

A Sensory Walk in Nature

Experiencing the world in new ways

By Lisa Scanlon

Imagine a hike with your family at Robert Treman State Park: Listen to the hum of the bees in the tree nest as you walk up the hill along the gorge trail. Bask in the smell of the pines. Gaze at the clear, blue water rushing through the gorge. Turn toward the feel



Photo © by Lisa Scanlon

Finding the letter "Y" at Monkey Run

of the sunshine as it peeks through the trees. Enjoy the taste of your picnic lunch, well-rewarded as you sit in the mist near Lucifer Falls, talking about all the steps you just climbed! A family hike at Treman State Park is full of exciting events for each of your five senses.

Robert Treman is one of many places in Ithaca where you can revel in the outdoors with your family. Ithaca's natural parks give us many options to go outside and play. Whether it's enjoying the Ithaca Farmer's Market on a

busy Saturday or heading out for a swim at Buttermilk Falls on a hot summer day, there is somewhere outside for every family to enjoy. There are also ways to play together in the urban areas of town, simply by walking in your own neighborhood.

Getting outdoors and enjoying your natural surroundings is more than just fun, it's beneficial. Walking through the woods can elevate your mood and alleviate symptoms of depression or anxiety. Being in natural areas can also help clear your mind to reflect on new ideas, solutions, and more. Enjoying the outdoors together can increase your family bond and provide you with many memorable experiences. Being outside in any area, whether an urban park or a remote hiking space, allows all of us to take a breath, let go of stress, and allow our senses to take over.

If you're looking for ways to enjoy nature and engage all your senses, check out the options listed here. These activities are virtually free and most are in your neighborhood.

Look at That!

Take a "color walk" by looking for all

the colors of the rainbow in nature.
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Sensory Walk

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Point out the colors to each other, and see who can complete the rainbow first. Whether you see colorful birds, flowers, or the sky (especially on a sunset walk), you'll be amazed at all the colors that nature provides.

Or try an "alphabet hike". Spot something that starts with each letter of the alphabet, in order; or look for ways in which nature creates each letter—the curl of roots making a lovely S curve on the forest floor, for example.

What's That Smell?

Who makes the best smell detective? Test it out using different herbs from your garden or the local farmer's market.

What do you notice in the woods? The sweet smell of springtime blooms; pine needles; the wet earth after a summer rain? See who can recognize the most scents.

Take a walk downtown and see if you can figure out which restaurant is baking bread or cooking with garlic. Perhaps you'll be drawn in by the scent of pastries and coffee as you pass by.

Mmm...Tasty....

Who in your family has the sharpest taste buds? Set up a blind taste test with different herbs. Each has a distinctive flavor—who can guess them all? Try it with other natural flavors, too—honey, tomatoes, apples, and so much more.

Get cooking! Create a recipe together using produce from your garden or the farmers market, then enjoy the fruits of your labor. Or hold a competition—each person makes something, then everyone votes for their favorite dish.

Please Touch!

Go hug a tree! Literally. Trees and other plants have many different textures—some are soft and fluffy, some firm and rough, and some are spiky! How many textures can you find?

Head over to the Cayuga Nature Center to experience one of their animal presentations. Perhaps you'll feel the smooth scales of a snake or the soft fur of a mammal.

What Was That Sound?

Hold a family scavenger hunt, using only your ears! How many different birds can you identify by sound? The Cornell Lab of Ornithology website is a wonderful reference for bird calls. Who can identify the most birds? Which bird do you hear most often?

Go on a "silent hike". Sometimes the best way to let nature in is to get quiet. Walk through the woods together without talking, just listening to the sounds around you. You might notice the rhythm of your footsteps, or the sound they make on different surfaces. You might notice bird calls, buzzing insects, or the wind in the trees.

Try it in five-minute increments, then check in with each other to see what each person heard!

Map It!

One way to illustrate how each sense can help you to appreciate your surroundings is to map an area based on the sense you're focused on. Perhaps you are walking through the Ithaca Farmers Market. Close your eyes and map this based on what you hear. There might be a music area, a water-sound area, a children's laughter area. Then map the Market by smell—is there a space that smells like baked goods? Like pizza? Or a breakfast burrito? By sight, you might map the purples and pinks of the flowers, the bright colors of the crafts, and the rich greens of the produce.

Compare each person's maps—how are they the same? How do they differ? Each sense gives you different important information about your location. Engaging all your senses will yield a rich picture of your neighborhood and natural areas.

Explore More

For more information about the benefits of getting outside, and more ideas on how to engage your senses in nature, visit: www.lisascannon04.wixsite.com/outdoor-senses. Explore the idea pages. Check out the links and the summer camp ideas. You'll find outdoor games, family challenges, and a lot of fun activities for day, night, and each season.

Most importantly—go outside! We live in a region with beautiful state parks and other natural areas nearby, as well as a very "green" downtown. Have fun exploring together!

Ithaca Child is pleased to welcome this contribution by Lisa Scanlon.

Depression

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- Loss of interest or pleasure in all or most activities
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Feelings of fatigue or loss of energy
- Excessive or inappropriate feelings of guilt or worthlessness

Visible psychomotor slowing down or agitation
Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide, with or without a plan or attempt

Types of depression

There are a number of classifications, or types, of depression. The following are some of the more common.

In a given year, **major depressive disorder** affects nearly 7% of the U.S. population, according to the National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH). During a major depression, almost all aspects of a person's life are affected. It can be difficult to find the motivation to do anything at all, including such necessities as taking a shower. As a result of the impairment, both work

life and home life suffer. In addition to the symptoms listed above, 20% of people with major depression will also experience psychosis—i.e. hallucinations and delusions.

Dysthymia is diagnosed when a person has experienced depression for most of each day, and on most days, for at least two years. For many, it's a lower-level but enduring depression, though people with major depression who are treatment resistant may be diagnosed with dysthymia as well. Therefore, those with dysthymia may experience mild to severe impairment. According to HealthFundingResearch.org, women are three times more likely than men to suffer from dysthymia.

Those with **seasonal affective disorder (SAD)** become depressed only or primarily during a particular season. For most, it's the fall and winter months, with their shorter days and reduced sunshine. But some people experience SAD during the summer months instead. The onset of SAD is typically around the age of 20. It affects 10 million Americans each year.

Bipolar disorder affects 2.6% of American adults, according to the NIMH. This treatable, but lifelong, disease typically develops in women in their mid-to-upper 20s. For men, onset is usually during the teen years or early 20s. Bipolar is characterized by bouts of both mania (or hypomania) and depression. Though individuals with bipolar will experience both ends of the spectrum, depression is often the most problematic for women, and mania the most problematic for men. Those with bipolar disorder often experience psychosis during bouts of mania, and sometimes with depression.

Postpartum depression is one of the forms of depression exclusive to women. According to the NIMH, 10 to 15% of women will develop it. Postpartum depression shouldn't be confused with the "baby blues", which are milder, short-lived, and related to the worry and fatigue of parenting a new baby. Postpartum depression results from hormonal changes. During pregnancy, a woman's hormone levels increase. Immediately following childbirth, the levels rapidly drop, returning to normal levels. For some women, this drop results in depression. As with other forms of depression, it can be mildly-to-severely debilitating.

Causes

The precise cause of depression is unknown, but several factors likely contribute to the condition. According to the Mayo Clinic, those with depression experience physical changes in their brains. Studying these changes may eventually help researchers determine the exact cause of the illness.

Depression is known to be genetic due to higher incidence among blood relatives.

Brain chemicals called neurotransmitters also play a role: they affect the neuro-circuits involved in mood stability and play a significant role in both the cause and treatment of depression.

Hormonal changes can also play a role in depression, particularly for women. During pregnancy and for several months afterward, women are especially vulnerable. Changes during menstrual cycles and menopause can also trigger depression.

Treatment

In some cases, depression results from an underlying medical condition such as thyroid dysfunction or low vitamin B levels. For this reason, it's essential to visit your primary care physician for blood work to rule out other causes. If an underlying medical condition is diagnosed, treatment for that condition is likely all that's needed to cure the depression.

If medical causes have been ruled out, then it's best to consult with a psychiatrist. Although primary care physicians can treat depression, psychiatrists have specialized training in diagnosing the various forms of depression, and experience in treating them. Psychiatrists often know which medications will work best for a particular patient, based on a variety of factors. In fact, depending on the type of depression and the specific set of symptoms, some people with depression require a combination of antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, and mood stabilizers. Psychiatrists know how to tailor treatment to each individual for best results.

For those who are treatment resistant, look for a psychiatrist with a psychopharmacologist designation. Psychopharmacologists have gone through additional, specialized training in the effects of medication on the brain and behavior.

In addition to medication, many psychiatrists recommend cognitive therapy with a psychologist or behavioral therapist. This can be helpful both in coping with the symptoms of depression and addressing any underlying trauma.

For those with SAD, sitting under a light therapy box is often recommended, and has been found to be helpful. Light therapy boxes can be ordered online, and come in a variety of styles, sizes, and strengths. Depending on your doctor's recommendation, you'll likely use it for 20 to 40 minutes each day.

Kimberly Blaker is the author of the STEM book, Horoscopes: Reality or Trickery? She has suffered from, and been in treatment for, various forms of depression for the past 22 years.

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