

A Five Senses Nature Meditation

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Introduction

Veterinarians and veterinary staff can be painfully aware of the need for personal wellbeing in maintaining a healthy veterinary practice. Healers in a community must be supported in order to provide their much-needed services to others. For veterinarians, particularly holistic veterinarians, a connection with nature can be close at hand if we take even a few moments during a busy day to appreciate our patients. The animals we care for, along with herbs and other natural substances used in healing, provide regular reminders of our interdependence and our places as humans in the ecology of the natural world. The following meditation is a core activity to bring awareness of self and community through connecting with nature, while also promoting relaxation and personal wellness.

Getting outdoors is a wonderful way to enhance personal wellbeing. We often spend our time outdoors doing something—walking, running, biking, hiking, playing sports, or gardening; even having a picnic is “doing” something. What if you had a special place outside where you could go to just be? You might have a favorite bench in a park to sit and watch squirrels or a chair in your yard where you enjoy a cup of tea and listen to the birds. Creating an outdoor garden at your place of work can become a wonderful space for staff to pause during the day. This special place does not have to be a remote or idyllic setting, although that can be lovely when possible. The best spot is one that can be reached quickly and easily. Intentionally visiting the same outdoor location on a regular basis is a great way to learn the flora and fauna of your area. When weather or other limitations make the outdoors challenging, simply finding a window to enjoy the sights and sounds of nature can be beneficial.

Any amount of time in nature, even 5 minutes, can be healing. Spending at least 20 minutes quietly in one spot can allow birds and other creatures to become comfortable with your presence and return to their normal routines. This cultivates a relaxed, familiar environment for observing the natural world and its inhabitants. Of course, be careful not to disturb the animals, particularly any nests or dens. This

might put them in danger or cause them to not return to the area. A quiet place not regularly disturbed by people is ideal, though many wild animals adapt to regular human activity. Becoming aware of the habits of animals, growth stages of plants, weather patterns, and more can be an enriching way to connect with nature and the changing seasons.

This “sit spot” is also the perfect location for quiet meditative moments. The Five Senses Meditation is a powerful way to increase awareness, reduce anxiety, and enjoy nature all at the same time. Learning these techniques can create brain patterns of relaxation and mindfulness that become activated every time you step outside, even for a few minutes. This meditative exercise is meant to develop the 5 primary senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste). When attention is drawn to these senses, it can help shut down cyclical thought patterns and bring us closer to a relaxed meditative state. It can ground us and draw focus to what is happening around us. Spending more time being conscious of the present moment is particularly good to reduce the stress, worry, and anxiety that develop when we dwell too intently on the future or the past.

Just as animals rely most on their strongest senses, humans have some senses that function more predominantly than others. Animals and people that have a decreased function or absence of one sense often make up the deficit by strengthening other senses out of necessity. Working with our individuality, we can develop senses we might otherwise ignore. As with any form of self-care, be aware of your own needs and take only what is useful to you from this exercise.

Five Senses Meditation

Move slowly and quietly to your sit spot. Find a relaxed position, trying to move very little to avoid disturbing any birds or other animals that may enter the area for foraging or daily activities. Take a few long deep breaths to settle into your body. Feel the ground (or chair) beneath you; look around to orient yourself in the space. When you are comfortable, begin by focusing on one sense at a time. Do this with relaxed, open curiosity.

To improve awareness, you may start by taking a day or week to develop each sense individually.

Sight

Sight is a primary sense for modern humans. Road signs, books, videos, and digital input all rely heavily on sight, but we are often focused on details, missing the bigger picture. As you sit, open up your peripheral vision. How far can you see above, below, and to each side without moving your head or eyes? Tune in to movements—can you identify a bird or other animal by the way it moves? What colors do you see? Close your eyes, think about focusing on one color, picture something of that color, and then open your eyes to see if that color jumps out at you more distinctly. By focusing on colors and patterns, we can begin to pick out specific plants and creatures that previously blended into the natural world.

Sound

Again, we use this sense a lot as humans, but what sounds are you usually tuning into? Close your eyes to better concentrate on sound without the visual input. Can you hear the quietest sound? An insect on a blade of grass? What is the farthest sound you can hear? Which direction did it come from? Try to distinguish individual bird vocal characteristics. Can you hear the wind moving across the landscape? What do the plants sound like, and what does this tell you about them? Can you understand what is happening around you solely by what you hear?

Touch

How often do you pay close attention to the sense of touch? We might be aware of heat or cold, warnings of danger, but what about the subtle cues our world is giving us? How does the earth feel to your bare feet? What is the texture of tree bark, rocks, soil, or leaves? Can you feel the direction the wind is coming from? Does the air feel dry or moist? Focus on temperature, texture, softness/hardness, roughness/smoothness, sharpness, stickiness, or other qualities.

Smell

What do you smell around you? How often do you use your sense of smell when there is not a strong or offensive odor? Are there subtle scents in the wind? Where are they coming from? Can you describe them? Can you perceive how moisture in the air or your nostrils affects your sensitivity to smell? Do different seasons or types of weather smell differently? What does snow smell like?

Taste

Choose something to taste in the environment around you. Be careful of toxic plants or unknown substances. Take the time to slow down and experience taste. Can you detect sweet, salty, bitter, pungent, or sour tastes? Does it feel astringent, drying, moistening, slimy, gritty? Is there

another word you would use to describe the taste? Does it remind you of something? What does the rain taste like? Have you noticed how interlinked the senses of taste and smell are?

Pulling it all together

After you have spent time exploring each sense on its own, try using 2 or 3 at a time. Listen closely in all directions, and then open your eyes to add sight. Can you see or hear a gust of wind coming in the trees before you feel it touch your skin? Notice your senses spreading out to better understand the world around you. How does it feel to use your senses in this way?

Using the senses to explore nature can be a more accessible form of meditation and development of mindful awareness, particularly for people who struggle with stillness and quieting active thoughts. It expands our innate skills for awareness and connects us with the outside world, moving the focus away from our thoughts and concerns. This expansion of awareness can have the added benefit of enhancing the ability to recognize subtle changes in our fellow human beings and our animal patients. Behaviors, vocal patterns, actions, and reactions begin to make more sense as we relate to all beings, creating deeper connections and understanding. Spending time with plants as they move through their life cycles has much to teach us. Herbalists especially notice this, but we all can benefit from the lessons of the plants. Sharing nature observations and discoveries with friends, family, and coworkers creates much-needed ripples of awareness, gratitude, and appreciation throughout our world. Reconnecting with nature can help remind us of what brought us to veterinary medicine in the first place.

“The goal of life is to make your heartbeat match the beat of the universe, to match your nature with Nature.”
- Joseph Campbell

Acknowledgments

Kris August, DVM is a veterinary herbalist and educator. She created the 9-month interactive online course “Self-Care Through the Cycles of Nature” to explore different aspects of wellness through nature connection, including sensory meditation.

For more information on sit spots and nature observations:

- Young, J. What the Robin Knows: How Birds Reveal the Secrets of the Natural World. 2012. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Company
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- Wilderness Awareness School – Kamana Naturalist Training <https://wildernessawareness.org>