

By Lisa Brady

Can a walk in the woods CURE ALL YOUR ILLS?

Well it can't hurt – and Dr Mark Rowe insists forest bathing and other nature-based immersion could be the key to living longer

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Taking steps for good health: Dr Mark Rowe

KATE Garraway swears by it, Gwyneth Paltrow also dabbles and Justin Bieber gets high on a green supply.

Before you get any other ideas, I am referring to forest bathing, the practice of immersing yourself in nature — fully dressed, no soapy water is involved — as a way to find calm and increase the wellbeing in your life.

But don't be fooled into thinking this is a woo-woo fad made good by Hollywood and social media — this is one wellness trend that actually has kudos.

Forest bathing — or to use its Japanese name, *shinrin-yoku* — might sound a little wacky but it's far from it. The idea originated in Japan in the 1980s when, following a swathe of deaths from *karoshi* (overwork), Dr Quing Li brought stressed businessmen into the woods for therapeutic walks to help improve

their health. The results were immediate — a slower pulse rate, lowered cortisol and blood pressure alongside increased feelings of vigour and vitality. Today in Japan, soaking up the sights, smells and sounds of a natural setting to promote health is seen as so important, it's become a way of life. The Japanese government has spent millions funding research and promotion of it has become so commonplace it's even covered by most health insurance policies there.

Like the best things in life, it's free and accessible to all — yes, even us non-celebrity lay people — and it really does work.

I try it in the beautiful, tranquil setting of Mount Congreve Gardens in Waterford. I'm taking part in a wellbeing masterclass courtesy of Dr Mark Rowe, a GP, author and TEDx speaker.

He has been prescribing time in nature for his patients at his busy medical practice, Waterford Health Park, which is a stunning, converted old convent that even encompasses a Healing Garden in the cloister courtyard.

'Once I understood the science — as a medical doctor, everything I do has to be rooted in science — and experienced the benefits after struggling with burnout myself, I had to share it,' says Rowe, who additionally studied lifestyle medicine at Stanford, and now incorporates it into his medical remit as much as he can, from mindfulness to meditation, gardening and even strength training.

'I have a 15kg dumbbell in my GP office and it's a conversation starter for sure,' laughs Rowe. 'Strength training is so important, or muscle mass, for longevity.'

'Movement is medicine,' he adds, citing a Smile study in Duke University that showed how exercise was just as effective as antidepressants, although Rowe adds that of course, in some cases, medication may be indeed necessary and often saves lives.

He has, he says, 'a strong desire to support people to become more active participants in their own wellbeing' and thereby changing the culture of 'a pill for every ill'.

'I went off to Harvard and I met Herbert Benson, who founded the whole idea of mind/body medicine in the 1950s at a time when it was considered completely taboo,' he says. 'I learned about the relaxation response and I started seeing that happen and bringing it into my practice.'

As a result, Rowe is a big believer in the myriad health benefits that come with the great outdoors.

‘Time in nature quietens the busyness of what I call the “merrygo-mind” with its always-on inner chatter,’ he says.

‘We have about 6,000 thoughts a day, and most of them are negative. These garden paths are a balm for the body and mind.

‘Studies have shown the association between time spent in nature and the reduced risk of 15 chronic health conditions. For every extra 1 per cent of green space within 300m of where you live, you reduce the prevalence of mental health conditions by 4 per cent,’ he continues.

In fact, there’s a scientific term given for our biological need to connect with nature. It’s called biophilia, coming from the Greek phrase meaning ‘love of life and the living world’. Unfortunately, a lot of us today are experiencing the opposite, what Rowe refers to as ‘nature deficit disorder’, which is simply a lack of getting out and about in green spaces at all.

As we start our mindful walk at Mount Congreve’s Dutch Steps — chosen by Rowe as an ideal starting point to ‘step’ into a more mindful experience — I’m starting

I SUPPORT PEOPLE TO BECOME MORE ACTIVE IN THEIR OWN WELLBEING

The little spring buds are making me feel true joy
to feel something shift already.

My phone on silent and firmly in my pocket, there’s a quietening of sorts, my endless to-do lists retreating as I make a conscious effort to actually notice what’s happening around me.

We are encouraged to use all five senses while we walk. From seeing the pink magnolia starting to bloom, the branching fractals of leaves in trees (which, incidentally, are similar in patterns to the neurons in our brains), from feeling the velvety moss underfoot, hearing all the birdsong, feeling the sunlight dappling on my skin and even tasting the rain in the spring air — it’s a sensory adventure.

Rowe’s often poetic musings alongside his medical observations and gentle encouragement make this ramble through woodland very special indeed. One particularly poignant stop is the final resting place of Ambrose Congreve, who died aged 104, which is in a temple overlooking his gardens and the River Suir below.

‘Just focus on the the constancy of change, as the river flows — from the past, through the present moment and into the future, just like your life is a cycle of continuous changes, nature’s continuously changing,’ says Rowe, before

guiding us mindfully to the next stop — viewing the river through a moon window.

Here, we are reminded about kindness and in particular how it can play a part in our health.

‘Kindness starts in the heart, acts through your mind and is seen through your eyes, the window to your soul,’ Rowe explains. ‘So this idea is of looking through a window, what do you see and how does it make you feel?’

Again Rowe has science to back up his thinking, and cites the transformative paper of US environmental psychologist Roger Ulrich, who discovered that patients who were placed beside a window which overlooked a green space in hospital had substantially quick recovery times and needed less medication than those with a view of a brick wall.

At certain times we are also instructed to close our eyes and simply breathe, focusing on the sound bath of nature. Mindful breathing — or the pause method — is something Rowe loves to arm his own patients with and will often teach it to them in a regular consultation.

‘What’s interesting is how the breathing centre in the brain is so close to the red button, the amygdala. When you’re breathing away, maybe 15 times a minute, we don’t think about it as automatic. But we can consciously slow down our breathing to four or five breaths per minute, that can be an instant circuit breaker on stress.’

Other favourite parts of the walk included spotting a bright, colourful Chinese pagoda in the centre of an old quarry, the trickling sounds of a rock waterfall and coming face-to-face with a Coast Redwood, otherwise known as a Sequoia tree, which can grow up to 300ft high.

I’d never had myself down as much of a tree hugger but I couldn’t help but feel a sense of overwhelm and awe for this majestic beauty. There’s something very beneficial and connecting about feeling just a little bit tiny in the world sometimes, as Rowe explains.

‘An awe experience is self-transcendent, meaning it shifts the attention away from ourselves, and makes us feel like we are part of something greater than ourselves,’ he says. ‘It’s the small self-effect compared to the vastness of nature around you — and there’s a comfort and generosity in that.’

When walking back towards where we first began, we are encouraged to notice different elements on this journey — and I do, as nothing stays the same.

I feel a palpable sense of gratitude too, which is humbling and welcomed, just to be alive, to sense and see all of this.

It's nothing short of amazing, to the point where I'm wondering if there was anything mind-altering in the Kombucha I sipped before we set off.

The little spring buds trying desperately to be seen among freshly-smiling daffodils are making me feel something like true joy.

That's exactly what we are looking for, says Rowe, those micromoments of positivity, and although it helps, you don't have to be meandering through a forest to get the benefits.

'Nature now is basically going out in your garden, to the local park or wherever you might be,' he says. 'If you see a lovely little plant or a flower, take a picture on your phone, so you can look back later on and remind yourself how you felt.'

'You can have a little indoor plant, and keep a screensaver on your phone or your computer with a view of nature — this has all been shown to lower stress.'

'There's so many ways we can continue more into the natural world and so we don't even need to go in for fancy forest therapy. Everybody, every day can stop and smell the roses a little bit more.'

When it comes to gardening, Rowe says it can be a life enhancer — and prolonger.

'It's that proverb — if you want to be happy all your life, plant a garden,' he says. 'I mean, the evidence is there.'

'There's bugs in the soil called mycobacterium that have been shown to boost serotonin, which is one of the chemicals involved with confidence and feeling better in yourself.'

'Gardening is a brilliant mindful hobby and a form of exercise as well. It's not coincidental that a lot of people that have a very keen interest in gardening, live long, healthy lives — that's been one of my little observations in my practice, anyway.'

Ireland currently faces many challenges — loneliness and obesity being hugely detrimental to our health, or social media in particular for youths and children, alongside our reliance on ultra-processed food. However, Dr Rowe says the figures are good when it comes to life expectancy and that 80 is the new 50.

'In the early 1970s in Ireland, the average life expectancy was early 70s. Now it's 82, and there's lots of factors there, such as stopping smoking and medical advances but a lot of it is education and a more holistic approach to health.'

There's definitely a movement in this country to people being more proactive towards their health.'

As a doctor, Rowe is adverse to 'toxic positivity' and says it's important that young people especially understand that life is always going to throw you curveballs and bad days.

'It's about having a toolkit to help you,' he says. 'There's no point pretending everything is great or perfect, but we have some very powerful antidotes at our fingertips to help, if we just seek them out.'

EVERYBODY, EVERY DAY CAN STOP AND SMELL THE ROSES A LITTLE MORE

■ DR MARK'S next Wellbeing Masterclass at Mount Congreve, with talks and lunch, will take place on May 25. Tickets at mountcongreve.com

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