

Connect With Nature: guided explorations

There is increasing evidence that contact with Nature and green spaces is beneficial to people struggling with their health. Groundbreaking research from the University of Derby¹ states, "Science shows us we need to go beyond simply enabling people's access to nature and enable people to build a connection with nature. It is our connection with nature that supports human and environmental health and well-being"

The five pathways we use to build connections with Nature, based on the Derby University research, are

- (1) engaging all the senses
- (2) engaging emotionally with Nature
- (3) exploring and expressing how nature can bring meaning to life
- (4) finding beauty and expressing it through words or creative activities
- (5) expressing compassion for nature through conservation activities, such as planting.

We link these to the NEF² five ways to wellbeing

- **Connect** through regular meetings to explore together
- **Take Notice** by being aware of the natural world close by and savouring the moment
- **Give** through simple acts like planting
- **Be Active** by wandering at your own pace, easy physical movement such as Qigong
- **Learn** through simple nature study and sharing knowledge

Participants are encouraged to take part in activities to the level of their personal comfort, including collecting natural materials, nature study, creative activities, informal discussion and simple exercises to develop their sensory and observational abilities.



In one of our November walks, which happened to fall on Diwali, we revelled in the vibrant colours of the leaves on the trees and collected yellow ones to create mini mandalas on the Nature Table, which is a central feature of our sessions and to which we always return at the end of a walk. We also looked hard for the tiny things that are often overlooked, like plant galls, tiny fungi in the grass and lichens. As we had just celebrated Halloween, we focused on the invertebrates that don't always get a lot of love, despite their vital roles in the ecosystem:

"Villains" like the wasp and the spider and the "ewww" creatures like snails slugs and worms.

In our "Wintering" walk, we examined what different creatures do to prepare for winter and looked at how trees and plants ready themselves for the cold and darkness. As always, we considered what we can learn from Nature about making our own preparations for winter and discussed what we like best about the dark-half of the year.

¹ derby.ac.uk/NCxRG

² <https://neweconomics.org/2008/10/five-ways-to-wellbeing>

As a special treat for that final session, we welcomed Sara, a Qigong practitioner who, during the walk, guided us through some simple exercises. All of the gentle movements she introduced us to could be done sitting, standing -- and even can be done at home in bed. Qigong combines breathing, visualisation, meditation or mindfulness and also teaches seasonal awareness. The exercises helped us to improve circulation, with keeping warm and building our inner resources to survive and thrive in the winter months.

We also had a go at creating some hygge, the Danish art of creating a warm atmosphere and enjoying the good things in life with good people, with lights, candles and chocolate to end the session. We placed candles, lights and chocolate on the Nature table. As part of our commitment to showing compassion for Nature some of us planted some bulbs in a small neglected part of the site.

Our Connect sessions are aimed at people with mental or physical health issues, especially service users of the hospital but also members of the local community. We aim to combat social isolation caused by poor health, unemployment or social problems, or mental health problems. We also encourage parents of young children to attend and welcome all age and social groups. As the walk pace is slow, gentle and tailored to the needs of the attendees and they only need to engage in activities with which they feel comfortable, we easily accommodate those with mobility problems, in wheelchairs or with under 5s. St Ann's hospital is also a workplace and we are always happy to welcome staff members to join us on all or part of the session.



We hope that people will appreciate the unique beauty of the St Ann's site and that by visiting often, engaging in Nature based activities and noticing how the place changes over the seasons, participants will develop a stronger connection to nature that will carry over into other parts of their everyday lives and enable them to find beauty, meaning and wonder in the middle of even the most urban of environments.

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"Nature connectedness is an internationally recognised psychological construct. It moves beyond simple exposure to and contact with nature to an individual's sense of their relationship with the natural world."

University of Derby Online Course

More: https://youtu.be/fZ5XNDF_BnA