

Here's a mental health tip to get you through coronavirus quarantine: Find tranquility in nature

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During the coronavirus pandemic, getting out in nature can be beneficial for your mental health. Just make sure you're still practicing social... (Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times) **More** ▾

By [Corinne Whiting](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

At this bizarre moment in time, most are digging deep into internal “toolboxes” in an attempt to retain some semblance of zen. Maybe you're experimenting with meditation and [yoga](#), [crafting and cleaning](#), or [indulgent wining](#) and [dining](#), shared with a Brady Bunch-esque setup of telesocializing friends.

Yet there's one thing two University of Washington scholars guarantee can bring relief: nature. And thankfully, Seattleites have abundant access to this healing resource. There's more good news: Even if you can't experience the budding trees and chirping birds in person, connecting through a window or computer screen brings welcomed benefits, too.

Kathleen Wolf, a research social scientist at UW's College of the Environment, cites widely sourced evidence — spanning some 40 years — that emphasizes the [importance of nearby nature](#) experiences for both our [physical and mental health](#), and “deep, compelling” research that proves these experiences to be restorative. Experimental studies show positive effects for people with [clinical mental challenges](#), from adults with depression to children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

“We fully recognize that this is not a substitute for a diagnosis and treatment by a health care professional, yet it’s one opportunity for people to feel better,” Wolf said. “Everyday nature experiences are so good for mental wellness. Pursue them; be mindful.”

Peter H. Kahn Jr., a professor in the UW psychology department and the School of Environmental and Forest Sciences, recommends getting your heart rate up through daily movement — outside in nature, if possible. Even urban dwellers can practice [social distancing](#) on [neighborhood sidewalks](#) and in green areas. “This is the very time for people to get out on walks, no matter your level of ability,” Kahn said. He believes this practice connects us to our ancestral paths, and an age-old pattern of leaving and homecoming that dates back to hunter-gatherer days.

“The going out and the return is powerful,” he says.

When it comes to beneficial impacts, Wolf and Kahn agree that even short bursts of nature exposure are better than nothing. Kahn worries about designating a specific time (i.e., a minimum number of minutes per day) we should achieve.

“The way that nature works on us,” he said, “It’s not a single way.” Kahn knows that a prescribed “dose” feels comforting for many, yet he fears that if we start thinking about our interactions with the outside world in a medical way, we diminish the power of nature. In this time of feeling distanced, it’s crucial to see that we are not alone in this vast, mysterious world. “Nature is there as an other,” he said. “As us ... it’s not tied to a dose; it’s tied to our very being.”

Kahn says research shows great value in simple, basic encounters near our homes. He points to restorative activities like gardening that merge nature and the body, which have always been interconnected. He even suggests sitting on the grass, kicking off your shoes and placing your bare feet on the earth. This act has components both biological (microbes and bacteria found in dirt can help boost immune systems and elevate moods) and metaphysical (Kahn says he feels tremendous energy emanating from the earth when he connects in this way).

“We as Americans have a tendency to think outside of our cities when it comes to nature and health,” Wolf said. The research, however, points to nearby, everyday nature — from our backyards to neighborhood streetscapes — being equally important, if not more so. (She adds that this has an equity component, too, since this type of nature is accessible to everyone.)

What if we can't directly access soothing swaths of green? Wolf suggests taking advantage of "vicarious or virtual nature," whether via wildlife documentaries or [daily livestreams offered by zoos, aquariums and nature reserves](#) around the globe. (Woodland Park Zoo's [online webcams](#) feature bat, grizzly bear and tiger residents.) Visit the websites of the [National Audubon Society](#) or Forest Bathing International, which offers free, hourlong [guided forest therapy walks](#). And if you can't get outside but have a window? "Look out," Kahn recommends. "Let your eyes feast on that nature."

Wolf also touches on the concept of social cohesion that enhances these experiences. Since humans are such social animals, this time of confinement and isolation makes it more crucial than ever to connect. This can mean planning a family walk or pulling out favorite photos to show friends during a Zoom gathering. Kahn suggests sharing nature images that conjure lovely recollections of joy and restoration. "That way we're using our minds in a constructive way," he explains. "We can rest in that memory."

Kahn asks, "Where can you create some space in your daily routine?" He admits the mind has a tendency to keep running, which can lead to unhealthy rumination, negative thinking and worry. Instead, we should pause and connect with nature whenever possible. "If we use this month ahead for practicing this, that would set a different mind pattern," he says. Like with any crisis, this current one presents opportunities on an individual and societal level. "Can we come out of this stronger?"

There is rich significance in acknowledging beauty we whizzed by before, while caught up in the "momentum of busyness," Wolf says. In the [coming weeks of staying near home](#), we may get lost observing birds migrating home, absorbing the buzz around a backyard hummingbird feeder or savoring the [explosion of fragrant blooms taking over city sidewalks](#).

"Now those are the elements of inspiration in our life," says Wolf. She offers simple advice: "Enjoy what's bursting forth in this spring season."

Coronavirus resources

- [What to do if you're sick: Call your doctor and stay home](#)
- [Should children wear masks? Here's what doctors say](#)
- [Tips for safely ordering and picking up takeout food during the pandemic](#)
- [There's so much coronavirus information out there. Here's how to make sense of it](#)

- ["Opening Up America": Guidelines from White House, CDC](#)
- [What you should have in your medicine cabinet, just in case](#)
- [Tips for cleaning, disinfecting your home and your phone](#)
- [Sign up for breaking news alerts](#)
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How is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting you? What changes have you noticed in your life or habits? What kinds of discussions are you having about it?

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