

Outdoor Time as a Wellness Practice: Why I Start My Day with It

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Most mornings, before my day as a clinical director and therapist really begins, I move my body on purpose. The start time changes depending on my schedule — sometimes it's 5:00 AM, sometimes it's later, but the pattern is the same: I get up, I get moving, and I do it before the demands of the day have a chance to pile up.

Here's the mind-set shift that made it stick: I don't negotiate with myself about how hard it is to move when it's dark outside (or when my bed is warm and the house is quiet). Instead, I focus on how I'll feel after — the steadier mood, clearer thinking, and the sense that I've already done something good for myself. That “after” feeling carries into the rest of my day, and over time it stops being a difficult effort and becomes a habit.

That personal routine is also a clinical observation I see again and again: intentional outdoor activity — especially when it's consistent and values-driven — can be one of the most reliable, low-cost supports for both physical and mental wellness.

Why the Outdoors Help

We all know movement is helpful. What's especially compelling is that nature exposure itself appears to add measurable benefits on top of activity alone.

In a well-known Stanford-led experiment, participants who took a 90-minute walk in a natural setting showed reduced

rumination (that repetitive, self-focused loop that can feed anxiety and depression) and decreased activity in a brain region associated with rumination — effects not seen in those who walked in an urban environment.

Larger-scale research syntheses also supports an association between green space exposure and better mental health outcomes, including lower depression and anxiety overall.

Reviews of the broader nature-and-health literature suggest links between nature exposure and improvements across stress physiology and well-being markers (including mental health and sleep), with evidence strongest when people have repeated, real-world access.

In other words: when we combine movement and green space, we're often working on stress regulation from multiple angles all at once — physiological downshifting, attentional restoration, and a break from the cognitive “noise” that accumulates in high-demand lives.

Burnout Prevention: What Nature Does that Willpower Can't

Burnout isn't just “too much work.” It's often the chronic mismatch between stress load and recovery. Many of the professionals we serve — especially physicians and healthcare leaders — are extraordinarily good at pushing through. What they're frequently missing isn't toughness; it's reliable recovery.

Time outdoors can function as a recovery practice because it's concrete and bounded. For example:

- A 10–20 minute walk between sessions

- A “parking lot decompression” routine (two minutes of slow breathing, noticing the sky, feeling feet on the ground)
- A weekend hike that becomes a standing calendar appointment, not a vague intention
- Gardening that invites rhythm, sensory grounding, and visible progress

More importantly, outdoor wellness doesn't have to be solitary. Social connection is protective — so walking groups, community hikes, and recreation programs add a relational buffer against stress.

Evidence-Based “Micro-Practices”

If you're busy (and who isn't), consider these realistic options, including the 5–4–3–2–1 Outdoor Reset (2–5 minutes), a quick sensory grounding practice that helps shift the nervous system out of “go-go-go” mode. Focus on:

- 5 things you can see (colors, shapes, light, movement)
- 4 things you can feel (air on skin, feet in shoes, temperature, texture)
- 3 things you can hear (birds, traffic hum, wind, distant voices)
- 2 things you can smell (rain, trees, grass — if you can't smell much, notice “neutral” air)
- 1 thing you can taste (sip water/tea, or simply notice your mouth's current taste)

This is especially helpful between sessions or after emotionally intense work. Here are some additional micro-practices as well:

1. Mindfulness in motion. Pair your walk with a simple cue. “Every time I notice my mind racing, I come back to my footsteps.”

2. Nature and reflection (not rumination). If your brain tends to spin, try a single structured prompt. “What is one thing I can influence today?” Then return to your surroundings. The goal is perspective, not problem-solving.
3. Gardening as nervous-system care. Gardening and horticultural activities have been associated with improvements in well-being and, in some studies, reduced depressive symptoms — especially when done in a supportive, group-based format.

How this Connects to Physician Wellness

Physician wellness is not a luxury — it’s a patient-safety issue, a workforce issue, and a human issue. At Joyful Living, we see the cost of chronic stress every day: sleep disruption, irritability, emotional numbing, relationship strain, and the quiet

sense of “I’m functioning, but I’m not okay.”

That’s why we’re grateful to be part of a community that invests in wellness initiatives — and why the LCMS Fundraising Gala on May 2nd benefitting the Physician Wellness Program matters.

The gala supports physician wellness efforts that help reduce isolation, strengthen protective supports, and expand access to meaningful resources. Joyful Living’s work aligns closely with those goals: helping people build sustainable coping strategies, strengthen connection, and recover a sense of agency in the middle of demanding lives.

A Simple Invitation

If you want a practical starting point, borrow my mind-set shift: don’t decide based on how it feels before you go outside — decide based on the “after.” The calm that comes later is

often worth the early effort.

And if today is the day you can’t manage a hike, a garden project, or a group activity, make it smaller: step outside, breathe, and let nature do what it does best — remind your nervous system that it’s allowed to come down. ♦

As Joyful Living Behavioral Health partners with the Lane County Medical Society through the Physician Wellness Program (PWP), we are honored to support physicians in finding their own sustainable ways forward through confidential, no-cost counseling and a space designed specifically for you as a physician — not just as a provider of care. Information about accessing the PWP is available through the LCMS website. We encourage you to consider it as one more tool in your wellness toolkit.

Suffer from Joint Pain?

- Achilles Tendinopathy Embolization
- Frozen Shoulder: Shoulder Embolization
- Knee Arthritis: Genicular Artery Embolization (GAE)
- Plantar Fasciitis Embolization (PFE)
- Thumb/Finger Arthritis: Embolization

Have Vascular Issues?

- Angioplasty/Stenting
- Bleeding Hemorrhoids: Hemorrhoids Artery Embolization (HAE)
- Prostate Enlargement: Prostate Artery Embolization (PAE)
- Uterine Fibroids: Fibroid Embolization (UFE)
- Dialysis Access

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