



Mindfulness in Nature Challenge

Over the course of ten days, you are challenged to spend more and more time in nature, to develop observational skills, and gain a better understanding of mindfulness practices in nature. **It is advised to take along a journal and writing instrument** (pen, pencil, colored pencils, etc.) as some activities ask for you to record your experiences. Nature journaling is an excellent way to chronicle your experiences in nature and can include written accounts, poetry, drawings, lists, and any other notations that are relevant to your experiences in nature.

During this challenge, you will be spending five to ten minutes outdoors exploring short mindfulness exercises to help deepen your experiences in nature. Remember that the goal of mindfulness is to be present in the moment, but also to be non-judgmental about thoughts or feelings that surface while you are engaging in these activities. This is a learning process, and it will take time to develop the skills to be at ease in the moment.

Day 1

- Spend five or more minutes outside in a natural area. It can be your backyard, city or state park, or a more remote area (national park, wildlife refuge, recreation area).
- During this time, take several deep breaths and focus on being present in the moment (avoid thinking about to-do-lists, schedules, or relationship issues and disengage from any technology).
 - For some, it is easier to focus on the present moment by listening to their breath and consciously slowing their breathing by taking deeper breaths (deep inhales and slow exhales).
 - Others find it easier to interact with natural objects (touching rocks, smelling flowers, listening to birds, or feeling the sun on their face).
 - Still, others find focusing on a single natural object (a leaf, a rock, a pool of water, or similar items) allows them to connect deeper to nature.
 - You can try all these methods and see if you have a preference.
- Describe your experience by answering the following questions in your journal.
 - How did it feel to focus on the present moment? Were you able to observe your surroundings or did your mind wander to other places/tasks/interests?
 - Did you try more than one way to be mindful? If so, did you find one method more beneficial for focusing than the others?
 - What aspects of nature were most appealing/interesting? Why?
 - What was the most difficult part of the experience? Why?

Day 2

- Spend five or more minutes outside in a natural area. It can be your backyard, city or state park, or a more remote area (national park, wildlife refuge, recreation area).
- During this time, take several deep breaths and then find a natural object that you can easily pick up (small rock, fallen leaf, acorn, shell, etc.) or walk around (tree, bush, mushroom, etc.). If the object is a living thing (plant, animal, fungi), take care in examining it.
- While examining the nature object, answer the following questions in your journal.
 - What is it? How were you able to identify it? What characteristic makes it distinct and aids in identifying it?
 - What does it look like? Describe it using different adjectives including visual representations (color, texture, size, shape, etc.) as well as traits you ascertain from your other senses (what it feels like, smells like, sounds like).
 - Where is it located in the environment? If you wanted to find another one, where would you look?
 - How does it fit into the natural environment? What roles might it play in the ecosystem?
 - Why were you drawn to it? What about this object is interesting/fascinating?

Day 3

- Spend five or more minutes outside in a natural area. It can be your backyard, city or state park, or a more remote area (national park, wildlife refuge, recreation area).
- During this time, take several deep breaths and then close your eyes (if it is safe to do so) and listen to your surroundings.
 - What do you hear? What can you identify in the environment through listening?
 - Which sounds are easy to identify? Which are more difficult to identify?
 - What is your favorite sound? Why?
- Now, think about how the environment is interacting with your skin, your body, and your other senses.
 - What do you feel? How does the temperature, wind, or humidity influence your experience? Are these feelings pleasant, neutral, or uncomfortable?
 - What do you smell? Are there any odors or fragrances in the air? What do these smells do to your experience of the natural area?
 - What other interactions are you experiencing as you sit in nature?
- Write your observations in your journal. You can answer the questions or just write about your experiences. Remember that only you will see your journal entries, so don't worry about spelling, grammar or other writing conventions.

Day 4

- Spend ten or more minutes outside in a natural area. It can be your backyard, city or state park, or a more remote area. For today's activity, you will need a blanket or chair if the location does not have outdoor seating.
- During this time, take several deep breaths and explore the area taking in the sights and sounds of nature. Start by walking around the area and then, when you find a good location, sit, and take a few minutes to relax in nature.
- As you are relaxing, think about the different aspects of nature that you are grateful for or that are helping you relax or be at peace.
- Now, write down five or more of the things about your experience that you are grateful for or that are helping you find relaxation/contentment.
 - You can start each statement with "I am grateful for . . ." or write a paragraph explaining what aspects of the environment are most beneficial. To fully appreciate and understand your gratitude, it is important to include why you are grateful for each thing you are experiencing.
 - Use "I am grateful for ____ because . . ." or similar format to ensure that the why is included.
 - Many people find it beneficial to write a gratitude journal each day to help maintain focus on the positive aspects of our lives and on what they already have (especially in cultures that often focus on commercialism and over-consumption).
 - To add a challenge when writing a gratitude journal, make each new entry unique from the day before (new things to be grateful for that day).
 - Some find writing each day challenging, so a weekly practice with gratitude journaling can be integrated into other mindfulness practices.

Day 5

- Spend ten or more minutes outside in a natural area. It can be your backyard, city or state park, or a more remote area.
- During this time, take several deep breaths and then find a natural object that you can easily pick up (small rock, fallen leaf, acorn, shell, etc.) or walk around (tree, bush, mushroom, etc.).
 - If it is easier, you could take a picture of the natural object with your phone and use the image during the rest of the activity.
- Now, write down as many descriptive details (adjectives) about the natural object.
- Next, draw the object in your journal and add a few sentences describing it.
 - If drawing is not something you are "good at" remember that this is only a piece of paper and no one else needs to see it. It is in no way a reflection of your self-worth or value. It is just a piece of paper with markings on it.

- If you are so inspired, you can add colors to the drawing with colored pencils, markers, or other art mediums (just make sure the color doesn't bleed through to the next page in your journal).
- Finally, write a few questions that you have about the natural object in the margins of your journal.

Day 6

- Spend ten or more minutes outside in a natural area. It can be your backyard, city or state park, or a more remote area.
- During this time, take several deep breaths and think about an aspect of nature that you are grateful for and would like to thank for its impact on your life.
- Once you have an idea for a natural object or occurrence that you would like to express gratitude for, open your journal and begin writing a letter.
 - Your letter can be realistic, emotional, thoughtful, or silly, as long as it is heart-felt and genuine.
 - Start the letter with a salutation: Dear Blue Sky or Hello Park Squirrels. Then write and explain all the ways this aspect of nature benefits you and express your thanks. Finally, end the letter with a closing salutation (Best wishes, gratefully yours, etc.).
 - The main point of the letter is to express gratitude. You don't need to worry about punctuation, grammar, or similar writing conventions.
 - Most thank you notes are short (less than 300 words), so don't over think it.

Day 7

- Spend ten or more minutes outside in a natural area. It can be your backyard, city or state park, or a more remote area.
- During this time, take several deep breaths and then find a natural object that you can easily pick up (small rock, fallen leaf, acorn, shell, etc.) or walk around (tree, bush, mushroom, etc.).
 - If it is easier, you could take a picture of the natural object with your phone and use the image during the rest of the activity.
- Now, write down as many descriptive details and verbs (actions) associated with this item. Using these adjectives and verbs, write a Haiku about the object or an adventure with the object using the following format:
 - The first sentence is five syllables.
 - The second sentence is seven syllables.
 - The last sentence is five syllables.
 - A syllable is a distinct unit of pronunciation containing a vowel sound and possibly surrounding consonants of a word. For example, water has two syllables: wa – ter. If you have difficulty hearing syllables, there are syllable counters online including the following website: https://www.howmanysyllables.com/syllable_counter/

- Example Haiku: Skipping Stone
 - Smooth, flat, skipping stone,
 - Relaxed pitch, released quickly,
 - Sails across water.

Day 8

- Spend ten or more minutes outside in a natural area. It can be your backyard, city or state park, or a more remote area.
- During this time, take several deep breaths and then begin to gently stretch. If you have experience with yoga, tai chi, or other forms of stretching, use these practices. If you are new to stretching, follow the practice outlined below.
- Basic Stretch for Beginners
 1. Begin by standing with your legs hips-distance apart and with your feet, knees, and hips facing forward. Ensure that your feet are pushing equally into the ground to maintain your balance and that your knees are bent slightly (not locked).
 2. Slowly lift your arms from your sides and reach up to the sky. Return your arms slowly back to your sides.
 3. Repeat steps 2 three or four times.
 - During these movements try to pair your breath to the movements. Breath in while moving your arms above your head, exhale when you return them to your side.
 4. Next, lift your arms above your head once more, but this time slowly bend forward at the waist allowing your arms to lead the way until your hands are touching the ground (or as close to the ground as you are able). Stay in this forward fold for 10 seconds before slowly rising to a standing position.
 - Often people rush through these stretches. The activity has more impact if you slow your movements and focus on slowing your breathing and pairing your movements to your breath.
 5. Repeat step 4 three or four times.
 - Align your breathing so that the inhale occurs as you raise your hands above your head and exhale as you fold forward toward the ground. Take a breath in and out while in the fold and then inhale as you return to the standing position, and exhale once in the standing position.
 6. By pairing your breathing with your movements, you are more likely to be mindful during this practice. You can repeat steps 2-5 as many times as you would like or add additional stretches that you are comfortable with after this short warm up.
 7. As with any exercise, if you feel pain, discomfort, or anxiety, stop the activity and allow your breathing to return to normal.

Day 9

- Spend fifteen or more minutes outside in a natural area. It can be your backyard, city or state park, or a more remote area.
- After taking several deep breaths, find a place where you can sit for five to ten minutes without being interrupted and where you feel safe and comfortable.
- Once in a seated position, take several deep breaths and allow your body to relax.
 - Your hands can be in your lap or on your knees, your legs can be crossed or straight (or flat on the ground if you are in a chair), and your eyes can be open or closed.
 - Ensure that your back is straight, and your posture allows for your lungs and chest to expand with each deep breath.
- Continue to take deep breaths and shift your focus to the sights (if your eyes are open), sounds, smells, and other aspects of nature that surround you.
 - Become aware of where you are and how your body is interacting with nature. Think about the present moment without judgement or preconceptions. Let go of any thoughts about the past or the future. Acknowledge that you are right where you need to be.
- Continue taking deep breaths and when you are ready shift your focus internally. Use your breathing to relax and become in-tune with your body.
 - Focus on the feeling of air entering your nose, then your lungs, of your chest expanding during the inhale. On the exhale, let go of any tension, anxiety, or stress. Feel how your body softens with the release of air.
 - Allow the breath to continue relaxing you. Feel calmer and more peaceful with each breath.
- After five or more minutes of breathing and relaxing, slowly become more aware of your surroundings and when you are ready, open your eyes and return to your daily activities with a sense of calm and peace.
- Congratulations! You have just completed a nature-based sitting meditation.

Day 10

- Spend fifteen or more minutes outside in a natural area. It can be your backyard, city or state park, or a more remote area.
- After taking several deep breaths, walk around the space for five minutes and then find a place there you can stand comfortably for a few minutes and not be interrupted. The goal of this exercise is to deepen your connection with the earth and ground yourself.
 - If you are open to the idea and it is safe to do so, you can take off your shoes and socks and stand barefoot in the grass or dirt.
- To start the grounding meditation, close your eyes (if it is safe to do so) or soften your gaze and focus your attention on the feel of the earth beneath you. Feel how your

toes and heels press into the ground. Feel the support of the earth holding you up as you push your feet into the ground.

- Breathe deeply and feel the connection between your feet and the earth.
 - Use visualization to image energy flowing from the earth into your feet and back into the earth.
 - As you continue taking deep breaths, feel the earth's energy flow up your legs on the inhale, energizing them, and then feel the energy ebb back into the earth on your exhale. With each inhale the earth's energy moves further up your body, energizing it, and then releases back into the earth with your exhale.
 - When your inhale brings the earth's energy to the crown of your head allow the energy to radiate outward filling the space around you with earth energy. On the exhale, release any remaining earth energy back into the earth.
- Take a few final deep breaths and if you are moved to do so, thank the earth for energizing and grounding you. During this time, begin to reconnect with your environment, slowly open your eyes, wiggling your fingers and toes, slowly stretch your arms above your head before returning to your day filled with energy and peace.

Challenge Reflection

Reflecting on our experiences is a profound way to build a deeper understanding of what we have done and learned over time. Think about your experiences during the challenge and answer following questions:

- What have you learned during your time being mindful in nature?
- Which activity did you find most beneficial? Why?
- Was any activity problematic or difficult to complete? Why?
- What have you experienced that you did not expect or that was wonderful?
- Over the last 10 days, how has your relationship with nature changed?

Thank you for completing the Mindfulness Challenge. I hope you enjoyed engaging with nature in new ways and that you will continue to use these mindfulness practices to connect with the natural world.