

The sky is the softest blue. The sun is shining through a scattering of clouds, bringing just the right amount of warmth to a late September morning.

It is a perfect day for a stroll in the countryside. But this is a walk like no other ... not to exercise, or get from A to B, walk the dog, or study nature, but to connect with the natural world on a level far deeper than most of us have ever experienced.

Forest bathing originated in Japan around 40 years ago. Its Japanese name, shinrin-yoku, translates as a bath in the atmosphere of the forest.

By shutting out the distractions of everyday life and tuning our senses into nature, it calms, de-stresses and can boost both mental and physical wellbeing.

All devices like phones, watches, and, God forbid, step counters must be left behind, or at least switched off and packed away out of sight.

The beautiful day is pure luck. Guide Gina Geremia has already warned me we will be going ahead whatever the weather.

The psychology graduate and qualified nature therapist began leading forest bathing sessions around three years ago.

We meet at Great Cornard Country Park – a glorious mix of native woodland and open meadows and one of the Suffolk sites where she has identified suitable routes. Our walk will last about 90 minutes.

Gina begins with an introduction to the area, occupied by humans for thousands of years, and the history and benefits of forest bathing. Close by is believed to be the site of a victory by Boudicca over the Romans in 60AD.

“Finding connections to the land we are standing on helps develop our sense of place and history and home,” she says.

“When we have that, we exhibit more pro-environment behaviour and pro-conservation capacity because we are part of something larger than ourselves.

“But the other thing about it is it has absolutely beautiful biodiversity ... the variety of plants and trees but also animals. You hear birdsong, there are rabbits, deer, and barn owls in the evening.

“One of the things forest bathing helps people do is to slow down. Moving slowly, the animal life goes on. We’re moving at the pace of nature. We are not intimidating.

“We will move in silence most of the time, and we will move slower than you imagined your slowest to be.”

She explains that forest bathing emerged from Japan in the 1980s. “It came from a visible decline in wellbeing in mega cities, which had up to 10 million people. They had a real disconnect from the natural world.

“So they worked out this way of bringing people out of the concrete environment into the natural world.”

During the walk, we will be tuning in one sense at a time. “There is a sequence of events, a sequence of invitations and the sequences are very important,” she says.

“It’s taking you out of your thinking mind, calming the inner voice and allowing you to enter the feeling part of your body.”

You don’t try to assess, or analyse.

Slowing right down for a long soak in a glorious forest bath

Tuning in our senses to connect deeply with the natural world brings a host of benefits to our minds, bodies and wellbeing. **Barbara Eeles** joined therapist **Gina Geremia** for a walk with a difference ...



I’m going to have to switch off the voice in my head and just absorb my surroundings.

Apart from the mental benefits of forest bathing, it has been reported to ease inflammation, lower blood pressure, and reduce menopausal hot flushes.

Occasionally, she will invite participants to share a thought by offering them her talking charm – a palm-sized horse’s head carved by her father.

She asks me to name my favourite tree, either a species or an individual one. That’s hard because I love all trees.

I overthink it but eventually choose a huge old pine tree in our village churchyard. Later, seeing some of the massive wide-spreading oaks along the trail, I remember how wonderful they are, too.

Gina says she loves pines because they remind her of home – she was born and raised in Vermont, USA, and moved to Suffolk when she married her husband, Justin, who was originally from Essex.

As we start to walk, I realise what she meant by “slow”.

We are more used to being bombarded with advice like 100 steps a minute being the minimum required to do us any good. But once we start walking, our pace – a guess



because I’m not allowed to look at my watch – feels more like one step every two seconds.

At first, it is not easy, but gradually the slow, gentle rhythm takes over and it feels more natural. I’m also aware my breathing has slowed right down.

First, we focus on sight. We are in woodland and the sun is filtering through the leaves. “Notice all the different shades of green,” she says. “Really feel the green.”

I lose track of time and have no idea how long we have been walking.

eyes closed, you are aware only of the sounds.

By now, we have stopped to listen to them in turn and are aware of the soundscape. “Just listen to the music,” says Gina. There are bass notes from cawing crows, high ones from songbirds and mewling buzzards. Percussion from someone, somewhere possibly chopping wood.

Then a whistle, and footsteps from an approaching dog walker. Snuffling and panting gets closer as the dog comes to investigate my feet. I manage to keep my eyes closed, but I can’t suppress a giggle.

Setting off again, we look for things in motion. At first, it seems only the leaves are moving.

Then there is a wasp flying low over the ground, and tiny insects only seen when the sun catches their wings.

Overhead, the clouds float by. A buzzard is circling. Two squirrels skitter down a tree and chase each other into the undergrowth.

Coming out of the wood into a meadow, we focus on smell. Breathing deeply, you can detect the faint aroma of mown grass.

Gina suggests picking leaves and rolling them in your fingers to release the scent. Some are acrid, some just slightly herby.

Heading back into the woods, we concentrate on texture and our sense



of touch.

I rest my face against the rough, craggy bark of an oak tree. Every kind of leaf feels different – some smooth and shiny, others velvety and soft.

Gina grew up on a small farm in Vermont. It was near a lake, between two mountains and close to a forest where they could encounter bears and moose.

One of her first real connections to nature was noticing the weather patterns. “I could tell just by looking out the window what the weather would be like for the day,” she says.

She did a degree in psychology and worked a lot in marketing and communications. “Around 2017, I started doing different work. I landed in coaching but knew I didn’t want to be a traditional kind of coach.

“I knew that when I removed people from all the triggers that make you feel low or bad and stress us out, your mind is open to more possibilities.”

She developed a style of coaching that recognised the link between overall wellbeing and nature connectedness.

“Three years ago, I started with forest bathing, and got my nature therapy qualification earlier this year,” she says.

“I feel that it has probably been the best thing for me as a professional. It makes my coaching better. I bring all my training into other programmes

I’m offering.”

Sometimes, the smallest connections with nature can make a difference to a stressful day.

“I say find something that you can connect with, like taking a leaf off the ground when you are walking from your car to your office,” she explains. “Then, just take five minutes to really look at it; notice the textures, blemishes and veins.

“We need people to engage more with the natural world in today’s modern society. People often say ‘I spend a lot of time in nature’. I hear that a lot but doing things outside is not being immersive.”

At the end of the walk, Gina asks me for one word to define the experience. I ponder over calming, and magical, and settle on magical. In fact, it was both, and more, but I’m far too chilled out to stress over it.

Leading forest bathing sessions has magic moments for her, too. One that still brings a smile to her face was walking with a family from Hong Kong in Rendlesham Forest.

“The mother was quite concerned. She said ‘we only ever walk on concrete’ - the children had never experienced being out in nature.

“They found a worm, and spent 20 minutes just watching it. Seeing that was wonderful for me, too.”

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Clockwise from above: Forest bathing involves walking slower than you thought possible, taking time to experience your surroundings.

Exploring textures is one way to tune in your senses.

Nature therapist Gina Geremia, who leads forest bathing walks.