

A calmer, happier you? One everyday escape may hold the key

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Credit: Unsplash

A walk through a park may do more than clear your head—it could measurably improve your mental health. In one of the largest reviews of its kind, researchers analyzed nearly 4,000 studies involving more than 10 million people and found a consistent pattern: individuals who spent

time walking, gardening, or simply sitting in natural environments reported lower levels of anxiety, stress, and depression. It's nature as medicine, backed by the numbers.

However, the results come with an important caveat. In most of the studies, time spent in nature was compared with doing nothing at all rather than with active treatments. In effect, nature was up against passive "controls" in most cases. So, while the mental health gains look promising, the analysis leaves open a key question: how does a walk in the park compare with other proven ways to boost mental well-being?

Nature on prescription? A forest of evidence

Mental health is an urgent global issue—more than 1 billion people worldwide live with anxiety, depression or related conditions. Nature-based interventions (NBIs) have emerged as a promising strategy. NBIs are simply activities in natural settings meant to boost mental (and physical) well-being. Think forest bathing, community gardening or a riverside meditation.

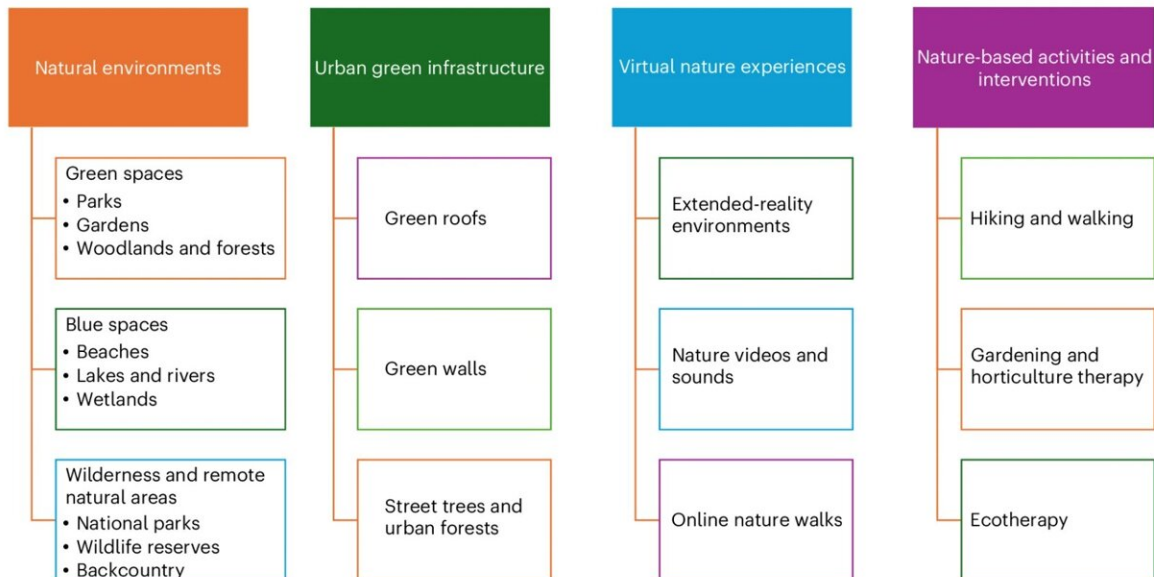
To gain clarity, a new study, published in [*Nature Human Behaviour*](#) took a bird's-eye view. Led by Esmaeel Saeedy Robat, the team conducted a systematic overview and second-order meta-analysis. They gathered 116 systematic reviews on NBIs and combined data from 30 of them.

In total, these covered 3,870 original studies and over 10 million people. The reviewers rated each meta-review for quality and bias, then pooled the results, effectively running a meta-analysis of meta-analyses to find consistent patterns.

Big drops in stress and anxiety

What did this mountain of data reveal? In a word: major benefits. Overall, time in nature slashed negative outcomes. Compared to controls, people in [NBIs](#) had much lower stress, anxiety and depression scores (overall effect around -0.69 standard deviations).

The biggest wins were seen for anxiety (≈ -0.83) and depressive symptoms (≈ -0.72). Even heart rates were lower (≈ -0.70). In practical terms, subjects were measurably calmer and less anxious after green outings.



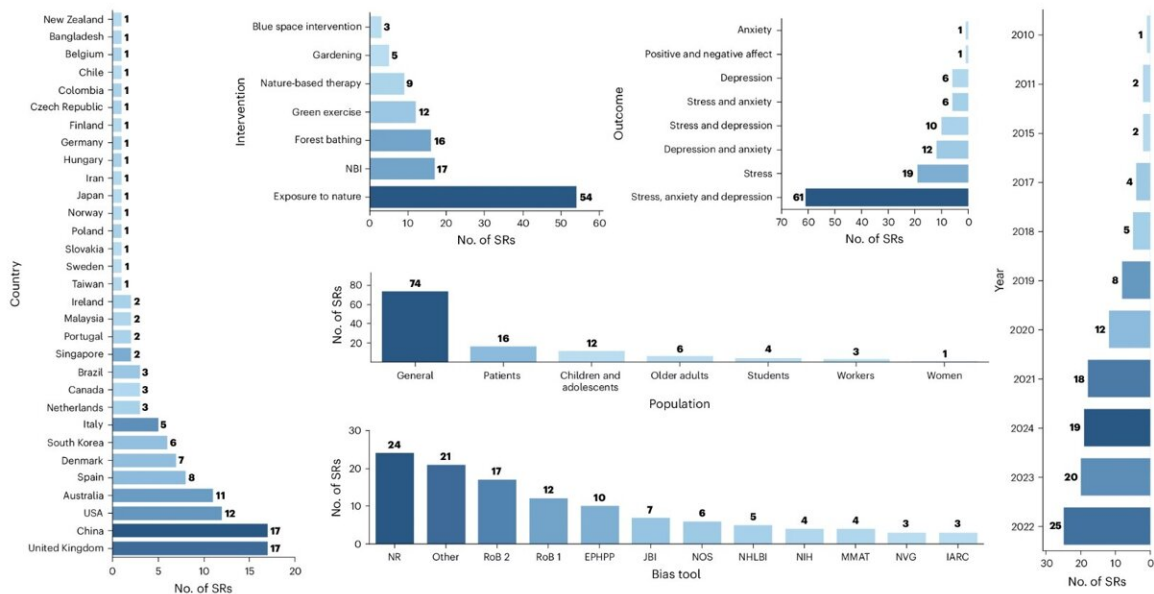
Typology of NBIs. *Nature Human Behaviour* (2026). DOI: 10.1038/s41562-026-02434-3

What's more, NBIs didn't just remove bad feelings; they boosted positive mood. Participants reported significantly higher positive effects and far greater relaxation after spending time in nature.

Overall mood shot up by about +0.90, and relaxation jumped by an impressive +2.85. In other words, people left feeling notably more relaxed and upbeat. As one author put it, "NBIs were effective in reducing overall negative outcomes compared with controls," showing nature's mental lift firsthand.

Still, scientists urge caution. Most studies used passive control groups (like quiet rest), not active comparators. This means we know nature beats doing nothing, but do not yet know whether it beats other interventions. Also, "nature-based interventions" covered a huge range—from brief park walks to weeks of forest retreats—so results were lumped together.

Definitions and methods varied, making it hard to pinpoint which exact activities work best. The authors also note that studies from Africa and South America are sparse, so evidence is skewed toward wealthier countries. This leaves a critical gap: is nature a true medical alternative, or simply a better-than-nothing baseline?



More high-quality trials needed

The researchers conclude that nature clearly helps, but stress requires more rigorous tests. "The findings confirm NBI benefits but highlight the need for high-quality primary studies with active comparators," they write.

Future trials should pit time in nature against other therapies (like exercise classes or counseling) to see how much extra benefit it adds. Clearer protocols and more diverse participants would also strengthen the case.

Despite the caveats, the implications are exciting. [NBIs](#) could become a low-cost supplement to therapy or prevention. Imagine doctors "prescribing a park" for mild anxiety, or schools creating gardens as stress outlets. For individuals, the takeaway is simple: step outside. Even short walks among trees or beside water can have a big impact. "If you feel overwhelmed," one researcher says, "a green walk or garden session can be surprisingly therapeutic."

As mental health challenges grow, this research offers a timely reminder that sometimes the simplest remedies are the most natural. Spending time by trees, lakes, or fields could become a widely used way to boost well-being. Nature may not cure everything, but it's a powerful tool, one we can all use more often.

More information: Esmaeel Saeedy Robot et al, A systematic

overview and second-order meta-analysis of nature-based interventions for stress, anxiety and depression, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2026).
[DOI: 10.1038/s41562-026-02433-4](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-026-02433-4)

The healing power of nature reduces stress, anxiety and depression, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2026). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-026-02434-3](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-026-02434-3)

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