

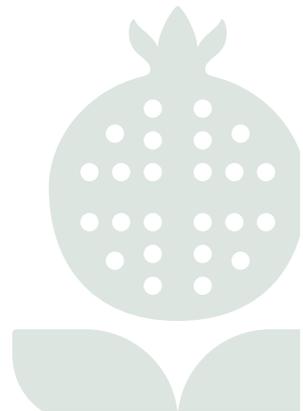


How Nature Can Support Mental Health Recovery

About St John of God University Hospital

St John of God Hospital is set within twenty-two acres of beautiful gardens, with a mix of wild and manicured spaces and an abundance of mature native trees. These grounds offer numerous serene spots for rest and reflection, along with accessible walking trails that encourage gentle physical activity and engagement with nature. The hospital's stunning natural surroundings form a vital part of its therapeutic milieu—the overall environment of care that supports healing and recovery. Recognising the vital role of nature in mental health, the hospital integrates access to natural sunlight, greenery, and a calming natural soundscape to enhance well-being. Rich in biodiversity, the grounds provide a restorative backdrop for both patients and staff.

St John of God Hospital also embraces the principles of biophilic design, bringing the outside in through the use of indoor plants, nature-inspired colour schemes, and imagery that reflects the natural world. This commitment to holistic, sustainable care is further reflected in the hospital's dedication to environmentally conscious practices, recognised by the Green Healthcare Award in 2020.



Nature Connection

Nature connectedness is a well-established psychological concept that describes how we relate to the natural world — emotionally, cognitively, and experientially. It is about our sense of belonging in nature and the belief that we are part of it, not separate from it. This connection shapes how we see the world, how we feel, and how we behave toward the environment².

Strengthening our connection with nature has been shown to boost wellbeing, reduce stress, foster positive emotions, and even inspire pro-environmental behaviour. To help people experience these benefits more deeply, researchers at the University of Derby identified five simple pathways to build stronger bonds with nature and support mental health³.



An example of the principles of biophilic design in action in the hospital, bringing the outside in through the use of indoor plants, nature-inspired colour schemes, and imagery

Beauty

Learning to notice and appreciate the aesthetic qualities of nature — its colours, patterns and shapes.

“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts”. —Rachel Carson⁴.

Taking a photo of a beautiful tree or flower, sketching a landscape or nature scene, writing a poem about your favourite season or collect leaves for their shapes or colours are all ways to appreciate the beauty of nature. Noticing the beauty in nature encourages awe, joy, and gratitude, which are key drivers of wellbeing.

Meaning

Finding personal, symbolic, or spiritual meaning in nature. Seeing elements of nature as metaphors for life or personal growth. Viewing a tree as a symbol of resilience, reflecting on how the seasons mirror life’s changes can help foster belonging, self-reflection, and inner strength.

Compassion

This pathway encourages the expression of care for the natural world— and yourself — through mindful, kind actions. This reflects our interdependence with nature. It is important not just to take from nature, but to also give back through pro environmental behaviours such as having a bird feeder in your garden, volunteering with a conservation group, or joining a litter pick or beach clean. This pathway helps enhance self-worth, helping us feel part of a greater whole.

Senses

Deepening your connection through mindful sensory experiences — seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, or even tasting nature. Watching birds, clouds, or flowing water. Listening to the wind rustling through trees. Smelling flowers or the earthy scent after rain. Touch tree bark or soil with curiosity. Tasting wild blackberries all enhances mindfulness, presence, and promotes calm.

Emotion

Acknowledging your emotional responses to nature — how it makes you feel, and how it connects to your memories and stories. Talking about how a natural place affects you emotionally. Naming a favourite tree, bird or nature spot. Sharing personal memories linked to nature can help strengthen empathy, emotional expression, and identity, deepening your bond with the living world.



Scientific Studies

Interacting with nature has been associated with enhanced health and wellbeing across different ages, cultural backgrounds, and social groups⁵, with individuals reporting lower wellbeing scores often seeing the most significant gains. Research indicates that nature-based approaches—such as mindfulness in natural settings, walking in nature, and therapeutic horticulture—can help alleviate symptoms of depression, anxiety, addiction, emotional dysregulation, and challenges related to autism^{5 6 7 8 9 10}. Exposure to nature has also been shown to support child development, contributing positively to overall wellbeing, cognitive function, and symptoms of ADHD¹¹.

A 2023 systematic review of ninety-two randomised controlled trials found that nature-based practices significantly reduced depression and anxiety levels, while also improving physical health indicators such as lowering blood pressure¹². Beyond individual health outcomes, research highlights that nature-based interventions can enhance social cohesion, foster social empowerment, and increase social support—helping to reduce loneliness and social isolation^{13 14 15}.



Scientific Studies

Working in and alongside nature has clear benefits for staff wellbeing and may act as a protective factor against burnout¹⁶. Individuals with a strong connection to nature tend to experience greater happiness and psychological functioning compared to those with lower connectedness. Boosting nature connectedness among staff can lead to improved wellbeing, with positive impacts on sickness rates, job performance, and retention¹⁷.

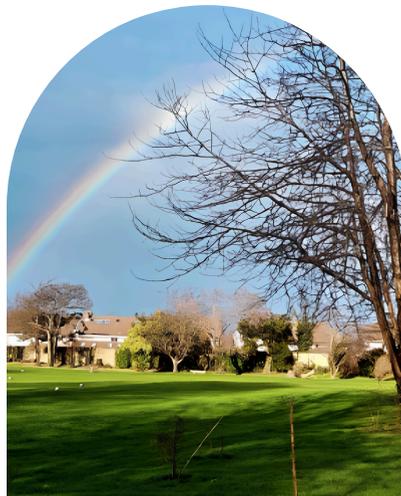
Practices that strengthen nature connection also encourage greater engagement in pro-environmental and conservation-oriented behaviours—actions that are essential in responding to the ongoing climate and ecological crises^{18 19}.



Theoretical Perspectives: How Nature Supports Mental Health

Attention Restoration Theory (ART)²⁰ Stephen and Rachel Kaplan

- In modern life, our minds are constantly bombarded by distractions—emails, traffic, screens, and notifications—all of which require directed attention, a mental resource that gets easily depleted. According to ART, nature provides a restorative environment where attention is gently engaged rather than forced.
- Natural settings offer what the Kaplans called "soft fascination"—stimuli like rustling leaves, flowing water, or birdsong—which allow our minds to rest and recover. The key benefits include reduced mental fatigue, restored attention and focus and boosted creativity and problem-solving.



Biophilia Hypothesis²¹ E.O. Wilson

This evolutionary theory suggests that humans possess an innate affinity for the natural world. It is not just that we enjoy nature—we are biologically designed to seek it out. Our ancestors evolved in wild environments, and remnants of that deep-seated relationship remain embedded in our DNA.

Start with your senses

- The easiest way to connect with nature is through your body. Pause for a moment outdoors and ask:
- What can I see? (Look for colours, movement, or shapes)
- What can I hear? (Birds, wind, water, insects)
- What can I feel? (Sunlight, breeze, texture of leaves)
- What can I smell or taste? (Flowers, rain, herbs) This helps quiet the mind and shift attention from inner worry to outer awareness.

Stress Reduction Theory (SRT)²² Roger Ulrich

SRT suggests that viewing or being in nature elicits a biological stress-reduction response. Within minutes, our heart rate slows, blood pressure decreases, and cortisol levels drop. This response is automatic and rooted in survival — when surrounded by natural cues of safety (like trees, water, and open skies), the body relaxes. Key benefits include lower stress and anxiety, improved mood and resilience and enhanced immune and cardiovascular function.

10 Nature Based Activities for Families

Nature offers children an incredible opportunity to explore, create, relax, and connect — not just with the world around them, but with themselves and their families. Below are some interactive, sensory-rich activities that promote mindfulness, creativity, emotional well-being, and a lasting bond with the environment.

1. 5-4-3-2-1 Sensory Nature Walk

This activity supports mindfulness, sensory awareness, and emotional regulation. Take a mindful walk outdoors and encourage children to focus on their senses. Use the 5-4-3-2-1 method to ground them in the present moment:

- **Five things they can see** – Birds, leaves, clouds, shadows.
- **Four things they can touch** – Tree bark, soft grass, smooth stones.
- **Three things they can hear** – Wind, rustling leaves, bird calls.
- **Two things they can smell** – Flowers, fresh earth.
- **One thing they can taste** – Only if safe (e.g., black berries picked with supervision)



2. Nature Journaling

Encourage children to keep a nature journal where they can draw, write, or press leaves and flowers. Sketching trees, insects, or clouds, write a poem or story about something they saw or reflecting on how the time in nature made them feel can enhance observation, memory, and emotional expression.

3. Outdoor Art with Found Materials

Invite children to collect safe, fallen natural objects — such as leaves petals, twigs, or stones — and use them to create a collage or tiny sculpture.



4. Bubble Breaths in Nature (Mindful Breathing Exercise)

This is a fun way to teach breathing and calmness outdoors. It calms the nervous system and grounds attention.

Invite children to sit or stand comfortably in nature.

1. Notice the Surroundings: “Let’s get quiet like the trees, still like the stones.”

2. Bubble Imagery: “Pretend you’re blowing a magical bubble with each exhale.”

3. Breathing Cues: Inhale slowly (3 counts): “Smell a flower...”

4. Exhale gently (4 counts): “Blow your bubble...”

5. Tiny Treasures Safari (With a Hand Lens):

“You’re a nature detective today!”

Explore the often-overlooked magic of small-scale nature.

Using a magnifying lens or just your eyes to observe bark patterns, tiny bugs, or moss, leaf veins, flower textures, or tiny treasures like feathers, seeds, shells

6. Nature’s Rainbow Hunt

Nature is not just green — it is bursting with colours! Go on a “Rainbow Hunt” to find all the colours of the rainbow:

Something red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.

See who can find the most! Remember, never pick anything that is growing!

7. Storytelling in Nature

Gather beneath a tree or in a quiet green space. Invite children to share a favourite memory connected to nature, a made-up nature story or talk about some favourite movies or poems with nature.

8. Bird Spotting Adventure

Go on a gentle birdwatching walk, how many species can you spot? Can you identify any bird calls? When you see a bird try and remain still to see what they get up to!

9. Outdoor Picnic & Games

Pack a healthy picnic and spend time eating together outdoors. Follow up with some movement-based games such as tag, hide-and-seek, frisbee or nature relay challenges.

10. Sensory Treasure Hunt

Create a scavenger list to find items based on sensory input: Something soft, something colourful, something fragrant, something that makes a sound. Never pick living plants or flowers from gardens or protected areas. Stick to fallen or safe items.

10 Nature-Based Activities for Staff and Patients

1. Mindful Nature Walk

Take a slow, intentional walk outdoors and engage all five senses. Notice the clouds drifting across the sky, the scent of flowers, the sweetness of ripe blackberries, the feel of wet grass beneath your feet, and the song of a nearby blackbird. This practice helps shift focus away from worry and into the beauty of the present moment.

2. Notice Three Things in Nature Each Day For one week (or more)

Write down three positive things you observe in nature each day. This could be a colourful leaf, a bird call, or sunlight through the trees. You can do this on a walk, from a window, or in a garden. Over time, this builds a greater sense of awareness, appreciation, and calm.

3. Movement and Interaction with the Landscape

Engage in gentle movement like yoga or stretching outdoors. Moving your body in connection with nature helps to improve health and well-being.

4. Watch What's Moving in Nature

Slow down your pace and gently observe what is in motion—leaves rustling, birds flying, insects buzzing. Let your senses guide you. Notice what draws your attention and allow yourself to be present with it. Silence can deepen the experience. While slowing down may feel strange at first, it opens us up to a different way of experiencing the world.

5. Outdoor Breathing

Find a tree you feel drawn to and take a moment to sit or rest beside it. Feel the reciprocal rhythm of breath—breathing in oxygen it provides and exhaling carbon dioxide it absorbs. Try this calming breath practice: inhale for 4 seconds, hold for six, exhale slowly for 8. Repeat as needed to feel more relaxed.

6. Sit Spot

Choose a quiet outdoor place to sit comfortably and simply be. Without needing to "do" anything, allow your senses to take in the sights, sounds, and sensations around you. Return to this same spot regularly to build a deeper connection with nature over time.

7. Nature-Based Journaling

Use journaling in the garden or green space as a tool for mindfulness and self-expression. Prompts might include: “Right now, I notice...”, “This small thing caught my attention...”, “Nature reminds me...”, “Where in nature do I feel most at peace?”, “What do I need to let go of, like the tree sheds its leaves?”

8. Bringing Nature Indoors

When outdoor access is not possible, bring natural elements inside. Use potted plants, natural light, essential oils, flower arrangements, stones, or nature sounds to create a calming and grounded atmosphere.

9. Creative Arts in Nature

Use natural materials to inspire or create art—leaf rubbings, nature collages, or sculptures from twigs and stones. Creativity in nature encourages self-expression, playfulness, and connection to the natural world.

10. Giving Back to Nature

Participate in activities like planting trees, sowing wildflowers, or maintaining a garden. Contributing to the care of the earth can foster a sense of purpose, community, and hope for the future.

10 Lessons from Nature to Support Positive Mental Health

1. Growth Takes Time

A large oak tree began as a single acorn. Flowers bloom in their own season. Healing and growth are slow. Be patient with your journey. Progress is happening.

2. All Weather Passes

Nature experiences storms, sunshine, and shadow — none of it lasts forever. Clouds drift, rain stops, and spring always follows winter. Feelings are temporary. Storms pass. Brighter days return.

3. Change Is Natural

Leaves fall, rivers shift, mountains erode. Change is not a flaw — it is nature's way. Change is not failure. It is part of your evolution.

4. Flow Over Force

Water teaches us to move with ease — it does not force its way but still carves through rock. You do not need to fight everything. Sometimes flowing and accepting creates deeper progress.

5. Stillness Has Power

Stillness is not about doing nothing—it is about grounding ourselves, creating space to breathe, feel, and simply be. In moments of stillness, we can reconnect with our inner strength, allowing clarity and healing to emerge from within.

6. We Are All Connected

Just as nature thrives through connection and mutual support, our mental health flourishes when we lean on one another. You are not alone—reaching out strengthens your support system.

7. Life Moves in Cycles

Life moves in cycles—there are times of darkness and stillness, but they are never permanent. Just as winter gives way to spring, periods of struggle will eventually soften, making room for renewal, growth, and hope.

8. Beauty Exists in Imperfection

Just as nature's imperfections create its unique beauty, our own struggles can become sources of strength and resilience in mental health recovery. Embracing our flaws and vulnerabilities allows for deeper self-acceptance and connection with others.

9. Letting Go Makes Space for Growth

In nature, trees shed their leaves to survive the winter and make way for new growth in spring—letting go is part of the cycle. In mental health, releasing what no longer serves us—old stories, fears, or expectations—creates space for healing, resilience, and transformation.

10. Diversity Is Strength

No forest thrives on one tree alone. Nature celebrates differences — in colour, shape, role, and function. Your uniqueness matters.



Bringing Nature Indoors

When we cannot get out into nature, we can still invite its calming presence into our lives. Whether it is the scent of pine, sunlight, or the sound of birdsong, the natural world has a profound ability to support our well-being. The following are five ways of bringing nature in.

1. Plants

Indoor plants do more than beautify your space — they breathe with you. Acting as natural air purifiers, they absorb pollutants like carbon dioxide and volatile organic compounds while increasing oxygen levels.

2. Natural Light and Fresh Air - The Body's Daily Medicine

Natural daylight — especially morning light — supports your circadian rhythm, which regulates sleep, mood, and energy levels. Open windows when you can to let fresh air circulate and position your workstation or favourite chair near a window to soak in that vital blue-spectrum morning light. If access to sunlight is limited, consider a Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) lamp, which simulates natural daylight and helps regulate mood during darker months.

3. Nature Imagery

When you cannot be in nature, images of nature can support well-being. Studies show that looking at pictures of green landscapes, flowing water, and fractal patterns (like leaves, trees, or waves) can calm the mind and reduce stress.

Displaying landscape photography, watching nature documentaries, having nature murals and nature inspired colour palettes are great ways to incorporate nature into any setting.

4. The Scents of Nature: Essential Oils

Scent is a powerful way to shift emotional states. Certain natural scents have been shown to promote relaxation, reduce anxiety, and even improve sleep quality.

Diffuse a few drops of these essential oils:

Lavender – for calming and sleep.

Lemon – for energy and clarity

Tea Tree & Eucalyptus – for purification and respiratory ease

Cedarwood, Pine, Douglas Fir – for grounding and relaxation

Jasmine or Japanese Cedar – for soothing emotional tension

5. Natural Soundscapes

Stress often heightens our sensitivity to noise. In contrast, nature sounds — birdsong, rainfall, rustling leaves — are shown to soothe the nervous system and lower blood pressure. The following are ways to incorporate natural sounds indoors. Sit near an open window and just listen, play birdsong or running water recordings, consider a small indoor fountain or water feature.

Nature Resources

Resources for Professionals:

“The Nature Fix” by Florence Williams

A highly engaging book exploring how nature impacts our brains and bodies.

Vitamin N by Richard Louv

(A fantastic handbook with 500+ ideas for reconnecting with nature for families and communities.)

With Nature in Mind: The Ecotherapy Manual for Mental Health Professionals

Natural Soundscapes and Meditation:

www.calmsounds.com

www.naturesoundmap.com

Nature based apps:

iNaturalist (Plant and Tree identification)

YouTube: Nature Soundscapes (Relaxation)

Websites:

Children & Nature Network: Childrenandnature.org

National Parks of Ireland: www.nationalparks.ie

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