

Nature's cure for the Covid blues
How cultivating an intimate connection with nature
can help reduce anxiety and loneliness.



Nest box camera photos of threatened Squirrel Glider and Brush Tailed Phascogale, where I work with the Bandjalong Rangers on the Minyurnai Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) on the far north coast of NSW, Australia. June 2021

Chances are you are reading this article in a state of Covid enforced lockdown. Even if you aren't in lockdown, you are no doubt having to vigilantly avoid others every time you step outside and might be feeling increasingly anxious and isolated.

These are unnatural times, and this is an unnatural way of being for our socially orientated species. The severe impact the pandemic is having on our mental health is escalating.

If you're wondering how you're faring, take a moment to try this little exercise. Put this article aside for 5 minutes. Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and try to focus your mind on your breath. When your mind wanders, simply return it to the breath, with loving-kindness and acceptance. Can you stay calm, relaxed, and focus on this exercise for five minutes? How long before you feel fidgety, reach for your mobile or another device?

This can be a particularly revealing exercise. If you feel too busy to try this exercise, even more revealing. I know, I have a regular personal struggle with mobile phone addiction. The need to keep it close by, to check for incoming SMS and email messages can be overwhelming. On good days I can switch it off or leave it behind to walk the dogs, do some yoga or meditation, and feel a lot calmer as a result. On bad days it rarely leaves my side and I'm checking far too regularly.

As the popular documentary, 'The Social Dilemma' so powerfully showed, there is a growing body of scientific evidence showing a decline in mental health linked to an overreliance on social media and technology to entertain and distract us.

A 2021 article in The Conversation (<https://theconversation.com/rewild-your-kids-why-playing-outside-should-be-a-post-pandemic-priority-156077>) by two leading public health experts points to research showing this trend was well established before the pandemic, driven by prior social trends such as fear of outdoor play (cleanliness, dangers) and increasing use of technology. Only one-third of children in Scotland had a regular outdoor play habit which was mirrored across a large number of developed countries. It concluded the current generation of children spend the least time outdoors and are the most unfit in human history.

Way back in 2005, Richard Louv identified this trend in his bestseller, *Last Child in the Wood*, in which he coined the term 'Nature Deficit Disorder'. He linked a lack of outdoor time in nature to childhood obesity, diabetes, mental illness, anxiety, anger, and ADHD.

As human beings, we don't need to be told this. We instinctively know and feel we are a part of nature and intuitively feel the benefit from this connection. Whether it's the energizing breath of a salt-laden sea breeze, the relaxing tranquillity sitting in the garden, or beside a pot plant in the corner of the room.

On the timescale of human history, we are not that many generations removed from traditional Indigenous cultures whose identity, wellbeing, and worldview are intrinsically interconnected with the natural world. I've been privileged to work on remote Aboriginal conservation reserves (Indigenous Protected Areas, visit www.countryneedspeople.org.au for details) where I've witnessed this intimate connection. For example, they know when it's safe to swim in a crocodile-infested waterhole because they know the whereabouts, personality, and nature of the most troublesome crocs. When they're hungry and cranky or have full bellies of fish and lazing in the sun!

Their work and worldview may just hold a few clues to helping reduce our sense of isolation and anxiety. We are lucky in Australia. We have a rich, thriving Aboriginal heritage with communities who have long known their health and wellbeing are intrinsically interconnected with their natural world. A study in Australia into Aboriginal spirituality and health outcomes conducted in 2009 found respondents overwhelmingly spoke of a need to go to country to find one's deep spirit, to feel comfortable within yourself. If these physical and spiritual connections decline, so do their health and wellbeing (<https://www.winnunga.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Spirituality-Review-2009.pdf>).

In Australia, Ngangkari Aboriginal healers are now working alongside and complimenting western medical approaches, using a range of healing techniques focussing on the realignment of the human spirit (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-28/aboriginal-healers-complementary-medicine-finds-its-place/9586972>).

These needs are no doubt deeply embedded within our roots. The notion of reorientating our children and ourselves toward a deeper connection with nature no doubt speaks to the famous quote by Robert Michael Pyle (the American nature writer and lepidopterist – butterfly expert) to 'let nature seep inside'.

There is no more urgent a time to be reminded of this, and the good news is nature's remedy is all around us, easily accessible and free!

The growing re-wilding movement is creating more wild time opportunities and free, curriculum-based activities. Examples include the UK-based wild network (<http://thewildnetwork.com/wild-time-learning/>) and Richard Louv's US-based children and nature organisation (<https://www.childrenandnature.org>) which advocates for 'more green, less screen'.

So, next time you feel a need for some quiet contemplation and inner connection, instead of watching your breath (as in the exercise above), try finding something in nature – an ant, beetle, bird – and study it intently, in silence. Notice its behaviour, movement, how does it interact with you, or other living beings nearby. Contemplate its world for a while, and what you can learn from that. You will be practicing the ancient practice of Dadirri (<https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/dadirri/>). The practise of deep inner listening and quiet still awareness, which connects us and nurtures spiritual well-being.

Taking the time to slow down and bear witness to the natural wonders surrounding us can provide a reassuring reminder we are not alone in this world. I wish you all well on your journey in finding personal solace through connecting with the natural world around you.

About Russell

Russell Irving is an Australian-based environmental educator and manager who has spent many years working with remote Aboriginal communities. He creates books ('The Rhythm of the Beach' and 'The Adventures of Jessica Jones & Sox and Grandpa'), poems, articles, and activities to educate and inspire children and families to connect with nature and themselves.

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