

Be well in Nature's Bounty

By Jodie Canfield, Retired Smokey Bear District Ranger

The pillars of physical and mental health that are important for us to live a long, healthy, happy life include a nutritious diet, good sleep, exercise, and connections to people we enjoy and love.

But here is a thought. Most of us spend most of our time indoors eating, sleeping, at the gym, and in the office. And many of us are continuously engaged on electronic devices. Does this lifestyle lead to wellness? I think not and the evidence supports my opinion in this regard.

After I retired (from a job where I served the computer), I spent most of my time hiking, skiing, fishing, gardening and just sitting on my deck watching the sun set over the mountains. And I started feeling healthier and happier. Why?

Our bodies have many circadian rhythms that are in synchrony with the rhythms of nature. As an example, the sun comes up and we wake up. We sleep at dark. We need direct sunlight to keep these rhythms operating smoothly. And we need real darkness for sleep. We thrive in the outdoors and I guess that is why so many people enjoy camping and backpacking, where everyday activities like eating and sleeping are done in a natural environment.

So I quit feeling guilty about my new lifestyle (mostly) and started looking more specifically at what makes us feel our best. We have "happiness chemicals" that are produced in the brain. These include Dopamine (reward), Oxytocin (love), Serotonin (mood), and Endorphin (pain killer). While each of these chemicals are released by engaging in activities such as doing yoga, hugging, playing with a dog or children, laughing, foods, etc. Electronics are not on any list. Sunshine and nature help facilitate the release of all of these chemicals. Good chemicals equals happy life equals healthy life? Almost. Add some movement and you have an equation that balances.



We live in an area with so many ways to interact with nature and be active outside. Within an hour drive, you can access hundreds of acres of public lands with hundreds of miles of trails for hiking, biking, and horse riding. We have a ski area, many golf courses, skating, and a river that runs through town. If you don't like the weather here on the mountain, you can go to the foothills near Fort Stanton, or to the desert near Tularosa. There is literally a mountain of opportunity.

So, you ask, "what are the benefits of fresh air, and natural environments?" A few years ago, I wrote about walking slowly in nature using all of our senses, which began in Japan. Back in the early 1990s the Japanese coined the term Shinrin-yoku — which translates roughly as forest bathing.

Researchers found that activity done within a forest environment led to more significant reductions in blood pressure and certain stress hormones.

Another benefit of walking in nature is the increased circulation of blood to the brain in a paced way (as opposed to sensory overload on a busy city street). In turn, this rejuvenates our mental resources that man made environments deplete. Not only that, but there is a deep intuitive connection between walking, thinking, and writing. Thoreau and Wordsworth come to mind. Thoreau wrote that when his legs moved, the thoughts flowed.

So get outside as often as you can and move your body in ways that increase your heart rate and hack the happiness chemicals. Go where the weather suits your clothes. Think big thoughts. Maybe write them down. Be happy.



Finding **Help**, Finding **Hope** for Problem Gambling

Free and confidential help is available for people struggling with a gambling problem, as well as the partner or family members who are affected. The Responsible Gaming Association of New Mexico offers a free **24/7 helpline** to connect with a trained treatment provider.

We also offer a **confidential chat** on our website, www.RGANM.org. From 8am to 7pm daily, you can chat with a counselor and receive information and referrals. Our website offers videos, information and resources to help.

Thanks for reaching out.
How can I help you?



888-696-2440 | RGANM.ORG

Confidential assistance when you're gambling too much