

Nature and mental health

Explains the mental health benefits of nature and gives tips and ideas to try. Also provides information on formal ecotherapy programmes, and where to find out more.

Contents

How can nature benefit my mental health?	2
What nature ideas could I try?	3
How can I overcome barriers?	7
About ecotherapy programmes	9
Useful contacts	13

This publication has been localised for Hong Kong and is based on a Mind UK publication and the original version may be found on the Mind UK website: [link](#).

It is made available free of charge and does not form part of any commercial activity. Any adaptation and/or translation have been done independently by Mind HK, and for general information purposes only. To view the original, certified information, please visit the original version above.

Adapted with permission by:



How can nature benefit my mental health?

Spending time in green space or bringing nature into your everyday life can benefit both your mental and physical wellbeing. For example, doing things like growing food or flowers, exercising outdoors or being around animals can have lots of positive effects. It can:

- Improve your mood
- Reduce feelings of [stress](#) or [anger](#)
- Help you take time out and [feel more relaxed](#)
- Improve your physical health
- Improve your confidence and [self-esteem](#)
- Help you [be more active](#)
- Help you make new connections
- Provide [peer support](#).

“Nurturing something else into life has really helped my wellbeing - gently caring for something helped me learn to care for myself.”

We all have different experiences of nature, and different reasons for wanting to connect with it more - or feeling unsure about whether to try. You might find you get something completely different from one activity compared to someone else.

Our pages on [ideas to try in nature](#) and [overcoming barriers](#) give lots of tips on how to bring some benefits from nature into your life, whatever your personal situation.

“I’ve been getting out into nature and walking, either on my own or with dogs, to manage my bipolar disorder for years. It helps to keep me calm and physically healthy, and I love taking the time to be mindful of all the beautiful green spaces around me, even when living in a city. Watching the birds and squirrels always has a calming effect and takes me out of my own head.”

Nature and mental health problems

Spending time in nature has been found to help with mental health problems including [anxiety](#) and [depression](#). For example, research into [ecotherapy](#) (a type of formal treatment which involves doing activities outside in nature) has shown it can help with mild to moderate depression. This might be due to combining regular physical activity and social contact with being outside in nature.

Being outside in natural light can also be helpful if you experience [seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#), a type of depression that affects people during particular seasons or times of year. And people tell us that getting into nature has helped them with many [other types of mental health problems](#).

“I’ve had mild to moderate problems with anxiety, depression and OCD all my life, and in recent years volunteering on my local city farm has been the most therapeutic thing I’ve ever done, besides good talking therapy.”

“It is hard to explain the power of nature in relieving both my physical and mental stress ... There is little more relaxing than sitting with a cup of tea looking at a hill through a window and hearing the nearby stream trickle away. There is something about the quiet calm of nature that is contagious, leaving a quiet calm in my mind.”

What nature ideas could I try?

This page has some tips and suggestions for enjoying nature:

- [Grow or pick food](#)
- [Bring nature inside](#)
- [Do activities outdoors](#)
- [Help the environment](#)
- [Connect with animals](#)

Don't worry if some ideas don't feel right for you - see if you can find some that do, or adapt one to suit you.

Grow or pick food

- **Create a growing space.** If you don't have access to a garden, you could plant salad leaves or herbs in a window box or plant pot.
- **Plant vegetables in your garden.** (E.g. the [Gardening Resources page from Green Queen](#) has information to help you get started.)
- **Grow food together with others.** Apply to share an allotment, or look for community gardens or food growing projects in your local area. (See the [LCSD's Community Garden programme](#) website for more information.)
- **Go fruit picking.** Look for local farms or orchards that let you pick fruit to buy. You might also find fruit growing in urban spaces, for example wild blackberries.
- **Learn to find edible plants,** also known as food foraging. You could see if a foraging group meets in your local area.

Quick tip: if you're going fruit picking or foraging, be aware that **not all wild plants are safe to eat.** Before eating something you've picked yourself, make sure you know exactly what it is.

“I very much enjoy being part of a community garden. It gives me a regular weekly time to devote to being outdoors, to work alongside people of lots of different ages and nationalities and teaches me a range of new skills and techniques. It is fantastic to work as part of a larger group, to see positive results in terms of seed and plant growth and harvest and to feel part of the natural cycle of life and see biodiversity at work.”

“I started out by just finding an empty and unused space in the garden outside my window and tending to it.”

Bring nature inside

- **Buy flowers or potted plants for your home.**
- **Collect natural materials,** for example leaves, flowers, feathers, tree bark or seeds - use them to decorate your living space or in art projects.
- **Arrange a comfortable space to sit,** for example by a window where you can look out over a view of trees or the sky.
- **Grow plants or flowers on windowsills.**

- **Take photos of your favourite places in nature.** Use them as backgrounds on a mobile phone or computer screen, or print and put them up on your walls.
- **Listen to natural sounds,** like recordings or apps that play birdsong, ocean waves or rainfall.

Quick tip: save glass jars and use them to make mini gardens (also known as terrariums), using plants, soil, stones and anything else you'd like to include. Some people like to add seashells, or plastic toys or figurines.

“I use photography as a creative outlet to express myself and support my health and wellbeing... It helps you to really see, to be mindful in the moment and rediscover the beauty in your own surroundings. For example, noticing and capturing the resilience of a flower growing with determination through a crack in concrete, or capturing the beauty of raindrop patterns and formulations. The process of observing the outside world breaks the cycle of being caught up with negative internal dialogue.”

Do activities outdoors

- **Take a walk in green space,** such as a local park.
- **Get creative.** Draw or paint animals or nature scenes, or let them inspire a poem or song lyrics. If you enjoy writing in a journal, try doing this outside.
- **Eat meals outdoors.** Have a picnic in a local park, or simply sit in a garden. This might be something you could enjoy doing with other people.
- **Watch the stars.** Use a stargazing website, app or book to help you recognise different stars, or simply enjoy looking at the night sky. Give your eyes time to adjust, as it can take about 20 minutes before you can fully see stars in the dark.
- **Try exercising outside.** Run or jog through a local park, or do yoga outdoors. You could try it by yourself, or look for classes in your local area.
- **Join a local walking or rambling group.** (See the [Hong Kong Hikers Group](#), [Hong Kong Free Walk](#) for more ideas.)
- **Follow a hiking trail.** (See the [LCSD website on route information](#) to look for woodland near you.)
- **Go beachcombing.** Visit the seaside and search the shoreline for interesting things.
- **Try geocaching.** Geocaching involves looking for items in hidden outdoor locations, using a device such as a mobile phone or tablet.

- **Be mindful in nature.** Find things to see, hear, taste, smell and touch, like grass under your feet or the feeling of wind and sunlight. You could also listen to recordings of mindfulness exercises. (Our pages on [mindfulness](#) and [taking a mindful moment in nature](#) have more information.)

Quick tip: if you're going out on your own for longer than you usually would, or walking somewhere you don't know well, plan ahead and remember to keep your safety in mind. If you can, let someone know where you're going and for how long, and take your phone with you (making sure it's fully charged).

“Hill walking and camping help to keep depression and anxiety at bay for my partner, as does trekking and gentle hill walking for me. When you are in nature only the real stuff matters (staying warm, staying fed, staying watered, and knowing where you are) ... your mind is free of the daily stresses and you can spend your time being in the moment instead.”

Help the environment

- Go on a litter picking walk, for example, in the park or on the beach.
- Volunteer for a conservation project. (See [WWF](#), [Hong Kong Dolphin Conservation Society](#), [Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden](#) and [The Conservancy Association](#) websites for some suggestions.)
- Plant helpful seeds, such as berry bushes for garden birds or flowers to help bumblebees.

“I started volunteering on Saturdays when I was in a really low frame of mind, and it really helped me recover more quickly. I work full-time in an office during the week so doing something so active in such a different environment is a lovely contrast.”

Connect with animals

- **Watch out for wildlife.** If you don't live near open countryside, try visiting a local park to look for fish, insects, ducks and other birds.
- **Visit a local community or city farm.** You might be able to help out by volunteering. (See the [Kadoorie Farm](#) website for more ideas.)
- **Hang a bird feeder outside a window.** If there's space, you could build a small wooden nesting box on a tree or under a windowsill.

- **Try birdwatching. You don't need any special equipment.** (See the [Hong Kong Birdwatching Society](#) website for more information on watching birds.)
- **Try pet-sitting or dog walking.** Offer to be a pet sitter in your local neighbourhood, volunteer to walk dogs for an animal shelter, or ask to borrow a friend's dog for occasional evening or weekend walks.

Considerations before getting a pet

Many people find caring for a pet brings lots of benefits, but you need to be sure your living environment and personal circumstances are right for the animal as well as you. If you don't own your home, it's also important to check if you're allowed to keep pets.

(See the [SPCA HK](#) website for more information about pet care.)

“My biggest highlight from farming was probably getting to witness goat triplets being born a couple of years ago and help them feed for the first time - there’s nothing like literally witnessing the birth of new life to give you perspective and make you feel connected with something much bigger than yourself, which I find very comforting.”

How can I overcome barriers?

Many of us with mental health problems face barriers that might stop us connecting with nature. For example, you might:

- Be unused to spending time in green space and find it uncomfortable or unfamiliar
- Get tired easily, or have difficulty doing physical activities
- Find spending time outside or around other people challenging
- Be worried about costs
- Feel low or unmotivated, or feel unsure if it's the right time for you to start something new.

Here are some tips and suggestions for you to consider:

- **Start small** - for example, try spending just five minutes paying attention to nature in your everyday life, as even small amounts of time can give your wellbeing a boost. (See our information on [improving your wellbeing](#) for more tips.)
- **Do things you find relaxing** - you might like to sit under a tree, look at the stars or do mindfulness or art activities in natural surroundings. (See our pages on [relaxation](#),

[mindfulness](#) and [ideas to try in nature](#) for more tips.)

- **Ask for support** - for example, if you feel anxious in new places or social situations, you could ask someone you trust to go with you at first. (See our pages on [anxiety problems](#) for more information and support.)
- **Work with your highs and lows** - consider which times of day you feel most energised, and when you find things harder. You might want to avoid times of day when side effects of any [medication](#) you take seem to cause more problems for you.

“As someone who’s quite socially anxious, I’ve found it much easier to chat to people and make friends when you have a practical task to do together. You also share your love of nature with fellow volunteers and farmers, so you have easy common ground and there’s never pressure to chat if you don’t feel like it. I’ve got to know some of the best people I’ve ever known whilst delousing chickens and trimming donkey feet - this kind of work is extremely bonding.”

- **Bring nature indoors** - if going outside isn’t possible or feels difficult at the moment, you could explore ways of [bringing nature indoors](#).
- **Plan ahead** - check the weather forecast and think about any equipment you might find useful, like warm or waterproof clothing, sun protection or a map.
- **Look for free swaps or giveaways** - for example, you might be able to swap spare seeds with other gardeners at a seed-swap event.
- **Explore our [useful contacts page](#)** - we’ve gathered together details of many different organisations who might help.
- **Don’t blame yourself if something you’ve tried doesn’t work for you.** Managing a mental health problem can be really difficult, especially when you’re not feeling well. There are many [other nature ideas you could try](#), and other [options for treatment and support](#) - different things work for different people. (Our pages on [seeking help for a mental health problem](#) could help you explore more options.)

Hospitals and green space

While some hospitals have gardens, these aren't always well-maintained or available to use. If you're staying in hospital, you could ask staff if there's a garden you can access.

“I volunteer with a local city farm. At first I was really nervous and my anxiety was sky high but I slowly built confidence. I made friends, I learnt new skills and I thoroughly enjoyed being active and outside.”

Attending regularly built structure in my week and became something to look forward to. Volunteering gives my life purpose and meaning, which - whilst not being well enough to work right now - is vitally important for my recovery, as well as helping build a sense of hope for the future.”

“You don’t need to have gardening skills or knowledge to get involved in garden/horticulture projects- just a willingness to get your hands dirty is all you need for a lot of activities ... I just love weeding and shovelling compost!”

About ecotherapy programmes

- [What is ecotherapy?](#)
- [What happens in ecotherapy?](#)
- [What types of ecotherapy programme are there?](#)
- [How can I get involved in a programme?](#)

What is ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy is a formal type of therapeutic treatment which involves doing outdoor activities in nature. There isn't one single definition of ecotherapy, but it's often used to describe a regular, structured activity that:

- Is led by trained professionals (sometimes therapists), who are there to support you
- Focuses on doing an activity, rather than on your health
- Takes place in a green environment
- Is related to exploring and appreciating the natural world
- Involves spending time with other people, although you can always choose to interact at your own pace.

You might do an ecotherapy programme on its own, or alongside other treatments such as [talking therapies](#), [arts and creative therapies](#) and/or [medication](#).

Different terms for ecotherapy

People sometimes use different words to describe ecotherapy, depending on whether the activity has an emphasis on exercise, horticulture (gardening) or therapy. Phrases you might

hear include:

- green exercise
- green care
- green therapy
- horticultural therapy.

These terms are often used to describe a whole range of outdoor activities, but may also refer to a [specific type of ecotherapy programme](#).

“Being at a supported gardening project has transformed my life and saved the life of my partner who had attempted suicide four times before she regained hope.”

What happens in ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy can take place in both rural and urban settings, including parks, gardens, farms and woodlands. It involves varying amounts of physical activity, depending on the type of programme. It can include activities that focus on:

- **Working in nature**, such as a conservation project, gardening or farming
- **Experiencing nature**, such as enjoying the views on a walk or cycling through woodland.

Some ecotherapy sessions follow a set structure, and incorporate types of [talking therapy](#), such as [cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#). Others can be more informal, or vary depending on the time of year and what work needs doing. People in the group may or may not have experience of mental health problems, but the main focus is usually working together on the shared activity.

“I do ecotherapy to get sunlight onto my skin and into my mind. It shines light through the dark fog of depression.”

What types of ecotherapy programme are there?

Ecotherapy programmes can involve a wide range of activities. For example:

- **Adventure therapy** - Involves doing adventurous physical activities in a group, such as rafting, rock climbing or caving.

- Animal-assisted interventions- Involves being in spaces such as farms where you come into contact with animals and spending relaxed time feeding or petting them.
- Animal-assisted therapy- Involves building a therapeutic relationship with animals, such as horses or dogs.
- Care farming- Therapeutic farming activities. Involves looking after farm animals, growing crops or helping to manage woodland.
- Conservation- Sometimes called 'Green Gyms'. Combines physical exercise with protecting and caring for natural spaces.
- Green exercise therapy- Involves doing exercise in green spaces, for example walking, running or cycling.

Find out more from:

- Walk Hong Kong
- Hong Kong Hikers Group

Nature arts and crafts

Doing art in or with nature. Can include creating art in green space, using the environment as inspiration or using natural materials such as wood, grass or clay.

Social and therapeutic horticulture

Involves gardening work such as growing food in allotments or community gardens, or inside buildings like village halls or libraries. This could lead to work experience, such as selling food at a market garden, or the opportunity to gain qualifications.

Find out more from:

- [Hong Kong Gardening Society](#)

Wilderness therapy

Involves spending time in the wild and doing activities together in a group, for example making shelters and hiking.

“I have depression, anxiety and borderline personality disorder (BPD). Doing ecotherapy has allowed me somewhere that is my safe place, a place of my own, where I can be quiet and peaceful. The act of growing

and caring for something else helps me to stop thinking about what is going on in my head.”

How can I get involved in a programme?

If you'd like to find an ecotherapy programme in your local area, you could:

- Explore our [useful contacts](#) page.
- Ask your family doctor. They might be able to refer you to a local programme. This is sometimes called 'social prescribing' or 'green prescribing'.

Some ecotherapy programmes require a referral - you may wish to discuss with your family doctor.

What if there isn't a programme near me?

If you can't find any ecotherapy programmes in your local area, you could:

- Look for nature-based groups or classes, such as walking groups or community gardens. Your local library or community noticeboard might have details.
- Look for therapeutic communities in your area and see if they include ecotherapy.

Useful contacts

Gardening, farming and conservation

Green Hong Kong Campaign

<https://www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/green/>

Hong Kong Gardening Society

<https://www.hkgardeningsociety.org/>

The Conservancy Association

<https://www.cahk.org.hk/>

Pets and wildlife

Hong Kong Bird Watching Society

<https://www.hkbws.org.hk/>

Hong Kong Dog Rescue

<https://hongkongdogrescue.com/volunteer/dogwalking/>

Hong Kong Lepidopterists' Society

<https://www.hkls.org/>

Lifelong Animal Protection Charity

<http://lap.org.hk/volunteer.aspx>

SPCA HK

<https://www.sPCA.org.hk/en/>

Places to explore

Hong Kong Wetland Park

<https://www.wetlandpark.gov.hk/en>

Agriculture, Fisheries and conservation department

https://www.afcd.gov.hk/english/country/cou_lea/the_facts.html

Walking, rambling and adventuring

Agriculture and Fisheries and Conservation Department- Hiking

<https://www.hiking.gov.hk/>

LCSD Hiking Scheme

<https://www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/healthy/hiking/index.html>

Volunteering

WWF

<https://www.wwf.org.hk/>

For more support options

Non-urgent support options, including low-cost services: www.mind.org.hk/community-directory/

Access to quick mental health information via Help Me virtual assistant:
www.mind.org.hk/help-me/

What to do in a crisis

If you are in a crisis situation where you feel that you need urgent help:

If you feel able to, you can speak to a trusted friend or family member, or a medical or mental health professional. Starting the conversation can be hard, but these people want to talk to you and help you to cope.

If you think you may act on suicidal feelings, or you have seriously harmed yourself: Phone **999** or go to your nearest **A&E department**.

Suicide 24 Hour Hotlines:

The Samaritans Befrienders: **23892222**
The Samaritans (multilingual): **28960000**
Suicide Prevention Services (Cantonese only): **23820000**

For more places to seek urgent support (including additional hotlines):
www.mind.org.hk/find-help-now/

For further information on how to seek help in Hong Kong visit:
www.mind.org.hk/getting-help/

Adapted by Mind HK January 2021

About Mind HK

Mind HK is a registered S88 charity (91/16471) committed to improving awareness and understanding of mental health in Hong Kong. We collaborate with other local and international mental health charities and provide online support and training programmes, based on global best practice, to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem and equip them with the resources they need. Through collaborative research, Mind HK is leading the way in understanding mental health problems in the city and providing its population with the right support and resources. For more on Mind HK and its mission and vision, please visit: www.mind.org.hk



www.mind.org.hk

media@mind.org.hk | hello@mind.org.hk

© 2021 Mind Mental Health Hong Kong Limited.

All rights reserved.