

Shinrin-yoku for troubled teens

Forest-therapy guide Alex Gesse supports youths in Lisbon using an unusual Japanese art >>

Words / Celia Woolfrey



the big idea



Stress relief for teenagers



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Modern life is stressful for many of us – and that applies to teenagers as much as adults. Overstructured lives, a lack of time outdoors, and the pressures of social media have been taking their toll over the past decade, leading to a rise in anxiety and depression in under-18s.

So what if there was a simple, cheap, medication-free way to help troubled youngsters feel better about themselves? Spanish forest-therapy guide Alex Gesse believes there is. He's practised in the art of Shinrin-yoku (forest bathing, or literally "taking in the forest atmosphere"), a term coined by the Japanese government in the 1980s but based on ancient Shinto and Buddhist practices, and now uses his skills to help teenagers with emotional and behavioural problems.

"Most people feel disconnected from nature because, in the city, we put ourselves in boxes, and this gives us an illusion of 'safety'," Gesse says. "But, I believe this safety can become a kind of jail. We relax in natural surroundings because that's where humans evolved over millions of years, so when people get back to the forest they can let their everyday social roles go and find their wild soul."

It might sound a bit out-there, but there's plenty of positive science to back up Shinrin-yoku. Studies have found that simply sitting looking at forest scenery is enough to reduce levels of the stress

Above
 Anyone can benefit from spending time in the forest, says Alex Gesse

hormone cortisol. Research from Tokyo's Nippon Medical School shows that a two-night forest-bathing trip gives an immune-system boost that lasts for a month.

Gesse, who divides his time between Spain and Portugal, started running sessions near Lisbon for groups of 14- to 18-year-olds almost two years ago. Each consists of a structured mile-long walk that takes around two-and-a-half to three hours. It begins with group reflection. Then everyone heads off through the forest together in silence, with intermittent invitations to awaken the senses by walking barefoot, for example, or to sit alone with eyes closed, before a closing tea ceremony.

Memories and feelings, including grief, often surface. "We don't say what the kids should feel, what they should do, we just witness it," Gesse says. Over a series of walks, he says he sees the teenagers start to feel more confident and develop feelings of trust, belonging and self-knowledge. "It's amazing how they change; how they learn self-management. They talk afterwards about feeling at peace, or feeling free, or calm. And you see how their faces change. You see their realisation – 'I don't need to be happy, I don't need to be sad, I just need to be me.'" shinrin-yoku.pt

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