

psychologies

## DOSSIER

*With you  
in mind*

# CONNECT WITH *nature*

As spring starts to slowly unfurl, find your place – and boost your wellbeing – in the natural world, writes Caroline Butterwick

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## Expert advice



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**W**andering through the woodland, there is a bite to the air – but, with it, the sweet promise of spring. I feel my stresses ease as I walk, focused on the sound of the birds, the breeze against my skin, the crunch of the pebbled path beneath my boots. Lately, walking in this wood – just a short journey from my suburban home – I’ve been making more of an effort to connect with nature, to celebrate the changing seasons, and to make a difference to the planet with my actions.

But, still, with my days spent mainly inside on my laptop, and my evenings chilling in the lounge, it’s all too easy to let time spent in nature slip away.

For many of us, nature is a source of solace and inspiration. But perhaps – like me – you feel disconnected from it much of the time. Or maybe you feel a little lost about the idea of connecting with nature to begin with, as if nature is something enjoyed by other people.

Of course, there’s a compelling case for spending more time in nature for our physical and mental wellbeing: ‘We are designed to thrive in nature,’ explains counselling psychologist Dr Tara Quinn-Cirillo. ‘It can diminish physical health issues by lowering your blood pressure and heart rate. And if your body feels good when you’re in nature, your mind will feel good, too. If you’re feeling low, it can enhance your mood – when you look at natural shapes

in nature, you process your emotions more efficiently than when walking around a town centre or city. And it can help to reduce feelings of anxiety, too.’

Indeed, according to mental health charity Mind, spending time in nature has been found to help with mental health conditions such as stress and depression. You may well have found yourself feeling better after a brisk country walk – your head clearer and your mood lifted. Even an hour spent pulling up weeds in the garden can be satisfying and give you a boost.

So it’s clear that nature is good for us. But even knowing this, it can still be challenging to connect with it. What, then, can we do to assess our relationship with nature, realise what’s holding us back, and to find ways to deepen our connection with the natural world in our day-to-day lives? Read on to find out...





*"You have to plan and make time to get into nature; not everybody has it on the doorstep"*

# Assessing your relationship with nature

**B**efore you dust off your hiking boots or head to the garden centre to buy compost, it's a good idea to pause and take some time to think about what nature means to you. This is about realising what your current connection with nature is, what you feel you're missing, and any barriers that get in the way.

'With the impact of the pandemic particularly, we're really stuck in a digital world,' explains Dr Tara Quinn-Cirillo. 'We've learnt to socialise more online, and a lot of us are doing it more often. We've lost a lot of physical connection.' The current cost-of-living crisis, she adds, is also impacting our free time, with many taking on extra work. I know what she means: I often feel glued to my desk, and while I enjoy my work, I regularly spend all day online, in Zoom meetings and staring at Word documents.

Having the motivation to embrace nature can be a barrier, too. 'You have to plan and make time to get into nature, especially as not everybody has it on their doorstep,' Dr Quinn-Cirillo says. When you are busy, or tired out, or just don't feel like going outdoors, for any number of reasons, it's understandable that the idea of connecting with nature can seem out of reach; something that's nice to do, but that falls by the wayside.

Psychotherapist Ruth Collier echoes Dr Quinn-Cirillo's thoughts that our fast-paced lives can mean we're disconnected from nature. She recommends taking time to stop and breathe, and to connect with yourself and how you are feeling. What is it that's getting in the way in your daily life? How do you feel about nature?

When I speak with Collier, we have a fascinating conversation about the barriers around nature. 'There are many people who haven't had the benefit of having nature in their lives,' she tells me. 'Perhaps they didn't have adults around them who could take them outdoors, or maybe they didn't have nature close by as a child.'

But if you grew up jumping in puddles, climbing trees, or splashing in rivers, nature likely feels, well, natural to you. You may still find yourself detached from it as an adult, but overall, you probably appreciate firsthand how wonderful it can be, and have positive associations. But not everyone has had these experiences. Maybe you grew up in a built-up area and didn't often go to places you'd associate with nature.

'For some people, nature is new and daunting,' says Collier. 'There may have been negative messaging around it: "Don't go into the woods, it's not safe,"



*“Work out where you feel yourself drawn to in nature, be it hills and mountains, woodland, or the sea”*

or “There are animals that will bite you,” or “Don’t sit on the ground, it’s dirty.” A lot of the anxieties around the natural world are from messages people have picked up at home or within their community.’ She gives the example of someone being told not to go out in the rain because it’s not safe, when actually, dressing appropriately can mean it’s not only safe but enjoyable: the patter against your skin, the smell of the wet earth. Indeed, there is a lot to be enjoyed, not feared, in wet weather.

Collier also makes the important point that there are higher levels of disconnection with nature amongst people of colour than there are for white people in the UK. A big part of this, Collier explains, is that, when stepping into the countryside, people fear how they are going to be perceived by others. ‘It’s not so much the countryside or wildlife, it’s if we’re being stared at, or being forced to field questions and comments that let us know we’re unusual, that we don’t belong – that can make us feel very uncomfortable’.

We should all be able to access the outdoors, so it’s crucial to acknowledge that there are societal barriers that can make this harder. Research by the

Ramblers walking charity has shown that a lack of equal access to the outdoors is an issue for many. As a partially sighted person, I’m often conscious of how being disabled impacts my sense of belonging in nature. I’m lucky to have grown up in a family that valued country walks, so nature is something that intrinsically matters to me, but I’m also aware that I can seem out of place. For those with chronic health conditions or mental ill health, it can be frustrating to be told to simply ‘get outdoors more,’ rather than having people realise how practically difficult that can be. This can all understandably affect our relationship with nature.

There is no easy answer to barriers to the outdoors – many of these stem from wider societal issues – but realising their existence, and what barriers we may face as individuals, can be a key part of getting to the root of what our current relationship with nature is, and why this is the case.

Both Collier and Dr Quinn-Cirillo speak about the significance of working out where you feel yourself drawn to in nature. Is it hills or mountains, or do you enjoy a woodland walk, or swimming in the sea? Do you enjoy exploring a local urban green space,

or wilder, more remote places? Do you feel any anxiety or resistance around such places?

It can also help, Dr Quinn-Cirillo says, to work out your values around nature. ‘There’s the emotional balance, and the connection you get when you’re in nature,’ she says. Do you value the way it makes you feel, or that it’s a place of solace or comfort? Is there something in how it brings you closer to others, or gives you a sense of perspective? ‘Or is there a pressing concern you may have, one that relates to your local environment or an animal welfare project?’ she adds.

Try reflecting on what nature means to you – journalling can help, or go for a walk somewhere you feel comfortable and let your mind wander. What do you think is holding you back from connecting with the natural world? What is missing from your current relationship with it? What have you enjoyed about time spent outdoors in the past? How does it link to your values and what’s important to you? It’s okay if you don’t have the answers to all of these, but it can help you start to home in on what nature means for you, and then to think about how you can weave it into your day-to-day life in a way that works.

# Celebrating the seasons

The golden yellow of the first daffodils shooting up always makes me smile. Spring is my favourite season – the sense of new life after the winter, the syrupy scent of blossom perfuming the air. I drink up spring, relishing that first day of the year when it's warm enough to go outside without my coat.

Many of us will have a favourite season. And while I am definitely a spring-into-summer person, it's good to remember that each season brings its own joys. I'm drawn to the idea of the Wheel of the Year, which is followed by some modern pagans, but has relevance for us all. It marks eight festivals – called sabbats – throughout the year, celebrating the changing seasons and drawing on the history of these times of the year. These are:

- **Yule (the winter solstice), around 21 December**
- **Imbolc, around 1 February**
- **Ostara (the spring equinox), around 21 March**
- **Beltane, around 1 May**
- **Litha or Midsummer (the summer solstice), around 21 June**
- **Lammas, around 1 August**
- **Mabon (the autumn equinox), around 21 September**
- **Samhain, around 31 October**

I find the Wheel of the Year a helpful way to ground myself in nature, to remember how the year turns, how life is always stirring, how each season matters. The sabbats give me time to pause and reflect. It's also a perfect way of noticing the little changes around us – the way that, from Ostara, also known as the spring equinox, there are more hours of light than dark. I like journaling on

each sabbat, using it as a chance to take stock and to think ahead about the coming months. I'll light a candle and meditate softly, setting intentions. I'm connecting with nature and with myself.

These are also a great way to bring people together. I love baking bread on the first of the harvest festivals, Lammas, to share with loved ones. Around the summer solstice, it's sitting in the garden with family, enjoying a barbeque and an Aperol spritz, catching up with one another and (hopefully) soaking up the sun.

Of course, it's about finding what works for you – you may like the idea of the Wheel of the Year, but if not, there are plenty of other ways to mark the seasons. There is also the role the changing seasons can play in understanding ourselves, as psychotherapist and coach Karin Peeters tells me.

'Every season feels so different, and has such specific qualities and characteristics, and when we're connected with those, we can celebrate what each season has to bring, and how that can inform us with what we want to enhance and embrace within us,' Peeters says.

'Spring is really that time where everything comes to life,' she explains. 'It's about new beginnings; it's very creative, expressive, and spontaneous. So when we connect with nature in spring, we can think about what the qualities of spring are and how that is reflected in our life. What already feels like it's going well, and which of these qualities would I like to embrace more?'

Summer, says Peeters, 'has the warmth and the softness, and a quiet confidence. It's supportive, letting us rest and enjoy.' What can you do to allow yourself to let your hair down this summer? Can you make time for loved ones, or get in touch with your inner child and think about what a good summer means to you?

'Autumn is grounded, it's a bit messy, it's a little bit defiant, unpretentious,' Peeters says. 'It's that massive burst of colour that's full of transformation. What can we let go of before winter? How am I embracing the messy, the transformational?'

'And then winter is all about simplifying and slowing down. There's the incredible stillness. It's about turning inwards and being a bit more minimalistic, and then also getting that clarity and that crispness.'

It's about getting in touch with the qualities of each season, and asking ourselves how this relates to our inner worlds. Again, journaling is a great way to do this. Set yourself some time to write and let the words flow. What does each season conjure for you? What would you like to focus on in your life during this time? And then, looking outwards, what can you do to get outside and mark the season. What can you learn from nature this month?

***"It's good to remember that each season brings its own joys"***



# Connecting with others

*Let time spent in nature become a gateway to new experiences,  
treasured moments, and more meaningful human connection*

Spending time alone in nature can be incredibly nourishing, but nature can also bring us closer to others. Walking with another person, in particular, is a great way to deepen your relationship. 'It's easy to connect with people when you're walking in nature, because you don't have to give them eye contact – you can stroll side by side. You're in awe of what you're seeing,' explains Dr Tara Quinn-Cirillo, who runs a walk-and-talk group in her town and has seen firsthand the difference it

makes. 'Walking together takes away the stress, the pressure, the anxiety of feeling we have to talk. Conversation flows more naturally. It's also really good for reducing stress levels and increasing your mood, which can have a good impact on how you connect with other people – how you're able to hear them, to respond, and to listen.'

Heading for a stroll through a local park can give you a chance to talk in a way that's easier than facing each other over a table in a café, and with more depth. You can enjoy both the benefits

of being outdoors while also spending quality time together.

Nature also offers us opportunities to try something new with other people and make memories together. Dr Quinn-Cirillo tells me about how it can help us step outside of our comfort zone and do something different, strengthening our bonds with others.

I think about how, this autumn just gone, my husband and I got up in the dark, chilly early hours to join a group at a wetlands centre to watch thousands of migratory pink-footed





geese take off at dawn. It was a beautiful – and loud – sight to behold, the sound of the geese’s squeaky honking, the beat of their wings, the birds silhouetted against the pink dawn sky. It was a magical moment, and one that was so dear to us as a couple. I’ve also found going on walks with other people, whether family or friends, is something I hold very close to me. After speaking with Dr Quinn-Cirillo, I realise how so many of the moments I treasure have involved being in nature with others.

It doesn’t have to be getting up very early or pulling on your wellies to find these moments. As the weather starts to improve, how about bringing friends together for a picnic in the park? If you have a garden, could you invite someone around to help you plant flowers one afternoon? Could you cook up a feast to share that draws on seasonal foods? Is there a local nature reserve that you could explore with a loved one?

Nature also gives us the chance to connect meaningfully with people we may not know. Dr Quinn-Cirillo

highlights how getting involved in a community project can be a way to help ease loneliness and meet new people. It can be useful to think back to your values around nature, here: do you want to help campaign to save a local woodland, or get your hands dirty volunteering at a community garden? If you have experienced barriers around access to nature, do you want to do something that lets you build that connection in a way that feels safe and manageable, or allows you to develop new skills or try something different?

# 9 ways to connect with nature

*There are so many ways to be at one with nature – here are just a few. It's worth thinking back to what nature means to you, to find those that will resonate most...*

## ACCESS ALL AREAS

*'Miles without stiles' are walking routes identified as being accessible to wheelchair users and other people who find uneven ground inaccessible. These routes are free from steps, stiles and steep inclines, and there are options across the country. Simply Google, for example, 'Peak District miles without stiles' or 'New Forest miles without stiles' to see what's available and where.*

## JOIN A GROUP

*As Dr Quinn-Cirillo says, walking with others can be a brilliant way of deepening relationships. You may already have a friend you enjoy strolling with, but don't worry if not: there are walking groups across the country where you can meet other people while enjoying a hike and getting to explore beautiful places. Search social media or Google for options in your area, or visit [ramblers.org.uk/go-walking/ramblers-groups](http://ramblers.org.uk/go-walking/ramblers-groups)*

## Walk a commute

If you spend a lot of time at home, Karin Peeters suggests getting outside and going for a walk at the start and the end of the day, as if a commute. Those of us who work from home may be particularly guilty of rolling out of bed, brewing a strong coffee, and sitting at our desks all day – meaning we don't step outside at all. If this sounds familiar, Peeters recommends slipping on your shoes and going for a stroll

before and after work. Whether you live in a city or the countryside, look out for signs of nature around you – the sound of birds, or even just the plants you spot poking through paving.

## Use your senses

You may be familiar with the idea of focusing on your five senses as a way of grounding yourself, and nature is the perfect place for doing this. Collier recommends sitting somewhere like

a park and really noticing what's around you, 'whether that's allowing your gaze to settle somewhere, enjoying the colours, the wildlife, or the change in the trees. There's a meditative experience in dropping your shoulders, loosening your neck, taking a nice deep, slow, gentle breath, and enjoying the scenery,' she says. Take time to notice the little details that may otherwise pass you by. What do these sensory details make you feel?

**CAPTURE  
 IT ON CAMERA**

*‘Set out on a walk, armed with your camera, with a certain theme in mind that feels relevant to you in that moment – love, for example, or confidence. And then take photographs of anything that make you think of your theme,’ suggests Peeters. Don’t censor yourself – let yourself be surprised at what you are drawn to. This can work with other art forms too.*

**GET CURIOUS**

*What’s the name of the bird that lands on your window ledge each morning? The plants that grow in the hedgerows along the main road? There are lots of brilliant books and online resources out there for learning about nature and wildlife (visit [rspb.org.uk](http://rspb.org.uk) or [woodlandtrust.org.uk](http://woodlandtrust.org.uk)). Can you find out more about nature near where you live – are there any species that flourish locally, or interesting features in the landscape?*

**Protect the planet**

A crucial part of connecting with nature is realising how we are part of the natural world, and how our actions impact the planet. Most of us know about the basics such as recycling or cutting down energy use. But what else could you do? What can you learn about environmental issues? This can also tie into ideas around celebrating the seasons. Could you set yourself the challenge of creating a meal that uses only locally

grown, seasonal ingredients? Dr Tara Quinn-Cirillo talks about how getting involved in local campaigns can be beneficial for our wellbeing and remind us of the impact we can all have. Could you join a group that cares for a park, or looks out for local wildlife?

**Read nature writing**

Sometimes, there’s nothing nicer than curling up with a book somewhere cosy or – if the weather allows – sitting

outside with your favourite drink and a good read. There are countless books out there that celebrate and reflect on nature. Here are just a few examples...

- *The Almanac: A Seasonal Guide to 2024* by Lia Leendertz (Gaia, £12.99). From sunrises and moon phases to wildlife and folklore, this month-by-month guide will help you reconnect with the world around you.
- *A Nature Poem For Every Night of The Year*, edited by Jane McMorland Hunter (Batsford, £25). Relax every evening with a poem that reflects and celebrates the changing seasons.
- *The Stubborn Light Of Things: A Nature Diary* by Melissa Harrison (Faber & Faber, £9.99). Harrison’s diary is compiled from her Nature Notebook column in *The Times*, where she reflects on her connection with nature in both the city and the country.

**Walk with the eyes of a shaman**

This activity, Peeters explains, involves going into nature and finding an item, such as a pebble. You then sit down and look at it, and write down three things you notice. ‘So you might notice a line on the rock that makes you think of a river; you might look at the shape of the rock and it makes you think about a bird; and then you might notice the texture of the rock, which is both smooth and rough in different places. And then from everything you notice, write one sentence,’ say Peeters.

So, for the line that makes you think of a river, you may write about how a river is never the same at any moment, how it always moves. When you think of the bird, you might think of its fragility but how it can also spread its wings. And with the textures, you may think about contrasts in life. You then have these three sentences that you can combine into a story, or a message. This is a great way of using nature to inspire your creativity while also allowing yourself to be present and mindful.