

Ways to wellbeing with nature

Secondary School Resource Teacher's guide

Objective

To notice the impact of nature on emotional state and how this might be useful for self-regulation and to enhance wellbeing.

Preparation

Before the lesson, identify a **green space**. It could be an RHS Garden, a local park, a nearby allotment, woodland or school grounds. Look for somewhere that has **lots of natural interest** and will immerse your students. You need to factor in the time to get there and back.

So what can you, as a class, do when you are there? Try our activities one at a time; you will know what best suits individuals or the class as a whole.

You will need at least 20 minutes. If you can, try to find space regularly in the timetable, so you can allow the students to develop their learning. Remember to check the resources you might need to take with you!

Remember not to push the students outside of their comfort zone with their feelings. This resource is intended to support wellbeing and for students to develop tools to better understand their mental health; it is not a therapy guide.

Here and now

Chat to students about how we can all find life stressful at times. There can be a lot of demands from friends, family, school and it can be hard to find the space and time to relax. Ask, how does this feel? How might this affect their behaviour? How do they think connecting to nature can help?

Explain that we all have different ways to relax and de-stress, but, did they know that connecting with nature can improve their physical and mental wellbeing?

It can:

- improve your mood.
- reduce feelings of stress or anger.
- help you take time out and feel more relaxed.
- enhance your physical health.
- enhance your resilience, confidence and self-esteem.
- support you to be more active.

At the start of the session, baseline the students on a 1–10 scale of how they feel at that moment. (1 being calm and confident – 10 being overwhelmed and not coping). Remember, if surrounded by their peers this might not be a true reflection of how some really feel. If any student is at the higher end of the levels, there are support contacts for you at the end of this sheet.

Choose an activity from the following sessions

These use the 5 Ways to Wellbeing as recommended by the NHS.



1 TAKE NOTICE and record nature journals

Encourage your students to start a nature journal. They will begin with recording what they see, hear, and smell as well as what they may be able to touch and feel. You might want to provide them with a jotter or paper and provide a supply of pens, pencils, watercolours, etc.

‘Slow Looking’ is a popular technique used in Art Galleries around the world to encourage people to clear their minds and connect with what is directly in front of them. Your students can create this same effect and observe what is around them in nature.

Ask your students to stare at their hands for a few minutes and look closely and carefully at the details they find.

Then, ask them to raise their heads and look directly in front of them and focus on the nature that surrounds them. Ask them to concentrate on the colours and shades they see; are there patterns? What lines can they find? What about light and dark contrasts or the scale of trees to the plants? Feel the air and listen to the surrounding sounds and take deep relaxing breaths.

You can start this activity for a few minutes and, over a series of sessions, expand the time.

Ask them to turn to a partner to share what details they noticed. How did it make them feel? They might feel a closer connection to nature and each other, through sharing their experiences. Many people feel calm and centred when they complete this exercise. However, for some, it can be an emotional experience. There is no right or wrong, and everyone’s feelings should be validated.

Encourage the students to record what they are noticing and start to relate this to what they feel inside. This will be different for each of them. Explore with them if they are making any metaphors. For example, seeing a plant growing in a pavement crack may relate to their own personal struggles or the presence of an ancient tree may inspire them to consider their future.

A nature journal could be a standalone activity, or this could be continued over a period of time. Students could develop their ‘take notice’ skills with collage work, writing poems, music or song lyrics.

To ‘take notice’ involves connecting to our bodies and the sensations that we experience. It is learning to notice what is going on inside and outside of ourselves moment by moment and becoming aware of how we feel physically and mentally. Sometimes this is called ‘being present’ or ‘mindfulness’.



2 CONNECT and share nature journeys

Walking in nature is a wonderful way to share an experience and connect to others. Being in nature is an activity that can be made accessible to all ages and abilities, including those who experience communication difficulties or social challenges and is, therefore, inclusive. To have a capacity to function well, there is a human need to feel close, connected and valued by others.

With this activity, you will encourage your students to use the experience of being in nature as a shared experience and a means for developing social interaction skills and gaining confidence when interacting with others.

Start by inviting the students to work in pairs. Within a defined area, send them on a scavenger hunt to find things beginning with the letters in their name. Then settle them into a quieter space to complete the next part of this sharing and listening activity.

The first partner names three things that they think of, and that they feel comfortable to share with their partner, while they are experiencing nature. This can be anything from what they are seeing and hearing in the moment to a memory that they have of another occasion when they have been in nature. The other partner needs to listen silently, carefully, and, without writing anything down. See how much of what their partner says they can remember. When the first partner has finished, the other partner then repeats what they heard. While they do this, the one who has shared listens and doesn’t prompt them. Can they see how much the listener was able to retain?

The partners then swap to do the exercise again in the opposite roles.

Bring the class back together and reflect on how it felt to share their experience of nature and to be listened to. This discussion is focused on what it is like to connect, rather than on the content of what was shared. The experience of sharing and being listened to is one that supports wellbeing. Some students may say that this was difficult to do or that they felt embarrassed. Sharing with the wider class is optional.

In addition to creating a connection with others, some students may have a sense of increased self-esteem, confidence and perceptions of personal wellbeing from the experience of connecting to nature.



3 Get ACTIVE outdoors

Different exercises will appeal to different students. You might already know what will suit your students, but, just walking surrounded by nature has huge physical, social and wellbeing benefits.

Often people don’t think of walking as exercise, yet regular brisk walking in a green area can:

- improve energy
- reduce stress
- lower blood pressure
- manage weight
- enhance sleep

When you are at your chosen location, you should encourage your students to walk for 10 minutes. Start at a pace that feels relaxed, then build up to a brisk walk. Give them time to slow down again at the end of the session. Built into their timetable regularly, they could build on extending this time. You could try some exercises whilst walking.

- **Walk in pairs**

– This provides the students the ideal opportunity to relax and connect. You might want to give each pair a topic to chat about, or just allow them to direct the conversation. This social interaction will subconsciously create positive connections to nature and exercise.

- **Walking on their own**

– They could think about goals they would like to set themselves in the future. Give them some ideas of realistic, simple goals that are achievable. How would they achieve those goals? What support would they need? How would they feel if they reached a goal? How would that help their wellbeing? Would that goal support others?

– Concentrating on their breathing and clearing their minds. This is a form of simple meditation. It isn’t always easy to clear our minds, so students shouldn’t feel concerned if they are unable to achieve this. Instead, they could concentrate on looking at the details in nature and the sounds around them.

– Ask the students to look around when they are walking. Look for species of animals or plants, they do not recognise. You might want to take ID charts out with you so they can look it up straight away. Or you might want to take a photograph so they can discover more back at school.

The RHS has a useful app:

www.rhs.org.uk/my-account/identify-plants

Gradually build up the time they walk through regular sessions. Some teenagers are not keen on ‘walking’, but use this activity to change their perceptions. Make sure that they understand the physical, wellbeing and social benefits of walking, especially when surrounded by nature. Chat to the students regularly to discuss their observations and find out any changes they would like to make.



4 LEARN something new

Those who take an interest in nature are instinctively learning. Nature is a broad subject and there is a wealth of knowledge to discover. Learning can also be skill-based as well as knowledge-based.

Gardening provides a great way to be creative, create growth and have a positive impact on the environment. It is also a good way to exercise; digging, planting, weeding all give you opportunities to stretch muscle groups and keep you fit.

You might feel that you do not have the knowledge to teach gardening, but, everyone can grow plants. **Look through the RHS website for ideas and inspiration.** You might want to share this with your students before you start, so that you are planning together. Students can create goals of what they would like to achieve. It doesn’t need a big budget. There are plenty of tips on how to reuse, recycle and repurpose everyday items into containers and plant pots. Remember to choose a location that you have permission to garden in.

When the students are planting, tidying, watering, weeding or pruning, they are focusing on the task in hand. This can lower stress and anxiety. At a point when they are all working, pause the group and ask them how they are feeling. Does physical activity give them a sense of well-being and purpose? Does greening the environment make them feel like they are making a positive change?

Why not plant a bed of herbs that support relaxation, for example, lavender, peppermint, aloe vera and chamomile. Remember, if you are not sure of your plant knowledge, check what you are planting and consider any health and safety risks that might be associated.

This activity ideally should be repeated throughout the year so that students have the opportunity to nurture what they are growing and connect to the space throughout the seasons. They can keep growing records and record the seasonal changes. Gardening is a wonderful lifelong skill and one that will continue to support their wellbeing.

Why not bring nature indoors and put plants in the classroom? Greening indoor spaces can improve the quality of indoor air. They are also supposed to help reduce stress levels, sharpen attention and boost productivity.

Gardening is a great way to reduce stress. Ask your students to concentrate on how they feel. At the end of a gardening session ask each of the students to, anonymously, write down one or two words of how they felt doing this activity and place it in a box/basket. You can then read a few out to the class without any comment other than an acknowledgement of the fact that everyone will experience things differently and there is no right or wrong reaction.



5 GIVE and be a part of something bigger

Giving is something that makes us feel positive. Giving includes spending time with another person, listening to them, sharing with them knowledge or skills, creating a gift or raising funds for a project. Even saying – ‘thank you’ to someone is a form of giving back. Giving builds our connections to others and fosters feelings of kindness and empathy for others.

Giving also increases self-esteem, in that we experience ourselves as resourced and able to help others. The reason giving makes us feel good is because it releases endorphins in the brain which are linked to pleasure and trust. When we receive a gift, we often experience gratitude which is also a feeling of wellbeing.

The wellbeing activities suggested below will engage students in the experience of giving. Using nature and plants allows for other areas of wellbeing to be experienced alongside this. They will be encouraged to develop their awareness of how they feel in response to their activity. The outcomes for the students are likely to indicate experience of happiness and kindness.

Consider with the students how nature needs to be looked after and how we need to give back to the environment. You might want to plan with the students which project, as a group, you will engage with. They will then feel a sense of ownership. Consider the ‘green’ spaces you have to utilise and have access to, as this will impact the work you can achieve as a group.

Here are some ways that you can engage your students with supporting others and the environment in your local ‘green space’.

- 1 Research to find out if there a local organisation that needs volunteers to give their time to support conservation.

- 2 Register your class for the new National Education Nature Park and Climate Action Awards. This project is designed to empower young people to make a positive difference to both their own and nature’s future.

www.educationnaturepark.org.uk

- 3 Scientists can’t gather all the data they need to answer the big science questions around climate change and the diversity of life. So they have asked us, the public, to help. Thousands of people are taking part in projects in their local green spaces. You could ask your class to study the plants in your area, collect and record the data.

Be a part of a big project!

www.rhs.org.uk/science/help-our-research

Taking positive action leads to positive wellbeing. Ask them how nature will benefit from what they are doing? How does that make them feel? If they could do something for nature what would they do? (Pick up litter, reduce plastic use, etc) Why do they think caring for nature makes them feel good?



Winding down

After you have finished an activity, repeat the questions you asked at the start. Discuss with the class the results compared against their original baseline. Use the data as a starting point to talk about how their mood has changed and why. What has nature made them feel? What did they notice about themselves?

Remember to:

- **Start small**
You’ll be amazed how much you can achieve in a small amount of time. Even if you only have a few minutes, this can make a difference to the way they feel. Super boost their wellbeing!
- **Experiment**
Try different activities. Students will find some activities easier than others to connect to nature and their inner wellbeing.
- **Find the time**
The timetable is very busy at school but try to find the time. It will help you and your students develop lifelong skills.
- **Be ready to sign-post**
When we start to get to know ourselves we can become aware of feelings that may be overwhelming. Be ready to sign-post students for extra support from your mental health lead in school and give them details of where they can find help.



Sign-posts for external support

I’m worried about a young person.
If their life is in immediate danger, call 999.

Otherwise, we recommend talking to someone who can help you understand what they might be going through and refer you to support in your area.

This could be:

- **Your doctor**
- The **Place2Be** staff member at their school, or a similar support service if the school doesn’t have Place2Be
- The **Young Minds Parents Helpline**, which you can call for free on 0808 802 5544 (9.30am – 4pm, Monday – Friday, UK).

On-line and telephone support:

Shout 24/7 Crisis Text Service

Text SHOUT to 85258

- For: anyone in the UK
- Available: free, 24 hours a day
- More info: giveusashout.org

Childline

Call 0800 1111

Chat online (set up an account first)

Send an email (set up an account first)

- For: children and young people in the UK
- Available: free, 24 hours a day
- More info: childline.org.uk

Support for teachers:

Education Support Partnership Helpline

Call 08000 562 561

Text 07909 341229

- For: Teachers / educators
- Available: free, 24 hours a day
- More info: educationsupport.org.uk