

The ecology of calm: **HOW NATURE RESTORES A TIRED MIND**

Not everything that restores us comes in a bottle. Sometimes it arrives on the breeze, especially in summer, when the outside world feels more inviting, more generous. The scent of honeysuckle, the warmth of sun on skin, the distant sound of birdsong, these ordinary moments offer what modern life

so often withholds: space to slow down, exhale, and reset. And this need for nature isn't a luxury or a nice-to-have, it's biology. We're wired for nature, and that pull toward green spaces and fresh air is rooted deep in who we are.

This connection to the natural world, what scientists call biophilia, is part of our blueprint.



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Humans didn't evolve under fluorescent lights or on concrete streets, but in open landscapes, beneath trees, beside rivers. Even if modern life keeps us indoors, our nervous systems haven't forgotten the quiet recalibration of standing beneath trees and watching light move through leaves.

'Our brains and bodies evolved in natural environments, surrounded by trees and birds, rivers and mountains,' says Dr Alison Greenwood, founder of the mental health charity Dose of Nature. 'So it's no surprise we thrive when we're outside in nature, and don't do so well stuck indoors all day, surrounded by TVs and toasters, and separated from the world in which we evolved.'

She explains that our systems respond instinctively to our surroundings. 'When we're inside, "trapped" in our geometric boxes by walls and ceilings, and surrounded by shapes, sounds, and smells that are unfamiliar to our old reptilian brains, our sympathetic nervous system (our fight/flight response) is activated. However, when we step outside into the natural world, with the freedom of an open sky above us, and surrounded by nature's familiar sights and sounds, our parasympathetic nervous system (our rest/digest response) is activated, our heart rate, blood pressure and cortisol levels all reduce, and we feel more relaxed.'

Dr Greenwood adds: 'Just being outside in nature is good for our bodies and brains. It can help us to feel calmer, happier, and more energised; we focus better, think more clearly, and even live longer.'

And that kind of clarity and calm are increasingly harder to come by these days. Modern life fractures our attention with constant notifications, headlines, inboxes, and background noise — all designed to seize our focus instantly and repeatedly. But our brains aren't built for that kind of constant vigilance, and the result is mental fatigue, irritability, creative block, and that all-too-familiar sense

of being overwhelmed by everything and connected to nothing.

Cognitive scientists have identified two kinds of attention. One is hard fascination, or directed attention, and it's what we use to complete tasks, follow conversations, or navigate busy streets. It takes effort, it's finite, and it's prone to depletion.

On the other hand is soft fascination, the kind of effortless attention that happens when something gently captures your focus without requiring concentration or response. It holds your mind just enough to quiet internal noise, but not so tightly that it drains your energy. It's the attention you give a flickering candle or the slow movement of clouds across the sky and it's subtle, absorbing, and restorative.

By contrast, hard fascination (think breaking news alerts, high-octane movies, or intense social media content) grabs our attention forcefully and fills our mental bandwidth. It's compelling, but leaves little space for reflection.

Soft fascination leaves that space intact and restores what overstimulation wears away. You've likely experienced soft fascination without naming it: standing at the edge of the sea watching the waves roll in, tracing patterns in the clouds, or watching the countryside drift

past from a train window. These are the moments when time slows and your mind, for once, doesn't try to race ahead.

Natural environments tend to be the richest sources and researchers studying attention restoration often point to landscapes with 'soft edges' and gradual movement: woodlands, rivers, dunes, meadows. These places gently draw our focus without requiring interpretation or reaction or a solution. They hold our gaze, but never trap it.

But soft fascination doesn't require a sweeping vista. You might find it watching raindrops run down a windowpane, or a candle flickering in low light. These moments hold more than stillness. They invite presence and the trick isn't escape, it's recognising the quiet

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thresholds already in your life, the subtle, overlooked scenes that ask nothing of you, yet offer everything your tired mind needs.

And, this gentle awareness creates space for something else: creativity. When the mind is no longer overloaded, ideas surface. Artists and scientists alike describe their best insights not at desks, but during walks, while gardening, or in the shower. These soft-attention states are open, relaxed, and quietly generative and they create just enough mental space for connections to form.

This isn't just a feeling of relaxation, it's neurological. Functional MRI studies confirm that time spent in green spaces or engaging in soft fascination can reduce activity in the part of the brain associated with worry and rumination.

And nature doesn't have to be remote or untouched to work its effect. 'It is a mistake to imagine that you have to be in the countryside to be in nature,' Dr Greenwood reminds us. 'As soon as you're outside your front door, you have sky, the same sky that's over mountains, oceans, forests and hills. And if you have sky, the chances are you have birds and insects, and weather and fresh air. Even in our most urban environments, there are usually a few trees and plants to notice.'

Her advice is simple: build nature into your daily routine. 'Go for a walk with a friend instead of meeting at a café. Exercise outside instead of in a gym. Eat your lunchtime sandwich on a bench instead of at your desk. Step outside with your first hot drink of the day and spend a few minutes looking up at the sky or across a neighbour's garden. Notice the dandelions in the pavement cracks. Reach out and touch the bark of a tree.'

These don't require a lifestyle change, just an attention shift. 'Incorporate into your daily life a few new habits of noticing nature with all of your senses alive,' Dr Greenwood says, 'a moment in the morning, a lunchtime walk, an after-dinner stroll, and you'll soon see the difference it makes to your mood and general wellbeing.'

Noticing nature isn't just a feel-good habit; it's a way to reclaim presence in a world that constantly pulls us away from it. 'Our lives are increasingly stressful, demanding, challenging, and most of us spend far too long regretting the past and worrying about the future,' says Dr Greenwood. 'When we notice the natural world around us, we are living in the present, and the more we live in the present, the more we are living life.'

Nature doesn't fix everything, but it reminds us of something essential: we are part of a larger rhythm. A slower, wiser one. Sometimes, all it takes is stepping outside, looking up, and letting the world soften at the edges. In those quiet moments, we don't escape life, we return to it.

THE TAKE-A-PAUSE TOOLKIT:

10 ways to find calm in under a minute

No gear, no yoga mat, no app required...

1. BOX BREATHING (45 SECONDS)

A Navy SEAL-approved technique that calms the fight-or-flight response.

How: Inhale for 4 seconds
Hold for 4 seconds
Exhale for 4 seconds
Hold for 4 seconds
Repeat 3 times

Why it works: This simple breathing pattern signals to your nervous system that you're safe. It's especially effective before high-stress moments — meetings, hard conversations, or the mental chaos of the 3pm slump.

2. SHAKE IT OUT (30-45 SECONDS)

Yes, literally shake.

How: Stand up. Shake your hands, arms, legs, shoulders. Bounce lightly on your feet.

Why it works: Animals naturally discharge stress by shaking. Humans forgot how. This goofy-looking move releases tension, resets your posture, and boosts circulation. It's surprisingly effective when you feel stuck or overstimulated.

3. NAME 5 THINGS (GROUNDING SCAN)

Anchor yourself in the present moment, fast.

How: Look around and name:

- 5 things you see
- 4 things you feel
- 3 things you hear
- 2 things you smell
- 1 thing you taste

Why it works: This sensory inventory pulls your mind out of anxious spirals and back into your body. Great for moments of overwhelm or racing thoughts.

4. SIP WITH INTENTION

Turn your coffee or water break into a ritual.

How: Take a slow, deliberate sip. Pause. Feel the temperature, notice the flavour, let yourself actually taste it.

Why it works: Drinking is automatic. Making it mindful turns it into a moment of pause, no extra time needed. This creates a natural break in your day and gently redirects your focus inward.

5. HANDS OVER HEART

So simple it's almost absurd, but profoundly calming.

How: Place one or both hands over your heart. Breathe slowly. Stay here for 30-45 seconds.

Why it works: Touch activates safety and connection cues in the body. This small gesture lowers stress hormones and gives you a moment of comfort, especially when no one else is around to offer it.

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6. THE EXHALE EMPHASIS**Shift your nervous system with just one breath.****How:** Inhale naturally, then exhale slowly and fully, twice as long as your inhale. Repeat 3–5 times.**Why it works:** A long exhale activates the parasympathetic ('rest and digest') system. It tells your body to chill, even if your brain hasn't caught up yet.**7. VISUAL GREEN BREAK****Calm your brain through your eyes.****How:** Look at something green, a plant, tree, photo of a forest, even a screen-saver. Focus on it fully for 30–45 seconds.**Why it works:** Studies show that

simply viewing natural elements can reduce cortisol, lower heart rate, and improve focus.

8. PALM PRESS RESET**Use pressure to signal calm to your body.****How:** Press your palms together at your heart centre. Hold with light pressure. Breathe slowly.**Why it works:** This posture creates a physical 'closed loop' that's grounding and centring. Bonus: it's discreet and works well before presentations or calls.**9. MINI MENTAL DE-CLUTTER****Drop the noise by naming what's on your mind.****How:** Say (or write) the top 3 things occupying your thoughts right now. No solutions, just name them.**Why it works:** Labelling emotions and thoughts reduces their grip. It clears mental space and lowers internal pressure fast.**10. COLD-WATER RESET****Snap out of spirals with sensation.****How:** Splash your face with cold water, or run cold water over your wrists for 20–30 seconds.**Why it works:** Cold triggers the mammalian dive reflex, slowing heart rate and calming the nervous system. Great for anxious moments.Subscribe at shop.kelsey.co.uk/PYJUR 57

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NOT FOR SALE

What do you need to press pause on?

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Distraction

You know you need to press pause but somehow you've lost confidence in your ability to relax. Instead, when life gets overwhelming, you've got into a habit of numbing your feelings and carrying on. You might find yourself endlessly scrolling, binge-watching or snacking without even realising it. But the more we rely on distraction to cope, the more disconnected we can get from our feelings. You're particularly vulnerable when you're overloaded, emotionally depleted or not sure what kind of rest you actually need. And when you've got used to constant stimulation, the prospect of slowing down can seem boring, pointless or even terrifying. Your first step towards pressing pause is to notice your go-to distractions with curiosity, not criticism. Tune in to what's inside and try to connect with the feeling under the craving for distraction. Then simply accept it and make space for it — don't try to analyse or change what you're feeling. Instead ask yourself, what could you try before reaching for your phone — a few moments of conscious breathing, a quick walk, or just 10 minutes focusing on your body and trying to let go of tension? Small moments like this will build your confidence in allowing gaps in your day to remain unfilled, and to see them as opportunities for calm.

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People-pleasing

People who thrive on social connections often put everyone else before themselves. Pressing pause will be a challenge if you find it hard to say no, and when you do get time alone, it can feel unfamiliar or even selfish. Your instinct to care for others is a big part of who you are, but it's draining your capacity to care for yourself and to slow down. You may fill your days with calls, commitments, or emotional labour, leaving no space to just be. What's more, pressing pause can feel unappealing when you're not used to prioritising your own needs. You may be well aware that you need clearer boundaries but might find it hard to tolerate the thought of upsetting people. But if you try to pause before you jump in and take responsibility for making others feel okay, you might find that a sense of having more time starts to naturally unfold. Although allowing small moments to pause throughout the day is important, you could also benefit from more structured time on a regular basis, such as a regular art or yoga class. If guilt creeps in, remind yourself that you don't have to prove your worth by putting yourself last, and your loved ones will also benefit when you are truly thriving.

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Perfectionism

For you, slowing down often feels impossible, because there's always something more you could or should be doing. You thrive on achievement and a sense of progress but your inner perfectionist drives you to constantly stay busy, often at the expense of your wellbeing. Even self-care and rest can become another area to 'do right' if you're convinced you need to learn to meditate or do more yoga. There may be tangible benefits to filling every moment with productivity, and others may admire your motivation and high standards, but deep down you know that having little room to pause, breathe and step off the 'what's next?' treadmill is taking its toll. The truth is, making time to pause is not a reward for when you've 'done enough', it's something you need right now — you don't need to finish the list to deserve it. Next time you notice the voice that insists it's not the right time to slow down, try to gently challenge it. If it helps, schedule in moments to pause throughout the day, such as sitting with a cup of tea or taking a slow walk somewhere green. Creating space in your life for slowness is the opposite of giving up, it's making a conscious and courageous choice to live differently, and trust that something good will emerge.

IF YOU SCORED MAINLY ■

Overthinking

It can be deeply frustrating when you long for a slower pace of life, but pressing pause just seems to make your mind busier than ever. As a reflective person, you may be genuinely interested in analysing past conversations, or thinking about how you and others have behaved. And mulling over the past, present or future can create a sense of being prepared or more in control. At times it does make sense to think things through, but overthinking is rarely insightful, and an overly busy mind can make you feel like your life is more overwhelming than it actually is. Mental busyness is not only a significant barrier to creating a slower pace of life, but left unchecked it can leave you vulnerable to low mood and anxiety. It might seem hard to resist filling slow moments with thinking, and you'll no doubt get sucked into it without realising. When you do, simply acknowledge by mentally saying 'thinking' and then bring your attention to the here and now by connecting with what you can see, hear and feel. Your aim is not to silence your thoughts, which is an impossible task, but to build trust that you can switch off from them, and instead, savour the opportunities to pause that present themselves throughout the day — however small.