

STRESS & ANXIETY PATHWAY



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Purpose: Research context document

Note: This document does not describe a clinical intervention and does not claim therapeutic outcomes.

Executive Summary

This document outlines the research context informing the Stress / Anxiety Pathway.

Research across environmental psychology, psychophysiology, and stress science suggests that certain natural environments are associated with changes in stress markers, attention, and subjective experience. The evidence is indirect and variable in quality. Accordingly, this pathway is offered as supportive context rather than treatment.

Purpose of This Document

This document provides research context for the Stress / Anxiety Pathway. It does not diagnose, treat, or replace care for anxiety disorders.

The Stress / Anxiety Pathway: experiential focus

The pathway emphasises slowness, sensory grounding, reduced cognitive demand, and time in natural environments without performance or goal-setting.

Participants are not asked to analyse anxiety, regulate their nervous system, or achieve calm. The focus is on reducing external demand.

Nature exposure and stress physiology

A substantial body of research has examined physiological responses to forest environments compared with urban settings.

Across multiple studies, forest exposure has been associated with:

- Reduced cortisol
- Changes in heart rate variability
- Lower blood pressure and pulse rate

These responses are commonly interpreted as correlates of reduced physiological stress.

Attention, overload, and mental rest

Research informed by Attention Restoration Theory suggests that natural environments engage attention in a gentle, non-directive manner.

Studies indicate potential associations with:

- Reduced mental fatigue
- Eased attentional overload
- Recovery from sustained cognitive effort

This may be relevant where anxiety involves hypervigilance or constant monitoring.

Sensory environments and stress recovery

Natural environments often provide:

- Repetitive, predictable sensory input
- Lower levels of sudden or intrusive stimulation
- Opportunities for embodied awareness without verbal processing

These qualities may feel supportive during periods of stress or anxiety.

Limitations of the Evidence

- Evidence is largely short-term
- Clinical anxiety populations are underrepresented
- Findings are associational
- Individual responses vary

This pathway does not claim therapeutic outcomes.

How this research informs the pathway

The research informs:

- Slow pacing
- Reduced instruction
- Emphasis on choice and simplicity
- Avoidance of outcome-based framing

Closing note

The Stress / Anxiety Pathway offers supportive conditions rather than solutions. It is designed to reduce demand, not to resolve internal states.

References

Park et al. (2010) — Physiological effects of forest environments

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Song et al. (2016) — Physiological effects of nature therapy (review)

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27527193/>

Kim et al. (2014) — Forest therapy program effects on mood & stress physiology

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Forest bathing & psychological outcomes (meta-analysis 2023) — anxiety & depression effects

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36864583/>