



The importance of being outside

It's fair to say that we all feel better when the sun shines. We feel stronger, have less illnesses and are generally in a more positive mood. This is because sunlight, whether direct or through clouds, has so many beneficial effects on our physical and mental well being.

The benefits of sunlight

It's no wonder the sun is a vital source of energy and when we experience direct contact it starts a cascade of biological responses including regulating our hormone balance, boosting immune function, helping us sleep and even protecting us against dementia.

Light is electromagnetic energy and moves in waves (Photons) long wave and shortwave. Our eyes and skin are the transmitter for sunlight, signaling to the body to synthesize this energy and activate various systems.

We have a very clever and sophisticated part of the brain (called the suprachiasmatic nucleus) which can be described as a room full of clocks that go off at different times throughout the day and night. These clocks signal the body to produce various hormones throughout the day, timed to precision to help us wake, function optimally through the day and sleep peacefully at night.

Daylight and night dark are two important clocks for our functioning. Our ancestors would have relied on the sunrise as a time to wake

and sunset as a time for preparing to sleep and important biological processes would have been automatically signaled through this natural 24 hour cycle. With the advent of electric lights, television, computers and phones we have disrupted this natural process. Of course, we would not want to be without our devices, but it is vital for optimal performance that we reset these clocks and try to replicate our ancestral body clock.

The good news is there are some easy, free and simple steps that we can take to help us to fall back into this natural biological process.

Spending 20 to 30 minutes outdoors, even on a cloudy day, is a great way to reset our body's system.

It's important to have direct contact with the light, as sunglasses and windows are designed to reflect the UV rays. I stress you shouldn't look at the sun directly if it is causing you to squint and you should also protect your skin from burning, particularly in the summer months, but there is a sweet spot of taking full advantage of the power of the sun and its energy.

Spending time outside early in the morning helps the body to wake and become alert. As soon as we see light, the body stops the production of melatonin – often named the sleep hormone. This helps us to wake and resets our system, allowing the body to slowly produce this hormone as day turns to night, helping us to sleep peacefully.

For those of us that often wake in the night to use the loo, I would recommend doing so with minimal light as our melatonin receptors are sensitive and too much light can stop us falling back to sleep straight away.

Practically speaking, getting outside is easier in the spring and summer months but I would highly recommend this protocol all year round.

As well as the eyes, the skin is another area that helps absorb these light waves from the sun which again has profound effects on our functions.

Vitamin D is essential. It is primarily created by our bodies synthesizing the energy from the sun, which triggers the communication to the gut cells which create calcium and phosphate, minerals used to support strong and healthy bones as well as supporting our immune system. Although Vitamin D can be obtained from foods and supplementation, skin exposure is the most natural way to create this essential vitamin.

Daylight also helps initiate spikes in healthy cortisol promoting our alertness, which is why we are often at our most productive and creative in the mornings.

Additionally, spending more time outside increases the production of testosterone in men and estrogen in women. These are often described as the growth and reproductive hormones, and play a major part in increasing overall sex drive and energy levels.

Other hormones which increase in daylight are dopamine, which boosts our motivation, and serotonin, which boosts mood, making us more productive, optimistic and happier when we spend time outside.

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Being outside has also shown to reduce our pain receptors, which is why we all feel so much better when the sun is shining. Our immune system also functions better which is why we pick up less colds and coughs in the summer months.

Walking

I find that walking is a great way to experience the daylight and optimise all the benefits of the outside. One of my all year round early morning protocols is to take myself off for a walk. As much as possible, I try to expose my arms and legs and I don't wear sunglasses.

I also use this time for mindfulness. I haven't yet mastered static meditation, however, on my morning walks, I deliberately don't plug in my headphones to listen to music or podcasts and instead use the time for mindfulness, listening to the birds singing, appreciating nature and my surroundings and focusing on my breathing or the sensation and cadence of my steps as a way of directing my attention from thoughts to anchoring in the present moment.

Equally, walking compliments good health as a way of building and maintaining muscle tone, improving heart function, regulating insulin and improving mood. It has also been shown to improve memory.

Morning walks are definitely a me time, but I am regularly promoting walk and talk meetings with friends and clients as I find being outside in nature combined with walking not only supports well-being but also supports building strong relationships.

Spend time in nature and around trees

The Japanese have a phrase called Shinrin Yoko, which translates to 'forest bathing'. They believe that being around trees provides comfort and serenity. We now understand that trees produce essential oils, or phytoncides, which are their natural protection from germs or insects. It is also suggested that this is how trees communicate with each other. A study found that when we spend time around trees our heart rate and blood pressure reduces, supporting a more calm state, helping our mood and improving our sleep.

Spending time around greenery, plants and trees has also been shown to improve our immune function and therefore, where practically possible, incorporate as much of your walk around nature to take full advantage of these natural healing essential oils.

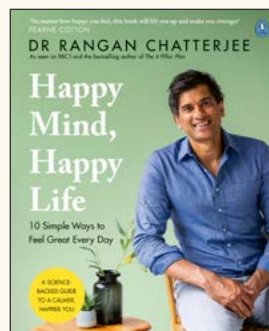
I have swapped my morning time in the gym with a walk outside in nature as soon as the sun rises and have genuinely felt real gains in my general mood and well being and would highly recommend the same to anyone.

Grounding / earthing

The body is a mass of electrical charge and, by directly touching the ground, we soak up electrons from the earth, allowing us to naturally detoxify our bodies of free radicals. From some of the research, grounding assists with heart rate variability, shifting our nervous system to a more calm state. Some will remember the scene in the film *Pretty Woman* where Richard Gere plays the successful but workaholic businessman and is persuaded by his new love interest, played by Julia Roberts, to come to the park and remove his shoes and socks and connect with the ground, which saw him relax and for the first time, instead of working all night, saw him have the best night's sleep.

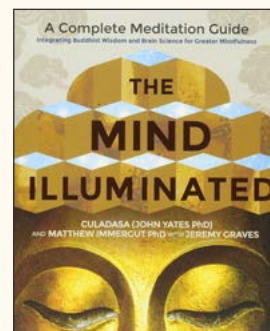
Although a fictional film, the benefits might not be too far fetched and this is another simple, free and easy way to connect and enjoy all the wonders of Mother Earth and to benefit our bodies and minds with the great outside.

RECOMMENDED READING



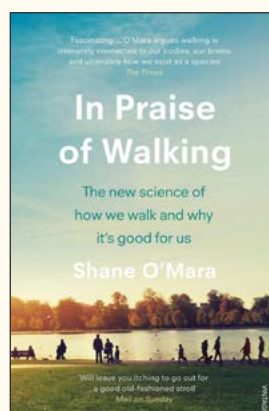
Happy Mind Happy Life

Rangan Chatterjee



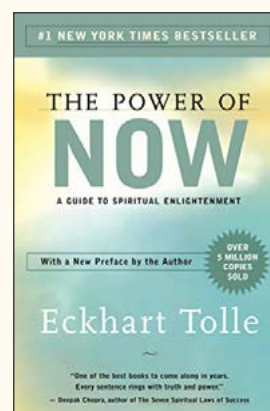
The Mind Illuminated

John Yates PhD



In Praise of Walking

Shane O'Mara



The Power of Now

Eckhart Tolle

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Listen:

Andrew Huberman –
Using Light
(sunshine, blue light
and red light to
optimise health
(18 April 2022))



Watch on YouTube:

Clint Ober –
The Surprising Health
and Healing Benefits
of Grounding
(Earthing)



All content is based on my own personal research and reading and, more importantly, on my own lifestyle choices that have positively supported my own health and wellbeing. Before making any changes to diet or lifestyle, it is my strong advice to take professional advice before doing so.