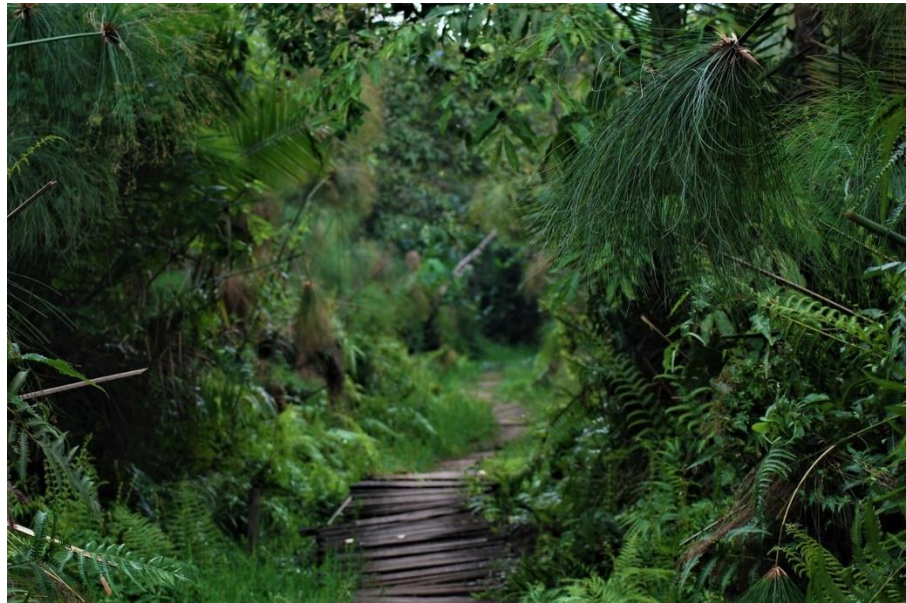


Why is Nature the Best Healer?

Written for Issue 2 of [Rise of Happiness Magazine](#) by Anna Drescher

‘Nature is the best healer’ is a phrase I hear (and use) often. It makes intuitive sense, but I wanted to understand the psychology behind it, which led me to discover something called the biophilia hypothesis.



The Biophilia Hypothesis

The word biophilia comes from the Greek, 'philia' meaning 'love of' and 'bio' meaning 'life'. It translates as a love of life or living things. This hypothesis describes how humans evolved over tens of thousands of years in a direct relationship with nature and how this has shaped us physically, emotionally, perceptually and spiritually.

Humans' innate tendency to seek connection with nature originates from a time when people lived in much closer contact with the natural world. Of course, there are still people in the world who live in this way and I believe we can learn a lot from them.

The industrial revolution and technological advancements accelerated the disconnect between humans and the natural world and we have quite literally cut ourselves off from nature by building concrete jungles and tarmacking streets.

The plants and greenery we have left in cities are enclosed in confined and controlled spaces, in pots or bound by metal fences. Our offices and homes shelter us from the elements and we spend most of our time in them, looking at nature through windows and on our screens.

Despite this, nature is valued universally. Everybody loves a beautiful sunset, a majestic mountain range, a pretty bouquet of flowers or the sound of ocean waves. It's long been an inspiration for poets, writers and philosophers from across the world who use the natural world to tell stories, describe emotions and draw parallels to human experiences.

Spiritual reverence for animals can be found in all cultures, for instance in the form of totem animals or animal symbolism.

Fear of nature – think spiders or hurricanes – is also evidence of our innate connection with nature. Having a fear response is the result of living in a world where we were constantly vulnerable to predators, poisonous plants and natural disasters– this fear was essential to our survival. We needed to maintain a close relationship with nature, to understand her cues and signals, as a matter of life or death.

We have a practical dependence on nature for food, clean water and soil – nature provides us with everything we need to survive. Growing plants and flowers and harvesting vegetables and fruits you've planted yourself is satisfying and brings so much joy because you're in direct contact with nature and working in partnership with her.

We have an emotional connection to the land, animals and plants – just think about how you feel when you're watching the sun rise above a vast landscape on a crisp morning.

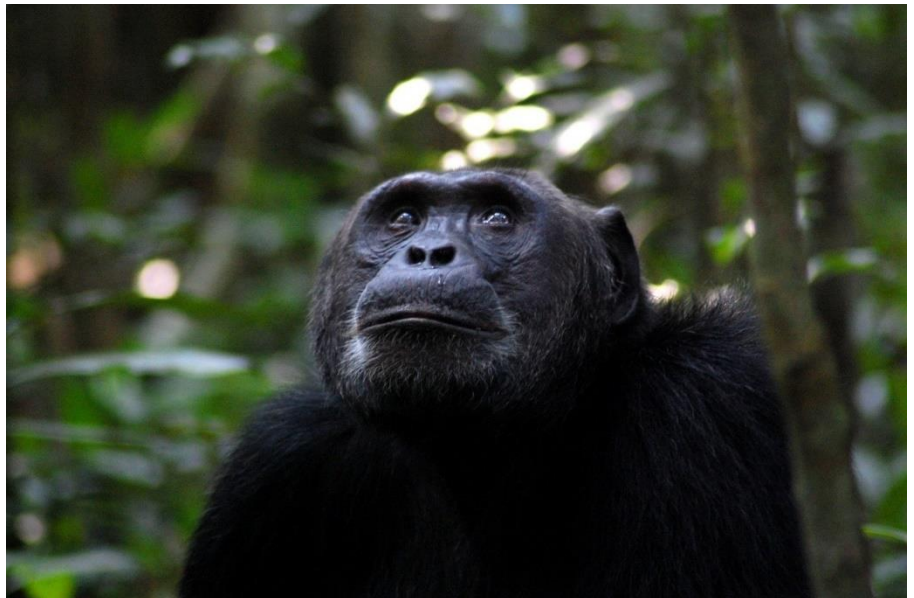
Even technology provides evidence for the biophilia hypothesis, as it provides a way to satisfy our need to understand nature. For example, the technologies used in molecular biology have been specifically designed to help us study life and ourselves and it even drives us to search for life on other planets – and it fascinates us all!

But technology has also reduced our conscious drive to connect with nature, although subconsciously, deep down, we yearn for it. This reduction in understanding how much we need nature, how deeply connected we are with her, has led to a loss of respect and appreciation for the natural world – the very thing we rely on to survive – and this is partly to blame for the environmental destruction and rapid extinction of various species on the planet.

Re-establishing the connection with nature is not only good for us individually, it's essential for the survival of this planet and therefore our species as a whole.

Nature and Mental Health

Conversations around mental health and illness should include our separation and dysfunctional relationship with nature because of our biophilic drive, our need to be connected with nature, which has been neglected and almost forgotten.



It should be recognised as a factor that contributes to the ever-increasing mental health crisis we're seeing around the world but as yet the DSM-5 (the book of mental disorder with criteria for diagnosing them) doesn't mention nature when it comes to how and why they develop.

Nevertheless, the healing properties of nature are known anecdotally and empirically, showing just how powerful nature can be in the recovery from mental ill health and disorders. Studies

have shown that spending time in nature, even just for one hour, can reduce stress and rumination¹ (excessive worry about past and future), increase the experience of positive emotions and provides a sense of ‘being away’².

It’s been found to replenish cognitive resources³ (your ability to think and focus), which not only helps you in your day-to-day and working life but also improves your ability to cope with mental distress.

An important emotion we experience when we connect with nature is awe⁴. When you struggle with mental health problems, there’s a tendency to spend a lot of time in your own head with negative thoughts and feelings, and this can make you feel overwhelmed, alone and lost.

Being in nature and experiencing awe grounds you and allows you to experience being part of something bigger, like you belong. Research⁵ shows that this improves well-being⁶ and life satisfaction⁷, reduces materialism and the desire for money⁸, and makes people more generous⁹ and feel more connected¹⁰ to other people.

Health and mental health professionals should recommend connecting with nature to their patients and it should be included in therapeutic interventions. There are many different nature-based therapies (e.g. adventure therapy or forest bathing) and even conventional talking therapies could be conducted in a natural environment where possible and appropriate.

People who are still living in close contact with nature, such as some groups of indigenous peoples, know that nature is alive and that we depend on each other for survival. There’s an

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41380-022-01720-6>

² <https://www.pnas.org/doi/abs/10.1073/pnas.1510459112>

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0169204615000286>

⁴ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29927260/>

⁶ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29927260/>

⁷ <https://www.bauer.uh.edu/mrrudd/download/AweExpandsTimeAvailability.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-pacific-rim-psychology/article/awe-weakens-the-desire-for-money/176F33B15DAD69FB69104D8B2DB021D4>

⁹ <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/psp-pspi0000018.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-20208-001>

understanding that the disconnection between humans and nature is detrimental to our health and well-being, and that reconnecting with it is essential for healing ourselves and the planet.

Nothing comes close to the physical, emotional and spiritual fulfilment and satisfaction we experience through interacting and connecting with nature. It's not something apart from us – we *are* nature – and that's why it feels so good. Here are a few ideas for you to try:

- Make it a habit to go for one-hour walks in a forest or other natural environment as often as possible
- Plant, grow and look after plants and vegetables
- If you can't get out, watch a nature documentary or listen to nature sounds, such as ocean waves. You could also try closing your eyes and visualising nature, it might inspire you to go outside and experience it for real.