

The '20-5-3' Rule Prescribes How Much Time You Should Spend Outside

Use this three-number formula to make yourself healthier and happier.

By Michael Easter, 2021

The herd of 400-pound caribou was running 50 miles an hour and directly at me. The 30 animals had been eating lichen in the Arctic tundra in Alaska when something spooked them. I was sitting in their escape route. The ground began to vibrate once they cracked 100 yards. At 50 yards, I could see their hooves smashing the ground and kicking up moss and moisture. Then they were at 40 yards, then 35.

I could hear their breathing, smell their coats, and see all the details of their ornate antlers. Just as I was wondering if the rescue plane would be able to spot my hoof-pocked corpse, one of the caribou noticed me and swerved. The herd followed, shaking the earth as they swept left and summited a hillcrest, their antlers black against a gold sky.

That moment when those caribou shook the earth also shook my soul. It was transcendent, wild as a religious experience. And it's not even the most intense thing I did in Alaska. I experienced savage weather, crossed raging rivers, and faced a half-ton grizzly. My brain was feeling less hunkered down in its typical foxhole—a state I'd compare to that of a roadrunner on meth, dementedly zooming from one thing to the next. My mind felt more like it belonged to a monk after a month at a meditation retreat. I just felt . . . better. The biologist E. O. Wilson put what I was feeling this way: "Nature holds the key to our aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive, and even spiritual satisfaction."

When I returned from the wild, my Zen-like buzz hung around for months. To understand what was happening, I met with Rachel Hopman, Ph.D., a neuroscientist at Northeastern University. She told me about the nature pyramid. Think of it like the food pyramid, except that instead of recommending you eat this many servings of vegetables and this many of meat, it recommends the amount of time you should spend in nature to reduce stress and be healthier. Learn and live by the 20-5-3 rule.

20 minutes

That's the amount of time you should spend outside in nature, like a neighborhood park, three times a week. Hopman led a new study that concluded that something as painless as a 20-minute stroll through a city botanical garden can boost cognition and memory as well as improve feelings of well-being. "But," she said, "we found that people who used their cell phone on the walk saw none of those benefits."

Other research discovered that 20 minutes outside three times a week is the dose of nature that had the greatest effect on reducing an urban dweller's levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

In nature, our brains enter a mode called "soft fascination." Hopman described it as a mindfulness-like state that restores and builds the resources you need to think, create, process information, and execute tasks. It's mindfulness without the meditation. A short daily nature walk—or even a walk down a tree-lined street—is a great option for people who aren't keen on sitting and focusing on their breath. But turn off your phone—alerts from it can kick you out of soft-fascination mode.

5 hours

The minimum length of time each month you should spend in semi-wild nature, like a forested state park. "Spending more time in wilder spaces does seem to give you more benefits," said Hopman.

A 2005 survey conducted in Finland found that city dwellers felt better with at least five hours of nature a month, with benefits increasing at higher exposures. They were also more likely to be happier and less stressed in their everyday lives.

The Finnish government then funded another study in 2014 in which the scientists dumped people in a city center, a city park, and a forested state park. The two parks felt more Zen than the city center. No shocker. Except that those walking in a state park had an edge over the city-park people. They felt even more relaxed and restored. The takeaway: The wilder the nature, the better.

3 days

This is the top of the pyramid. Three is the number of days you should spend each year off the grid in nature, camping or renting a cabin (with friends or solo). Think: places characterized by spotty cell reception and wild animals, away from the hustle and bustle.

This dose of the wildest nature is sort of like an extended meditation retreat. Except talking is allowed and there are no gurus. It causes your brain to ride alpha waves, the same waves that increase during meditation or when you lapse into a flow state. They can reset your thinking, boost creativity, tame burnout, and just make you feel better.

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This is likely why one study found that three days in the wild boosts creativity and problem-solving abilities and another found that U. S. military vets who spent four days white-water rafting were still buzzing off the wild a week later. Their PTSD symptoms and stress levels were down 29 and 21 percent, respectively. Their relationships, happiness, and general satisfaction with their lives all improved as well.

When I returned from Alaska, my wife and I moved to the edge of the desert in Las Vegas. She wanted a shorter commute, and I wanted more access to nature. I now walk my dogs through red-rock trails for at least 20 minutes daily and on Sunday do a long trail run deep into the canyons to rack up my five-hour quota for the month. This summer, I’m planning a weeklong backcountry fly-fishing trip in Idaho’s Frank Church–River of No Return Wilderness Area. Hoping I’ll return less frazzled, fitter, and feeling more alive.

Adapted from the book *The Comfort Crisis: Embrace Discomfort to Reclaim Your Wild, Happy, Healthy Self*, by Michael Easter, out now from Rodale Books. Copyright © 2021 by Michael Easter. This story appeared in the June 2021 issue of *Men's Health* with the title *The 20-5-3 Nature Cure*.