



Reforesting the Mind

A Short Guide to Integrating Forest Walks into Your Work Life

Work-related stress has become a significant challenge in Swiss workplaces, with rising levels of emotional exhaustion and absenteeism due to negative psychological effects. Even if performance demands intensify, employees increasingly need effective ways to restore mental clarity and emotional balance.

Nature offers a powerful antidote. Research demonstrates that exposure to nature, particularly forest environments, offers powerful restorative benefits for both mind and body. The practice of forest mindful walking combines these benefits with intentional awareness, creating a practical tool for mental restoration during working days.

While traditional forest bathing sessions typically last from two to four hours, short and regular exposure to nature can also help with stress reduction. Our project *Reforesting the Mind* adopts these principles for working professionals, offering a structured yet flexible Forest Mindful Walking approach that fits within demanding working schedules.

We believe the workplace, where we spend most of our days, should be a source of well-being, not just a space for performance.

1 Understanding Mindful Forest Walking and its benefits

MINDFULNESS is the practice of being **fully present** with a welcoming attitude. It involves paying close attention to what is happening within oneself (thoughts, sensations, etc.) and in the surrounding environment, without judgment. This state of receptive awareness, or "watchfulness," forms the foundation of mindfulness. It is a concept with deep roots in Buddhism that has been widely adopted in psychology for its benefits to mental and emotional well-being.

NATURE'S RESTORATIVE CAPACITY natural environments engage our attention differently than urban settings, through what's termed "soft fascination." This phenomenon allows our attention capacity to **recover** from fatigue. Additionally, exposure to nature triggers physiological changes that reduce stress responses, like lowered cortisol levels and lower blood pressure.

FOREST BATHING or *shinrin-yoku* is a traditional meditative practice originating in Japan characterized by walking in a forest at a regular non-tiring pace. It includes taking some stopovers along the way to rest, do breathing exercises and contemplating the surroundings. Traditional sessions typically last 2-4 hours under the guidance of trained practitioners. Current research indicates that it can be beneficial to boost the immune system, to improve cardiovascular, respiratory health, mood and anxiety levels.

Recognizing that most professionals cannot dedicate hours to these mindfulness practices in nature, we've developed an adapted approach. By focusing on shorter, accessible sessions, this practice becomes feasible during a lunch break or short pause in the workday.

2 How to Implement it into the Work Routine

Preparation

Find a suitable forest nearby: within 5 to 10 min walking distance or just a short ride by bicycle or public transport. In the lack of a forest, other natural environments such as urban parks with trees are a good alternative.

Setting a fixed date and time each week helps transform this intention into a habit. One or two sessions per week can already be very beneficial and feasible in the long term. The lunch hour is often practical for a 30-to-45-minute forest walk, either before or after lunch. Our study participants reported this time slot as the most accessible in their workdays. A morning break or afternoon break can work equally well for those with different schedules. Even during particularly hectic periods, when restorative practices are needed most, a brief 15-minute visit to the forest for simple awareness exercises can offer a restorative effect.

Try it alone or with a group of colleagues: some people find that mutual commitment strengthens discipline and creates a sense of sharing. Others prefer the solitude and personal flexibility of walking alone. Both approaches are equally valid.

Keep your phone switched off or in airplane mode. It allows you to come into the here and now.

If you are joining a guided walk, you can relax completely as the guide assumes responsibility for setting the pace, choosing the path, and ensuring that the session is finished on time. For self-guided walks, consider setting two gentle timers: one to mark when you should begin walking back to the starting point, and another one for the finishing time. This way you can enjoy the freedom to wander around without worrying about time.

The walk

Intentional slow pace: Walking at a gentle, unhurried rhythm – “nothing but wandering along” is the foundation of this practice. This deliberate slowing counters our habitual rush and allows deeper connection with the environment. Walking at such a gentle pace can be challenging at the beginning and even generate some anxiety, as some of the participants of our study reported. If you're walking without a guide, begin at the slowest comfortable pace, knowing that with practice, your ability to settle into this slow rhythm will naturally improve. There is no target destination - the objective is simply to relax and enjoy being in nature.

During the walk, you will probably notice that distracting thoughts arise, and this is natural. There's no need to fight them; they are like passing clouds. Guide your attention back to physical reality with the mindfulness tool that suits you the best.

Mindfulness tools

Breathing: Your Natural Anchor

Conscious breathing serves as a powerful bridge between body and environment. Switching your attention to the tactile sensation of air moving through your nostrils, the rhythmic rise and fall of your abdomen, the slight pause between breaths—these are powerful anchors to the present moment.

Breathing exercises can also be done at the very beginning of your session to calm the nervous system. The forest air, rich with beneficial terpenes, makes this practice particularly revitalizing.

Sensory Engagement

Activating all five senses to fully experience the forest environment calms your body and mind. Notice colors, shapes and textures of the soil, leaves, trees and light patterns through the canopy. What do you hear? Which sounds are close or far away? Notice the smell of the forest. Feel how your feet touch the ground with each step, feel the breeze on your skin or the warmth of the sun.

Mental awareness

Periodically check in with your mental and emotional state. Is your mind calm or busy? Clear or cloudy? Where does your attention naturally settle? Without judgement, simply observe.

*Let imagination free to design the best forest walk for you.
The most meaningful practices often emerge when we allow ourselves
to adapt them to our authentic needs and wishes.*

It might also be interesting to...

- ✓ Enjoy the opportunity to sit and just be with nature for a while
- ✓ Practice meditation
- ✓ Stretch
- ✓ Try out touching nature elements, hugging a tree can be surprisingly nurturing
- ✓ Bring your picnic with you

3 Step-by-step of a Mindful Forest Walk

Here is an example of a self-guided 30-minute Forest Mindful Walk with suggested activities and their duration at different moments of the walking session. In italic, concrete examples as proposed to the participants of our study during the mindful walks in the forest behind Campus of BFH-HAFL in Zollikofen.

ARRIVAL AT STARTING POINT – 3 MIN

Breathing and/or stretching exercise.

Begin by taking three deep, long breaths. Inhale deeply through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth.

MINDFUL WALK INTO THE FOREST – 10 MIN

Walk slowly and silently through the forest.

MINDFULNESS EXERCISE IN A FIXED SPOT – 5 MIN

Choose a nice spot in the forest and stop walking for a while. Find your own comfortable space. You can either stand or sit, whatever feels best for you. Take a moment to settle into the environment, letting yourself connect with the forest around you.

Newborn's eyes exercise: engage with the forest as if it's the very first time in your life that you see a forest. Look and experience your surroundings with fresh eyes, noticing the details with curiosity and wonder. Everything is new here!

MINDFUL WALK – 10 MIN

Walk slowly and silently through the forest until the starting point.

CLOSING THE SESSION – 2 MIN

When arriving at the starting or final point of your walk, take time to settle down again, be in the present moment and enjoy the forest surroundings and its effects on your mind and body for another moment.

Close your eyes, breathe deeply letting the air and the energy of the forest invade your body. Take the forest with you for the rest of the day.

4 Deepening your practice

The most effective approach is to **try it out** and discover what format, schedule, and practices work best for you. Below are some helpful sources to deepen your understanding and provide practical tools for getting started.

Forest bathing and Mindful walking initiatives

There are several courses and workshops in Forest bathing in Switzerland, it's worth it to have a look on the internet.

Our project page: <https://www.bfh.ch/en/research/research-projects/2024-932-108-818/>

Book: Shinrin-yoku: The Japanese way of forest bathing for health and relaxation. Miyazaki, Y. (2018)

Book: In praise of walking: A new scientific exploration. O'Mara, S. (2019).

Föhn, M. (2022). Waldbaden und Waldtherapie als innovative Ansätze mit gesundheitsförderndem Potenzial. Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Forstwesen, 173(1), 4–9.
<https://doi.org/10.3188/szf.2022.0004>

References for this document

Galliker, S., Igic, I., Elferin, A., Semmer, N., Brunner, B., Thommen, C. (2022). Job-Stress-Index 2022. Monitoring von Kennzahlen zum Stress bei Erwerbstätigen in der Schweiz. Arbeitspapier 72. Bern und Lausanne: Gesundheitsförderung Schweiz.

Swica, WorkMed (2022) Krankschreibungen aus psychischen Gründen in der Schweiz: Hintergründe, Verläufe und Verfahren, Eine Analyse von Versichertendossiers der SWICA Krankentaggeldversicherung. Binningen, Köln, Winterthur, Wädenswil, 23.03.2022.

Menardo, E., Di Marco, D., Ramos, S., Brondino, M., Arenas, A., Costa, P., Vaz De Carvalho, C., & Pasini, M. (2022). Nature and Mindfulness to Cope with Work-Related Stress : A Narrative Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(10), 5948. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19105948>

Antonelli, M., Barbieri, G., & Donelli, D. (2019). Effects of forest bathing (shinrin-yoku) on levels of cortisol as a stress biomarker : A systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Biometeorology*, 63(8), 1117-1134.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00484-019-01717-x>

Miyazaki, Y. (2018). *Shinrin-yoku : The Japanese way of forest bathing for health and relaxation*. Aster.

Hansen, M. M., Jones, R., & Tocchini, K. (2017). Shinrin-Yoku (Forest Bathing) and Nature Therapy : A State-of-the-Art Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 14(8), 851.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14080851>

This document was produced as an output of the project ***Reforesting the Mind: Evaluating the impact of mindful forest walking at workplace*** within the framework of the BFH Transversal Junior Scholars Program (JSP). The project was carried out by Patrícia Granado Sanzovo (BFH-AHB) and Dandan Pang (BFH-W) in collaboration with Jerylee Wilkes-Allemann (BFH-HAFL).

Biel, November 2025