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Back to Nature

MEET FOUR LOCALS WHO CONNECT THEIR SOULS TO THE MOUNTAINS—AND LEARN HOW YOU CAN, TOO.

by CARRIE VISINTAINER

photos by MATT GRAVES PHOTOGRAPHY

In our hyper-connected modern world, we've all heard the terms: Nature immersion. Forest bathing. Wilderness therapy. And it sounds so idyllic, right? Getting away from it all, disconnecting from electronics, reconnecting with trees and flowers and streams. Well, it turns out there's good reason to take note, backed by science. "When you spend time in nature you can reduce stress and boost your mood," explains Dr. Eryn Scott, a naturopathic doctor at Mountain River Naturopathic Clinic in Frisco. She notes that happy hormones like serotonin and dopamine are produced when you exercise, and when you do so outdoors, a recent study showed significantly reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol, when compared to exercising indoors. In addition, "green" exercise has been shown to improve self-esteem, even when done in short bursts.

There's also a growing body of research into the microbiome which shows that certain strains of microorganisms that are beneficial for those with anxiety and depression can be found in the soil. Simply by connecting with the earth, putting your hands or feet in the dirt, you can reap the rewards. When she sees patients struggling with anxiety, attention disorders or hyperactivity, Dr. Scott says, "I encourage them to come back to what's grounding and nourishing, like gardening and outdoor exploration."

So how can you take charge of your own rewilding? In Summit County we're surrounded by possibilities, yet even so, it can be hard to find the time to turn off distractions and get outside. We talked to four locals with unique connections to nature to get their seeds of inspiration, plus their personal picks on where go.

DREW MIKITA *The Wilderness Healer*

LICENSED PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR



When you schedule an appointment with Drew Mikita, he'll explain that in your session you will not be lying on a sofa. In fact, you won't even be indoors.

You'll be outside.

Depending on the time of year, this might mean walking a trail, making turns on the ski hill, or riding a bike, immersed in wildflowers or fall leaves. "I've found that people are much more receptive to talking about their feelings, looking at their life, and understanding who they are when they're out in nature," he says.

This is something he learned on his own personal journey. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder several years ago, a condition that he says "made me feel unbelievably lost," he hit the books trying to find direction. He discovered that the Vitamin D we get

from sunshine can decrease depression, and that the chemicals our bodies produce when playing outside are known to combat mental illness. "You can take it in a pill, or get it outdoors," he says.

He chose the latter, moving from Ohio to Colorado in 2007, and immediately he found that his forays into the forest helped him process his emotions. "The amount of tears that I've shed onto my skis and my bike is significant," he says. "And it gave me that forum to look within myself." Over time, this empowered him to rebuild his life and ultimately serve others through his private practice, and through teaching at Colorado Mountain College and writing his "Be Awesomer" blog.

When not in his outdoor office, Mikita trains for endurance races. "But I'm also a yogi,"

he says, emphasizing that a combination of adrenaline sports and stillness works nicely for balance in his life. It can be therapeutic to simply sit quietly, looking at a beautiful place. Maybe even while reclining on a sofa.

Go There

Head to Mt. Baldy, which is a great spot for almost anything: biking, hiking, even watching meteor showers.

Boreas Pass has exceptional views, and is accessible for people with lower fitness levels.

Check out French Gulch, which has limitless biking for the pedaling enthusiast.