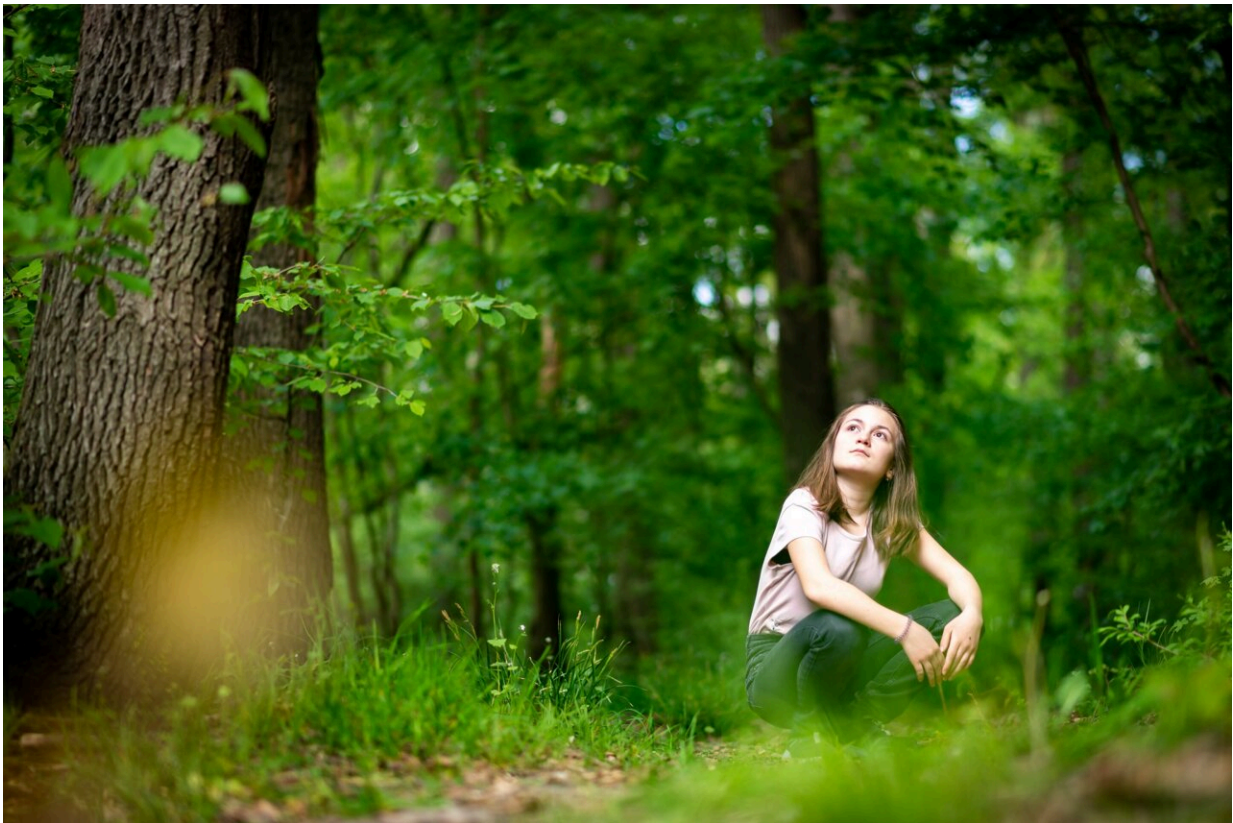


Time in nature may help older adults with improved health, purpose in life

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Over time, research has demonstrated that spending time in nature confers [psychological, emotional and physical benefits](#).

To maximize benefits of spending time in nature for people over the age of 65, researchers from Penn State; National Open University, Taiwan; and Lunghwa University of Science and Technology, Taiwan, studied the attitudes, beliefs and actions of a group of elders—people over the age of 65—who regularly spent time in a natural area. The researchers found that fostering social connections around nature-based activities may be connected to improved health and [quality of life](#) for elders.

In Japan, the term *shinrin-yoku*, or "[forest](#) bathing," was developed to refer to spending time in nature while engaging all of one's senses: tasting the air, smelling a forest, listening to a stream, and being present with whatever you experience.

For elders who encounter challenges when attempting to hike quickly over difficult trails, forest bathing may present an enjoyable and safe way to spend time in nature. According to the researchers, forest bathing is popular among [older adults](#) in Japan, China and Taiwan, where the practice originated, and it is becoming increasingly popular in the United States.

The researchers studied older visitors to the Xitou Education Area, a natural preserve in Taiwan. Between April and June of 2022, the researchers surveyed 292 visitors to the preserve who were at least 65 years old and who visited the park at least once a week. Participants were asked a range of questions, from whether they felt supported by others, to how much they thought about their futures, to how much purpose they felt that their lives had.

The results of the study were published in the journal *Leisure Sciences*. The researchers found that people who discussed their experiences in nature with others tended to have a greater sense of attachment to forest bathing and a stronger sense of purpose in life.

[Prior research](#) supports the conclusion that these factors are related to better physical and mental health and higher quality of life. This finding can guide leisure-service providers working in various settings including community recreation departments and retirement villages on how to facilitate leisure for elders, according to John Dattilo, professor of recreation, park and tourism management at Penn State and co-author of this research.

"Elders can access community and state parks where it is safe for them to spend time in nature: places with walkable paths and convenient, accessible parking, are helpful," Dattilo explained. "Agencies can publicize these opportunities and help identify the value they offer to elders and others.

"Better yet, leisure-service providers could arrange transportation and then afterwards facilitate social interactions among participants," Dattilo continued. "Enabling people to get out into nature to experience their surroundings is one aspect of forest bathing. Part of what we found is the linkage between positive social relationships and spending time in nature. So, if leisure-service providers create opportunities for elders to return from an experience, meet over a warm beverage and talk about their experiences, there will be value in these connections for people's sense of purpose."

An improved sense of purpose is related to better physical functioning, higher quality of life, and lower fear of death, according to Liang-Chih Chang, professor of living sciences at National Open University in New Taipei City, Taiwan. Forest bathing matters, he continued, because it might be able to help people foster that sense of purpose.

"Forest bathing seems to connect people to the moment and the world," Chang said. "When elders use that same experience to develop [social connections](#) and support, they may experience a broad range of benefits

associated with physiological functioning as well as cognitive health. These are associations, not cause and effect, but the potential consequences are exciting to consider."

The study continues Dattilo's research on the value of the leisure experience for elders that he has explored with his collaborators in Taiwan as well as locally with colleagues from Penn State's Center for Healthy Aging.

"We have conducted research on square dancing and karaoke, both of which are common activities for elders in Asia," Dattilo said. "Forest [bathing](#), is unique in that it is closely tied to hiking, strolling or sitting in nature in which many elders engage across the globe. If leisure-service providers facilitate exposure to nature and help participants build a sense of community around those [experiences](#), then elders could live, not only healthier, but richer and more meaningful lives."

More information: Liang-Chih Chang et al, Relationships of Social Support and Activity Attachment with Purpose in Life among Older Forest Bathers: A Mediated Model, *Leisure Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/01490400.2023.2174217](#)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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