



By RENÉE TRUDEAU

Nature, the Ultimate Antidepressant: Seven Ideas for Getting Outdoors

One of our family's favorite spots is Big Bend National Park in West Texas, home to the second darkest night skies in the US. We go there for magical starry nights where

the Milky Way can easily be seen without a telescope, and for the sparsely populated terrain and vast wilderness. For years we made this annual pilgrimage and would unplug and hike, stargaze, sleep and read; this journey brought us back to ourselves and to one another.

Nature opens us up to the present moment. It allows us to access wisdom and insights we could never have in our 24/7 modern life. I never cease to be amazed by the ideas and clarity that bubble up after a weekend at the ocean or a day in the cool, dark forest.

Time in nature is often referred to as the ultimate antidepressant. Being outdoors alleviates stress, positively affects our mood and overall mental health, helps us to "reset," promotes cognitive functioning, fosters problem solving and creativity, supports work/life balance, stimulates social interaction and boosts connection and intimacy. Spending time in nature should be as natural and regular as breathing. Not saved for special occasions but part of a daily flow.

If it's been a while since you've spent time outdoors, or perhaps you are new to the area and feel out of your element in bear country, consider the following ideas:

- **Team up.** Ask nature-loving friends for advice on favorite local spots and join them on their next excursion to discover nearby hidden gems. Set up a weekly or monthly "nature date" or hike with family or friends and take turns suggesting new natural areas to explore.
- **Stay close to home.** Re-acquaint yourself with your own backyard, neighborhood park, streams/trails and natural areas within walking distance. Seek out magical

spaces: secret gardens, labyrinths, a school playground or even a bench under an old tree.

- **Plan a picnic.** Pack some sandwiches, grab a blanket and head to the closest forest, river or arboretum; everyone loves the spontaneity of picnics!
- **Tune in to nature's rhythms.** Consider marking the full moon, new moon or summer solstice with an evening hike, canoeing trip or swim. These rituals can be fun, meaningful ways to connect to nature's rhythms.
- **Create new habits.** Make time outside habitual. Take a short hike before dinner to help unwind and release



Photo by Kevin Young

stress, have your morning coffee on the back porch with the birds or make it a point to visit a favorite tree during your lunch hour. After-dinner walks are relaxing and great preparation for good sleep.

- **Tap outdoor groups for ideas.** Contact your national and local park offices to learn about upcoming outdoor

programs. Visit the website for the Children and Nature Network to learn about family events. Locally, there's FIND Outdoors and Conserving Carolina.

- **Be adventurous.** Experience nature's wild side and do something different. Explore kayaking, stand-up paddle boarding, zip-lining, rock climbing or horseback riding. Consider swapping homes to explore a new terrain.

Merely walking outside at night and viewing the stars in all their vastness can be inspiring and remind us of how small and inconsequential our worries often are. Life is a mystery to be lived, not a thing to be managed.

The healing power of nature recalibrates us and helps put things in perspective. In our galaxy, the sun is one of a hundred billion stars. What's more important: finishing your laundry or viewing a rare full-moon eclipse?

Based in Brevard, Renée Peterson Trudeau leads Wild Souls Authentic Movement classes, women's circles/retreats. Join her April 26-28 for Awakening Your Wild Soul at Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health. View all events at ReneeTrudeau.com.