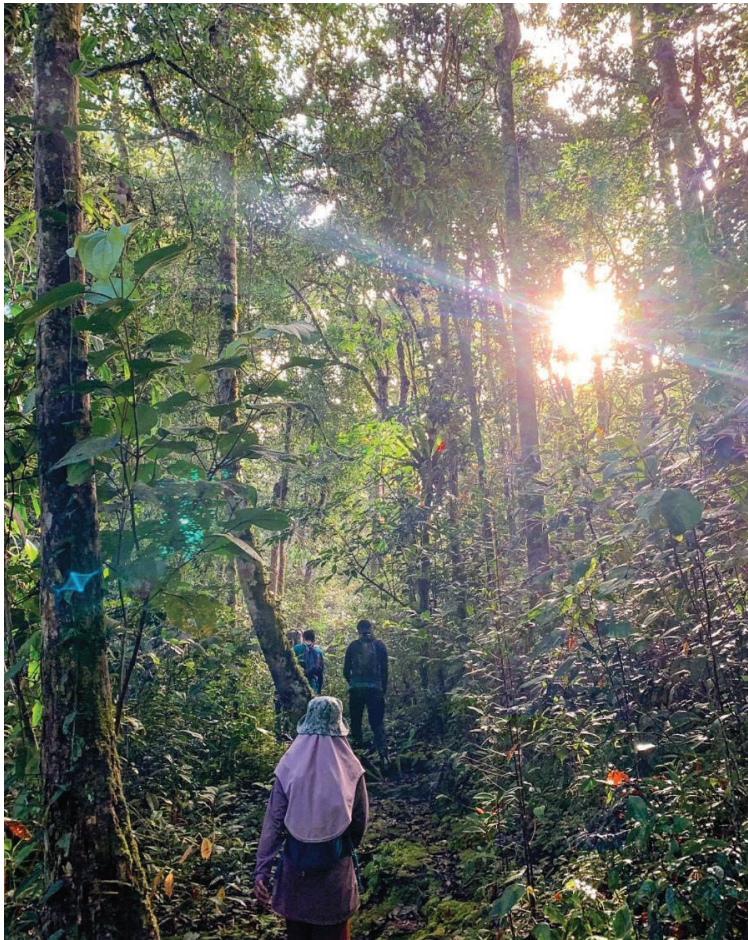


Figure 3: A group of people are walking through the tropical rainforest. (Source: Author's personal collection).

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Finally, forest bathing has emerged as a powerful de-stress therapy, utilising nature's healing power to counteract the negative effects of chronic stress. Scientific studies have consistently demonstrated the physiological and psychological benefits of spending time in natural environments, supporting the efficacy of forest bathing. We can tap into nature's calming and restorative qualities by incorporating this practice into our lives, promoting overall well-being and resilience in the face of daily stressors.

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