

The High Point Pook

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Finding Stress Relief Through the Holidays

Late fall and early winter are some of my favorite times of year but not for the reasons you might think. The weather in Tennessee can hold just warm enough to spend half a day with my fishing pole by the riverside, but just cold enough to ward off other anglers. Nature is one of my ways to recharge, and I love this time of year because I can soak in the solitude of it all without being interrupted. I always feel refreshed, calmer, more patient, and have a clearer mind after a day by the water.

It turns out there's some evidence behind why I feel the way I do when I recharge in nature. The Japanese culture figured this out centuries ago with a practice called Shinrin-Yoku, which roughly means "taking in the forest atmosphere." Today it is simply called Forest Therapy, and the actual practice is very similar to Mindfulness Meditation but with the specific added benefit of nature. Simply being in the forest for a quick 20-minute walk has been shown to decrease stress hormones (like cortisol) by around 15%. A 40-minute walk has been associated with significantly improved mood and feelings of health and robustness. Blood pressure, heart rate, inflammatory conditions like asthma and arthritis, diabetes, depression, anxiety, and memory are all improved through the weekly practice of Forest Therapy. A study showed that people who spent two hours walking in the forest increased their natural killer cells (example—cancer fighting cells) by 50% after only two days of walking.

One of the largest understandings that has come out of studying Forest Therapy and its benefits is an overall reduction of actual stress hormones which not only decreases how stressed we actually feel, but also changes how our bodies respond to this stress. When there are less stress hormones and inflammation in our body, we can function at our full potential. Have you ever noticed during really stressful times in your life, you were more likely to get sick with things like respiratory infections? This is because increased stress hormones and inflammation decrease the body's ability to fight infections. Stress hormones also do something else—you guessed it—increase stress in your body! The physical results of stress are higher blood pressure and heart rate, increased anxiety, poor sleep, and worsening of things we already have like arthritis, asthma, diabetes, etc.

Is Forest Therapy the end all be all? No. Is it a piece in the bigger picture of better health mentally, physically, and spiritually? Absolutely! The holiday season is stressful for a lot of reasons. Take some time this next month and get out into nature (I know I will). If you see me standing on the riverbank with a big smile on my face and trout in my net, you'll know I'm working on lowering my stress hormones and improving my health.

Happy holidays and enjoy the outdoors!

Dr. Josh Wienczkowski

The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness

—John Muir

Trees are poems that the earth writes upon the sky

—Kahlil Gibran

Between every two pines is a doorway into a new world

—John Muir

Believe me, for I know, you will find something far greater in the woods than in books. Stones and trees will teach you that which you cannot learn from the masters.

—Bernard of Clairvaux



Giving Really *IS* Better than Getting

Christmas is upon us again and it is a time that people have an array of emotions. We all seem to experience stress during this time for a multitude of reasons. One of the stressors comes from this idea that we need to give gifts to others. We see it all around us and hear it on the TV, on the radio, and in conversations. We all grew up hearing the old phrase, "To give is better than to receive," and especially at this time of year, we recall that saying more often.

We all get caught up in the hustle and bustle of the holidays instead of focusing on the things that are important, generosity and compassion. One of the main stressors in the idea of holiday giving is the financial aspect of it. Many of us feel pressured to spend money we don't have on gifts for people we don't really care about. Society would like us to think we are not good people if we don't buy everything for everybody. However, the true spirit of the holidays is in generosity and generosity is not just about giving material gifts. There are several ways to give and be generous during the holidays without spending money on gifts.

- Spend time with a person—this can be just as or even more meaningful than buying a gift. Have a meal together. Invite them over for coffee. Get together for a game night. Your time and your investing in them as a person is worth so much more than money. Build memories that will last lifetimes.
- Volunteer your time by running an errand for someone. Help another person with a project they can't do alone. Offer your services to a family or friend to walk a dog or feed their pet snake. Rake the leaves out of your neighbors yard. Put Christmas lights up on an outdoor bush at a neighborhood house where an elderly or ill person lives.
- Be emotionally available to the people that are important in your life. This means you are willing to spend the time to be there in mind, body, and spirit. This can be very challenging to do depending where we are in our lives and what the person we are trying to support is going through at the moment.
- Perform acts of kindness such as holding open a door for someone. Go to Walmart and smile at every stranger you see. At the grocery store, let someone cut in front of you in line. Give the harassed cashier a compliment, there's always something positive you can say. Spend time just listening to someone. Make someone laugh, it is almost impossible to be anxious or fearful when you are laughing.

Giving is good for us, emotionally, physically and spiritually because all these things are connected. It can cultivate self-worth; you will feel good about yourself. Generosity can give us purpose, decrease stress, increase happiness, decrease our chances of being overtaken by self-pity, improve resilience, increase our immune system and feed our souls. Studies show that volunteering/giving of your time even one time a week for an hour or more can prolong your life span. Generosity can have such a positive impact on your own healing and recovery, and it is part of the journey.

Before choosing to live a life of recovery, life was lived in a selfish way with a narrow focus. The focus was survival and many times maybe just meeting basic needs. While in this pre-recovery lifestyle we often hurt others, take from others, ignore the needs of others, and many other self-centered things due to only being focused on seeing our own needs. Part of the healing process is to change the thinking and behaviors we lived with before. As we change our focus and broaden our lives, we realize that being able to give back to others is important. Sometimes being able to give back especially to those that we took from previously and selfishly, will bring us the blessings of peace and healing.

One last idea to help you find a less stressful path this holiday season is to share your journey with others. Tell your story. Your story can help others to heal and progress in their recovery. It may help a person to start their journey in recovery. Your story, no matter what it is, can inspire, encourage, and help other people. So give generously this holiday season.

-Amy Crosswhite

A Bit of Holiday Fun

The staff at HPC is out to have some fun this holiday season, but we need your help. We have chosen 6 doors between the two buildings and decorated them with various holiday themes. We would like you to vote on which door is the best. As you are here, look around and study the six doors that are decorated. Be sure to come back by the reception lobby in 205 and tell Larae, Charity, or Jacob which door you are voting for so we can mark it up on our board. At the end of Dec, we'll see which door takes the prize!