

Stargazing: Your New Mindful Hobby

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How often do you take the time to stop and look up at the night's sky? The benefits of connecting with nature are well known but so often we think about exploring the greenery around us in the daytime, when in fact, the dark nights give us just as many opportunities to enjoy our natural environment. Awe-inspiring and rewarding, stargazing is becoming more and more popular. And it's not just good fun – it can also play a key role in our emotional health. This was the subject of recent research by Coventry University which found that stargazing helps promote various aspects of wellbeing through what researchers describe as an "increased sense of flow through fascination and loss of time". Participants in the study reported feeling peaceful, relaxed and in awe of the natural world when looking at the night's sky and the researchers concluded that the activity can certainly be life-enhancing.

And that's not all. Other work conducted by the University of California-Irvine has revealed that a sense of awe – something often associated with stargazing – can make us more selfless and considerate of others. "Our investigation indicates that awe, although often fleeting and hard to describe, serves a vital social function," explains lead researcher Dr Paul Piff. "When experiencing awe, you may not, egocentrically speaking, feel like you're at the centre of the world anymore. By diminishing the emphasis on the individual self, awe may encourage people to forgo strict self-interest to improve the welfare of others."

There's even a whole practice of meditation dedicated to sky and stargazing activities. The theory is that looking up allows us to appreciate the bigger picture and see beyond the thoughts and feelings that are troubling us at that moment.

"Star and skygazing meditation is often said to have come from one of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism known as Dzogchen," explains meditation expert Susan Kaiser Greenland (susankaisergreenland.com). "I've heard it said that in Tibet there were caves built just for this purpose, where you couldn't see anything other than sky when you looked out.

"These practices help us remember and connect with the sky-like nature of our minds," she adds. "When we softly focus on the world above us, our bodies tend to relax, our minds tend to quiet, and it's harder to get tangled up in our thoughts. This practice reminds us that even when emotions cloud it, there's a sky-like awareness within us and that wide-open awareness has enough space and clarity to hold whatever feelings, thoughts, reactions, biases and sensations come and go in our heads."

Look up

Eager to get started? The good news is that stargazing can be an easy hobby to enjoy.

"Anyone can stargaze from their back garden," explains astronomer Seb Jay, who runs stargazing experiences and offers telescope hire across the UK (darkskytelescopehire.co.uk) "All you need is time to step outside on a clear night and let your eyes adjust to the darkness. The more rural your location, the better the view, but even from the middle of a city you'll be able to pick out some of the brighter stars and constellations with the naked eye."

If you don't want to invest in a telescope but do want to explore deeper into the cosmos, try mounting some binoculars on a steady tripod.

Seb recommends that beginners download a planetarium app on their phone or tablet to understand more about what they can see. "Once it is calibrated to your location you can switch on the GPS function and hold your device up to the sky. The screen will then show you the main stars and constellations visible in that direction," he explains.

For Seb, and many other stargazers across the country, there's something very special

about observing the night sky and physically connecting with the hundreds of stars that are out there. The constellations above us may not be sort of nature we naturally associate with our health and wellbeing, but they're not to be forgotten.

Super stars

Want to try a stargazing-based meditation? Follow Susan's step-by-step guide to enjoy inner calm

Stargazing cuts through many of the challenges people have when they learn to meditate. We relax, gaze at the sky, and explore what's happening at the moment.

- Sit or lie down comfortably and relax. Settle into the natural rhythm of your breathing.
- When your body feels relaxed, move your attention to your out-breath and lightly rest it there.
- Look at the horizon and rest your gaze. Keep your eyes soft and open, not focused on any particular object. Notice any changes that you see in the sky.
- When thoughts, emotions, and body sensations bubble up, let them be. If you do this, they tend to stay for a while and then fade away on their own.

Raise your gaze

Easy ways to discover the joys of stargazing

- Find a certified dark park: Discover areas near you that are certified as 'dark parks' – places where you can be sure of a certain level of darkness. darksky.org
- Download the Night Sky app: Identify stars, planets, constellations and satellites by simply holding your phone up to the sky – who knows what you could be sleeping under? Free, available on the App Store