

How FOREST BATHING *healed my heart*



Kerry with baby
Teddy in Australia

Losing her son shattered Kerry Parnell's life. But the embrace of trees and green spaces slowly helped her to rediscover joy...

I remember looking at the leaves in the trees outside the hospital window, the day my son died.

Of all the memories of a day no parent should ever experience, I can still see the bottle-green leaves of those eucalyptus trees being gently buffeted by the breeze.

Teddy's room was high up in the children's hospital in Melbourne, Australia. It was the middle of summer and the heat was oppressive that day, or maybe that's just how it felt to me. The hospital was on the edge of a park and surrounded by trees – the architects had designed the glass exteriors to reflect

the colours of the foliage, to create a “healing environment” for the patients.

In the end, it couldn't heal the broken heart of my baby boy, but those trees planted a seed that, years later, would begin to mend mine.

Trees and green spaces are proven to make us happy. The Japanese have >>

known this for years and call it “shinrin-yoku”, or “forest-bathing”. And Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge recently co-designed a healing garden for the Chelsea Flower Show. The RHS Back to Nature Garden is a woodland setting for families to connect with nature and has a den, a waterfall, a stream to play Pooh Sticks in, and a treehouse with a swing. It’s based around the idea of forest bathing for mental health and is part of partnership with NHS England to promote the physical and emotional wellbeing that access to green spaces and gardening provides.

It seems obvious that a walk in green spaces will make you feel better, and science backs this up: researchers at King’s College London discovered that seeing trees, hearing birdsong and looking at the sky significantly raises our sense of wellbeing and the effects last for hours.

Other studies have shown that people who live on city streets with trees on them are happier than those who don’t – a team from the University of Exeter proved the more trees on the street, the lower the rate of anti-depressants prescribed to its residents.

Silicon Valley entrepreneur Julia Plevin has just published a book, *The Healing Magic of Forest Bathing*,

based around her experience of “psychoterratica” because she realised her grey, urban environment was making her depressed.

“Forest bathing saved my life,” she says. “The medicine I need is definitely forest bathing. I take my medicine every day.”

Like Julia, I realised my need to be in green spaces and, two years ago, uprooted my little family from inner-city Sydney for what Australians call a “tree change”. We moved across the world, back home to a small cottage down a little lane in the middle of the Kent countryside.

When I open my front door, I see rolling green hills dotted with oast houses. It’s a sight that – every day – lifts my spirits. It’s like an anti-depressant for your eyes.

It was something I simply had to do. Teddy was my first and I thought would be my only child, a much-anticipated baby boy. But what I didn’t know and could never have imagined, was that he would only stay with us for nine-and-a-

half months, and all of those would be spent in and out of hospital. On the rare days when we didn’t have appointments, I would walk him around Sydney’s lovely Centennial Park and he would look up at the leaves in the trees. It was my favourite time with him, when everything,

for those couple of hours, was okay – I was just a mother, he just a baby.

The beautiful trees that line that park – the oaks, figs, pines and eucalyptus, paperbarks and weeping willows dipping their branches into the lakes – are imprinted indelibly in my memory. When Teddy died, I fled to the trees; I would take a blanket and lie in their shade, comatose with grief. And slowly, their embrace helped to heal my shrivelled soul.

It has been six years since he passed away and I did discover how to be happy again. Because I learned through him that you can find joy in the smallest of things – like a leaf blowing in the wind. **w&h**

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The Duchess of Cambridge discussing plans for the Back to Nature Garden