

A bed beneath the stars: How camping can reset your body clock

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Blog



If you are a nature lover, chances are you would happily switch a resort holiday with a swimming pool for pitching a tent amidst lush greenery, wild vegetation and the sea lapping at your feet.

Soaking up the simple life and getting back to basics is remarkably beneficial for your body, mind, and spirit, and can help bring balance back to many areas that have been neglected or otherwise compromised.

One of these things is the often overlooked but highly essential aspect of health: sleep. Did you know camping can help improve your sleep? Whilst camping, your days are filled with natural light and your nights are spent in total darkness. Minus the constant environmental disruption of night lights, alarm clocks, and other appliances that emit an artificial light creating disharmony within the body, your brain is essentially reprogrammed to “switch off” in preparation for sleep.

Our circadian rhythm (otherwise known as our internal clock) adjusts rapidly to the natural light/dark cycle and responds powerfully. Melatonin, the hormone that prepares the body for night-time and promotes sleep, is almost instantly increased. Its release is assisted by the absorption of vitamin D, which is wonderfully abundant in sunshine.

Therefore, the simple act of getting more sunlight during the day, spending ample time exploring your new, natural surroundings, followed by falling asleep in a darkened tent or even outside not long after dusk, can aid in altering the sleep/wake cycle. This can encourage an earlier bedtime, longer sleep duration, and much fewer night-time awakenings.

A 2013 study from the University of Colorado found that after just one week away camping, volunteers were exposed to four times more daylight than usual, syncing their body clocks back in line with the summer sun. Saliva tests showed that their release of melatonin came on two hours earlier, near sunset, and naturally began to wane around dawn, signalling to the body its readiness to start the day.

A cascade of events related to our physiological rhythms begins when light hits the photoreceptors in our eyes. This sets off the released timing of the hormones that influence not only sleep, but also appetite, metabolism, and mood, reversing many health problems, including diabetes and obesity, boosting work performance, and relieving seasonal depression.

Without the all-too-common late-night rendezvous with your computer or television screen, the biological night naturally lengthens to align with the seasons, as is the case for many animals. The effects of this prove particularly evident in the winter months when the solar spectrum is even more pronounced. Along with altering your circadian rhythm through this form of light therapy, there are a number of other benefits including:

- **Exercise:** achieved by walking, hiking, swimming, and other forms of movement to fight the boredom of not being surrounded by your usual modern-day, plug-in comforts
- **Quality time:** spent with those dearest to you, sharing stories and laughs while preparing meals, building a campfire and reconnecting with nature together
- **Forest bathing:** a Japanese practice, which involves the automatic inhalation of phytoncide, a natural compound released by trees and other flora that naturally improves immune function
- **Simple eating:** consuming mainly perishable foods, such as fruit, meat, and vegetables cooked in the fire and reducing your reliance on convenience items, such as microwave meals, processed food, sauces, and condiments
- **Improved oxygen flow:** gained from breathing in the negative ions present in the fresh air that has been charged with the electricity of natural water sources, including waterfalls and ocean sprays

If it feels like an impossible dream to pack up the family and tent and head for the hills, try downloading computer software that reduces the amount of blue light emitted to achieve a similar effect to your body clock. Such programs include Night Shift for Apple Mac or f.lux, free for all devices. However, nothing beats even a short weekend away and this alone might be all it takes for you to recharge your body, de-stress your mind, and help get your relationships back on track.

Reference

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