

FOREST BATHING & SENSITIVITY

This essay is about a research project to find out the possible effects Forest Bathing may have on sensitive people, as there is very limited research on this topic. Before entering into the project details, as a way of introduction, I would like to give a brief description of both forest bathing and sensitivity. Forest bathing, or “Shinrin-Yoku” in Japanese, is the art of intentionally connecting with nature as a way to enhance health and well-being. It involves taking short, slow-paced, walks to mindfully tune our senses and our being into the forest habitat and atmosphere. It is an evidence-based intervention that began in Japan in the 1980’s to counteract the effects of psycho-physical and spiritual conditions emerging from modern living, such as feeling disconnected to self and others, self-centredness, addictions, over consumerism, digital overwhelm, chronic stress and anxiety, to mention just a few.

After nearly two decades of academic research, sensitivity is now recognised as a human trait, rather than a mental health condition to be treated. It is a trait that describes the ability sensitive people have to perceive and feel emotions intensely and process stimulation from the environment more deeply. According to early findings (1) 20 percent of the population in the UK is highly sensitive while more recent studies suggest that there may be three groups of sensitive people; (2) Here 40 percent of people are considered moderately sensitive, while low-and high-sensitive individuals each comprise about 30 percent of individuals and the world statistics reflect closely the UK figures. While we all have sensitive traits some people are more sensitive than others and they are strongly affected by both adverse and positive experiences in their lives. Their nervous systems are designed to observe subtleties of life while living in a blunt, over-stimulating and often insensitive world. This can translate into high levels of stress and anxiety for many sensitives, who often have to withdraw from the world into a safe, quiet space.

According to ‘Highly Sensitive Refuge’, Forest Bathing offers an optimal soothing and grounding form of self-care for sensitive people. Moreover, it has been shown that sensitive people, because of the way their brain processes information, find it considerably easy and restorative to connect with nature and appreciate its patterns, cycles and rhythms. (3.) As a Shiatsu therapist, I have been working for several years with people who identify as sensitives and have developed an understanding on how to support them through the medium of touch-communication. Here in this context, I was curious to find out how sensitive people would be affected by forest bathing and what activities they may prefer during the walks. Given the lack of existing data, I was advised by the tutor of the ‘Nature and Therapy UK’, Stefan Batjoris, who supported me throughout the various stages of this project, to carry out primary research to assess how a group of people who identify themselves as sensitives, would be affected by a series of 4 weekly forest bathing walks. The walks were offered free of charge to the participants and thanks to a local company, the ‘Woodland Presents’, who promotes ecological events in the forest, I was given a grant to use ‘The Glade’, an eco-building that includes indoor and outdoor spaces. The 4 participants (3 females and 1 male) who voluntarily committed to the 4 weeks study, were recruited via advertising in the local community, after enquiries had been received from 22 people who found it difficult to attend all of the walks.

The group were invited to participate in the walks in a local woodland, at a slow pace, while mindfully tuning their senses into the forest atmosphere. During the two & half hour walks the participants were offered a variety of invitations to help them to forge an embodied connection with themselves and with various elements they encountered in the forest, from trees, to the ground, plants, stones, river, wind and sky. In addition to exploring connection with the 5 senses, they were invited to explore grounding and alignment of their posture, breathing practices, mindful reflection, playful expression through voice and sound, the use of imagination with visualizations, making collective installations through gathering and offering natural objects they had gathered in the forest and which had meaning for them, poetry, group sharing as well as having space on their own to find their way to connect with the forest.

Each of the four walks followed a different trail through the forest, so that a variety of ambiances could be sensed throughout the study. The walks included a few pauses along the way, chosen as the ideal playground for the particular activities explored. In all of the walks we paused at the 'The Glade', either at the start or at the end of the walk. Gathering there made a difference to the study as it offered a safe and sheltered space, particularly at the start of the project, where the initial group bonding took place and the ground rules for working together were offered. Attitudes of respect and fostering a reciprocal relationship with the forest habitat, with the other than human world, as well as with each other in the group, underpinned the whole study.

Two different scales were used to assess the changes before and after each walk. A 27-item self-report HSP (Highly Sensitive Scale) measure (1997 E. Aron) and a 12-item self-report HSP measure (2020 Pluess, M., Lionetti, F., et al) both measuring environmental sensitivity in adults, after obtaining permission from both of the scales' creators to use in the study. The changes on both scales are measured through a 7-point Likert scale where 1 represents no difference at all and 7 measures extreme difference. Each participant was asked to fill the questionnaires online before and after the walks, anonymously - using number & letter codes. I also collected data for myself and my partner who assisted me during the 4 walks, in the same way I did for all participants. I did this as we also both identify ourselves as sensitive people, in different ways, and also because it would be helpful for the project to collect more data.

On walks 1 & 4 I used the 27-item questionnaire and on walks 2 & 3 I used the 12-item one. As well as the data from the questionnaires, the participants' anecdotal feedback was gathered during and after the 4 walks via email. On the second walk one of the group participants had Covid, so she could not attend that walk. Originally, I was going to use only the 27-item questionnaire prior to the first and after the last walk, but after seeking advice from a researcher connected to the 'Nature and Therapy School', I decided to use both scales on different walks, to be able to gather more data and to see if there were differences in sensitivity after each individual walk, as well as before and after the 4 walks.

After going through the summary of the results for all the participants I made note only of those questions where there was a difference before and after the walk of 2 or more on the Likert scale. I then created a chart for each participant, showing all the question numbers as columns (1-27), and all the “before and after” data in weekly rows (1-4) – first “before”, then “after”, then the numerical difference between them. A reduced number generally indicated an increased tolerance, or reduced reaction, towards the situation the question related to. I then highlighted all the cells where there was a more substantial difference (of more than one).

Next, I totalled all the reductions that there were for each of the questions – totalling the 27-Questionnaire and 12-Questionnaire questions separately. I then created a chart in which I summarised the results for each of the questions, for all of the participants. In the 27-Question version, the following question showed the greatest numerical reduction: “Do you try hard to avoid making mistakes or forgetting things?”. Other questions with a significant reduction included: “Do you become unpleasantly aroused when a lot is going on around you?”, “Are you bothered by intense stimuli, like loud noises or chaotic scenes?”, and so on. In the 12-Question version, the following two questions showed the greatest numerical reduction: “Do you get rattled when you have a lot to do in a short amount of time?” and “Do changes in your life shake you up?”

The conclusions drawn by observing the data collected, were that the forest bathing walks had most impact in reducing the sense of pressure and anxiety that sensitive people in the study experienced when they have to do too many things in a short period of time as well as when they hear sudden loud noises, face change or chaos in their lives. It emerged that the participants were able, after the walks, to enter a space within themselves where they didn’t feel so pressured by the same questions they answered earlier, before the walk. It also highlighted that the more intellectual questions, that didn’t place them in a situation of high pressure and anxiety, showed very little change between “before and after” the walks. Questions like: “Are you conscientious?”, or “Do you seem to be more sensitive to pain?”, or “Do you seem to be aware of subtleties in your environment?”

The participants’ anecdotal feedback collected during each walk revealed how they appreciated tuning their senses with the forest, the sense of being one with the forest, as well as finding their grounding there. During the invitation of lying on the forest ground one person reported how amazing it was for her to hear the crunchiness of the forest floor as well as the sound of the birds and the wind, as she had previously suffered perforation in both of her ear drums. Another person at the offering to the forest invitation, presented a small tree branch and commented how he felt the branch was alive and that he could feel and hear the story of how the tree where the branch originated once was. One person reported how she felt aroused by the buzzing sound of a bumble bee caught in her hair. And another reported how she appreciated the simple yet powerful act of walking with awareness of her feet and legs. She found it very grounding and supporting staying in her interoceptivity while being aware of what was happening in the landscape.

After going through the participants' feedback, following the project, I have noticed that all the participants highly valued having been a part of the study. They stated that the four walks made a great difference to their sensitivity as well as to their sense of well-being. They reported feeling calmer, more grounded, more resilient to spending time in nature and more sensitive to the "Unus Mundus" experience the forest shared with them. They also appreciated the sharing and the support that being part of a sensitive group offered them as there was a sense of closeness and intimacy that had developed during the four weeks. One participant mentioned she would like to make a priority to walk in the forests, while another said she would like to return to sleep overnight in a place she felt close to in the woods. The forest invitations they enjoyed most were: spending time alone lying down in the forest and exploring being with the river, as well as walking slowly while being aware of the ground, their breath and the changes in space around them. For two participants, being guided by a partner to explore the tree while having their eyes closed was challenging as it felt unsafe. Several participants commented that their enjoyment of being in the forest was enhanced because they felt safe and understood by a sensitive guide, which was quite touching for me.

Even though this project only attracted a small group of people and it was quite a big undertaking for me, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to be of service to the participants who volunteered to take part. Over the four weeks it allowed me to get to know the participants better and how their sensitivity has been shaping their lives. I am also appreciative of having been able to explore how Forest Bathing can help reduce the pressure and the anxiety of having to live with certain limiting aspects of the sensitive trait and, at the same time, highlight the gift of the sensitive soul - that ability to be sensitive, compassionate and creative in the exchange with the forest. To put it in the words of Anthon St Marteen: "*...to feel intensely is not a symptom of weakness - it is the trademark of the truly alive and compassionate*". There is a high need for further research about Forest Bathing and Sensitivity, on a wider scale and with different ethnic and age groups. While I intend to continue exploring the effects of forest bathing on sensitive people, I hope that this project may also inspire other interested people and researchers to continue this work of surveying the range of benefits Forest Bathing can offer to sensitive people, perhaps to discover how sensitive people may be the best people to take to heart issues of forest and nature conservation (4.).

References:

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