

Tech-free time spent in nature can reboot our brain

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of autumn.” — John Muir

Have you ever rushed out the door of your home or workplace and arrived at your destination only to discover that you left your smartphone behind? You can just picture it resting in the charging stand by the doorway or under a pile of papers on your desk. For some of us, maybe for many of us, a sinking sense of panic rushes in at that moment. We are so tied to our devices that we often feel at a loss without them. Our phones keep us informed and connected, but they also require a directed type of focus that keeps our minds in a constant state of attentiveness, which is fatiguing.

One way to remedy this is to take a deliberate timeout from technology and spend time outdoors.

I was at the home of a friend when their little one arrived home from kindergarten. Barreling into the house with a big smile on his face, he shook off his backpack and gave his younger sister a bear hug. Together they dove into a bin of toys and tore outside on a sunny autumn day to play in their backyard under golden-hued trees. Delightful giggles filled the air. These two siblings did not care about the lat-

est newsfeed nor did the five-year-old brother feel a need to scroll through pictures of everything he did at school that day. Their attention was in the moment. They were free from the tug of technology. They were present, and they were at ease.

By simply taking a page from a kid’s playbook and taking a timeout from technology and immersing ourselves in the outdoors, we too can give our brains a natural rest.

Instead of staring at a screen, if we power down our devices when we are in the natural world, we start to notice things that capture our attention in gentle ways. This type of attention is referred to as “soft fascination.” According to studies, soft fascination allows our minds to wander naturally, which is restorative. Directed attention, the type of attention we use for critical thinking, strategic planning and problem solving, fatigues our brains.

Since nature is filled with things that attract our attention through soft fascination, scientists say we can restore our brains, reduce stress and increase creativity and productivity by spending more time in it. The catch is, we must power down our devices and turn off the distraction of technology.

To explore this process, why not try

intentionally unplugging? The next time a thunder and lightning storm rolls through the valley, we can unplug our electronics. As the rain pours down and brilliant flashes illuminate the dark sky while the ground shakes from the powerful roll of thunder, we can take a brief timeout and allow soft fascination to restore us by listening to the lull of raindrops and enjoying the spectacular light display out our windows. In moments like these, we reset our brains.

Studies show that spending multiple days in nature away from technology boosts the restorative effects even more. Known as the “three-day effect,” which has been researched in depth by David Strayer, a neuroscientist from the University of Utah, spending three days in the natural world disconnected from electronic devices allows the cognitive control networks in our brain to reset. His research shows that after a day or two, we start to relax, and we begin to enjoy the visual beauty in nature.

When the attention network is freed up, other parts of our minds become more active. Viewing things like white clouds parading slowly across a blue sky and sunlight glistening on the ripples of an alpine lake provides the cognitive restoration that benefits our well-being because these natural scenes do not re-

quire our direct attention.

Recently, I experienced this reboot while on an extended camping trip along the spine of the Rocky Mountains without knowing there was scientific proof that something had actually shifted in my brain. On the first day, deep in the forest and far away from technology, my mind seemed to be elsewhere, swirling with all the things I should be doing and accomplishing, and I felt uneasy in the quiet.

With each passing day though, my uneasiness dissolved, and I felt more in sync with the natural environment. Eventually my mind stilled. Surrounded by towering peaks and aquamarine lakes, I was soothed by the steady music of clear water cascading over granite tiers. My mind was vibrant. Creative inspiration flowed readily, and those loud to-do lists faded to a whisper. The remote location and multiple days spent outdoors proved to be naturally restorative, hence the three-day effect.

By turning off our devices and heading out into the mountains as John Muir encourages, we too can allow nature’s peace to flow into us.



Nature Rx

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