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# Green Exercise

## Discover the Powerful Combination of Nature and Activity

Sure, you experience health benefits when you exercise in a gym, but when you exercise surrounded by nature, you end up happier, less fatigued and angry, and more tranquil and relaxed. It's time to go outdoors!

# W

By Sandi Schwartz

hen you hear the term “green exercise,” what do you imagine? You might picture intense, outdoorsy activities, like hiking or climbing mountains. But green exercise can really involve any activity in which you interact with nature while moving your body and breaking a sweat.

No matter where you do it, green exercise is beneficial, as it reduces stress, boosts your mood, and leaves you feeling calmer and happier.

### What Is Green Exercise?

Green exercise is a term used to describe our interaction with nature while engaging in a physical fitness activity. It was coined by Jules Pretty, PhD, and Jo Barton, PhD, at

the University of Essex in the United Kingdom. Their focus on this topic spurred a great deal of research into how the combination of nature and exercise can benefit emotional well-being.

Over the years, Barton and Pretty have published dozens of studies on the benefits of green exercise. They have shown that exercising in green spaces—whether in a city or in the wilderness—has a positive effect on mood. They also discovered that the effect of exercising near a body of water has an even greater impact on improving mood. Additional researchers from a wide background (including physiology, health and well-being, environmental sustainability, community engagement, and behavior change) continue to study the link between nature, exercise, and mental health. This groundbreaking work can help all of us find ways to feel happier and calmer by doing something as simple as going for a walk outside.

### How Green Exercise Lowers Stress and Anxiety

Experts have found a clear link between exercise and stress reduction, and

between nature and stress reduction. So when you combine exercise and nature, you get a double dose of wellness! In fact, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, consistent exercise can be as effective as medication for some people to reduce symptoms of anxiety. Other research shows that physically active people have lower rates of anxiety than those who do not exercise.

Here are several ways green exercise helps reduce stress and anxiety:

#### It produces endorphins.

When we exercise, our body releases feel-good neurotransmitters called endorphins. These chemicals in our brain act as natural painkillers, making us feel better and less stressed. Endorphins are responsible for the natural high we get from a hard workout.





**🌿 It reduces stress hormones.**

Exercising in nature helps you feel calmer because it reduces your body's level of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol.

**🌿 It reduces fatigue.**

Exercise improves your blood flow and your body's ability to use oxygen efficiently. These changes reduce fatigue and improve alertness. This is especially helpful when you feel stressed and depleted and need to return to a more balanced level of energy. When you are stressed, nerves in your brain and throughout your body are impacted. Because of that connection, when your body feels better, your mind will feel better too.



**🌿 It provides a pleasant distraction.**

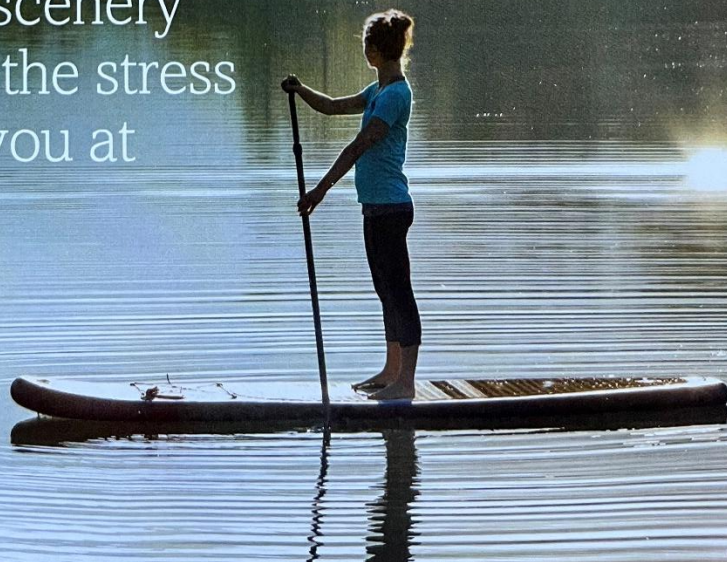
One of the best parts about exercising while spending time in nature is that the experience offers a fun break from the pressures of daily lives. Just changing your scenery and environment can lift some of the stress that surrounds you at work or home.

**🌿 It encourages you to be present.**

While you work out, you can fully engage in the present moment instead of letting your mind run wild with worries about the past or the future. When you combine viewing nature with working out, you can get lost in the moment and experience a happiness boost.



Changing your scenery  
can lift some of the stress  
that surrounds you at  
work or home.





# 6 Green Exercise Activities to Try Now

**W**ith green exercise growing in popularity in recent years, there are now Green Gyms in the United Kingdom that combine physical activity with local environmental projects.

They offer programs consisting of a warm-up, cooldown, and a wide range of environmental activities, such as gardening, planting trees, digging ponds, and managing trails.

By creating opportunities for people to work together in meaningful outdoor projects, the program improves the physical and mental health of volunteers by increasing their physical activity and reducing social isolation. A study from the University of Westminster found that after participating in a Green Gym for two months, volunteers reported higher levels of well-being and lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Researchers also collected saliva samples to measure the stress hormone cortisol, and results showed that volunteers were less anxious. Green Gym also piloted a school program for elementary school students, which resulted in positive behavior and well-being for the children.

While Green Gyms offer a very specific green exercise program, you can incorporate nature into your activities no matter where you live. Here are a few ideas to get you moving and connecting with nature:



## 1 • HIKING

Any type of hiking, whether it's around your neighborhood or in a national park, can help you enjoy some healthy exercise while taking in the beauty of nature.



## 2 • SWIMMING

Experts have noted that swimming produces a relaxation response that increases calming chemicals and allows you to enter a tranquil state. When you swim laps, you can focus on your strokes and breathing, making it easy to shut off all the noise and activity going on outside the pool.



## 3 • BIKING

Whether you ride alone or with others, cycling is a wonderful way to get exercise, enjoy the fresh air, take in the natural scenery, and experience special moments.



## 4 • TEAM SPORTS

In addition to being good for your physical health, team sports are also good for your mental health, as they promote positive social interactions. Look for a sport that plays outside in the open air, such as soccer, baseball, softball, lacrosse, or beach volleyball.



## 5 • OBSTACLE COURSES

Create your own fun, outdoor fitness activity in your backyard. (Kids will love it too!) Go through your house and garage and gather a variety of fitness equipment. Create several stations with different activities, such as a jump rope, cones to weave around, a box to jump over, and a basketball net to shoot a ball into. You can also designate some stations that do not require equipment where you do things like jumping jacks, push-ups, or hop on one foot.



## 6 • INDOOR OPTIONS

Surprisingly, green exercise doesn't only have to be reserved for outdoors. You can also enjoy nature while exercising inside. Some ideas include setting up a treadmill or stationary bike near a window with a view of the outdoors or tuning in to some nature scenes on your screen while running, lifting weights, or doing aerobic exercises. As long as you are connecting with nature in some way, you can experience the benefits of green exercise. ▽

Sandi Schwartz is an author, journalist, and mother of two. She has written extensively about parenting, wellness, and environmental issues.