

FOREST BATHING



The practice of Forest Bathing or its Japanese name, Shinrin-yoku, was developed in Japan in the 1980's. Shinrin means forest and yoku means to bathe. Shinrin-yoku became part of the national public health program in Japan in 1982. Many of us have been practicing forest bathing for years without being aware of its existence but since the 1980's a mounting body of evidence through Japanese research, has highlighted the potential health benefits of Forest Bathing.

Forest Bathing is essentially a walk through a park or forest, guided by a forest therapist, and combines walking with mindfulness. Participants are encouraged to focus on the senses by breathing mindfully, listening to the birdsong and the quiet sounds of the forest, looking at the light filtering through the branches and smelling the fragrances of the forest.

The potential health benefits of phytoncides, chemicals released by trees, are also an integral part of the forest bathing theory. Phytoncides are chemicals released by trees and plants, to protect them from insects and infection. They

are believed to boost immunity in humans also. Japanese studies have looked at immunity markers and stress levels before and after a two hour forest walk, and found that stress hormones are significantly decreased and the numbers of natural killer cells (a type of white blood cell) are significantly increased.

Shirley Gleeson, from Eco Wellness Consulting is an Irish certified Forest Therapy guide. She says that many people who come on her forest bathing sessions also suffer from anxiety and depression and even a 2 hour session can offer a reprieve from their condition and encourage them to get out in to the natural environment. Shirley worked in Health Promotion and Social Work for over 20 years and she would love to see "social prescribing" become more common amongst GPs and health professionals in Ireland. Social prescribing is a mechanism for linking people with non-medical sources of support within the community to improve physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. She explains that Western Society is way behind Japan in



terms of recognizing the health benefits of forest therapy. Recently the NHS announced that British primary care networks will be supported by 1,000 social prescribing workers by April 2021.

During Migraine Awareness Week 2019 we are partnering with Shirley Gleeson, a Nature & Wellbeing Consultant and the Director of Ecowellness Consulting Ltd. Shirley and her colleagues will hold special Forest Bathing sessions in key locations throughout the country during Migraine Awareness week. We will announce location and dates through our ezine and social media channels by the end of August. If you can't get to one of our sessions, then go along to a local forest or park and try it out for yourself with our tips below. If you would like to arrange a local meet up and forest walk during Migraine Awareness Week, then send us the details and we will post it on our social media channels.

Start with a comfortable time limit. If 2 hours is too much, then work up to that as a goal.

- Turn off your phone and all other devices or leave them at home if possible
- Slow down. It's not a competition and the slower you walk and the deeper you breathe the better the benefits.
- Practise mindful breathing, breath into your abdomen and exhale slowly. If yoga is in your practice, then try yogic breathing in the forest.
- At certain stages sit and just observe the sounds, smells and textures surrounding you. If you see a forest stream, dip your toes in the stream.
- Try not to overthink the process.
- Rehydrate. Though this is not an essential part of forest bathing it is always essential for migraine sufferers so make sure to bring a bottle and an additional small snack if you are going for the full 2-hour experience.
- There is a selection of national walking trails on the Coillte website and they offer varying levels of difficulty and length of walks. <https://www.coillte.ie/activity/walking/>