

Author: Louise Horsfall, Suntrap Tutor

## **How nature helped me survive thirteen years of 'lockdown'**

The current lockdown situation, with all its restrictions, is nothing new to me. Nor, to millions of others, who have been confined to their homes and isolated from their communities due to their mental or physical health. I had Chronic Fatigue Syndrome or ME for thirteen years and was bedridden for much of that time. I was isolated not only from family and friends but my beloved nature. However, nature helped me survive and even thrive during that difficult period. In hindsight, I can see I am stronger for my experiences. Let me share how nature can help you too, even if you cannot step outside.

Nature is always changing, and brings that vital 'spice of life' that we need mentally and emotionally. As lockdown has been during spring, we cannot miss the transformation of the natural world around us. However, every season and every week nature offers us something new and interesting if we raise our awareness. The key is to pay full attention to whatever elements of nature you have access to. Try to let go of your worries, put away distracting devices and fully engage your senses: look at details, listen for distinction, 'smell the roses', as it were. Recording what you notice is a wonderful way to immerse yourself more fully. You could photograph, write, paint or draw to journal your experience and you will appreciate far more richness.

Nature is always there for us, like the best of friends. You may know from personal experience that nature improves your mood so making even ten minutes of 'nature time' in your day can be very restorative. If we seek to understand the natural world better, we will gain more from our relationship – just like with people. We may be restricted in our access but we can get to know our local area more intimately.

Be curious: asking which bird is singing and which tree you can see?

Observe on a tiny scale: lose yourself watching a spider craft its web or watching visitors to a single flower. (Even if you are indoors, you can visualise past experiences, drawing on as many senses as possible and it will have a positive effect on your health, like a mini holiday.)

As you tune into the natural world, its familiarity and rhythm can bring great stability to an ever-changing human world.

Nature teaches us life lessons. This should be no surprise because we are part of it but sometimes we forget! With an open mind, even children can draw profound and memorable lessons from the ways nature handles challenges, for example.

Spring reminds us that good times follow the hard times and even in winter we can see the buds that promise that new start. Furthermore, the hardship of winter is necessary for healthy ecosystems, just as it can be for our personal development. We can observe nature's resilience in never giving up (like the plants growing through the pavement cracks). However, note how it uses its energy wisely: the bee doesn't fly on bitter winter's day; it waits for spring. Nature can teach us much about patience and preparation, especially in times when we can't do everything we might like to!

Finally, the natural world works in cycles. It is not always summer or midday and the pattern of energy and activity reflects this: There is a time for preparation, activity, rest, and renewal. As humans, we often try to ignore this and aim for prolonged frenetic activity, at our ultimate cost. We need preparation, self-care, reflection and rest in order to sustain ourselves long term. Try to include time to energise and motivate, reflect and unwind as well as your key tasks of the day. Do what the rest of nature does!

Here are my hard-earned tips for coping with lockdown and using nature to support your well-being:

- Notice details and changes in the natural world around you to enrich your day
- Spend some time with an aspect of nature every day, or immersing yourself in your richest memories
- Use this opportunity to learn about the natural world on your doorstep; getting to know it like a familiar friend
- Think of a quality you would like to strengthen (e.g. resilience) and look for ways nature can demonstrate it to you

Remember that just as seasons change, this time will pass. Perhaps in time to come, you will reflect on how it helped you grow.