



Observing the night sky can produce health benefits and feelings of happiness for stargazing, aurora viewing, meteor shower watching, or peaceful meditation on the sky.

Image credit:

Kira Gilbertson

## Stargazing for your Health

By Lauren Likkel

It turns out that stargazing is literally good for your health. Most people enjoy gazing up at a star-filled sky, often feeling better afterward without quite knowing why. Now, science is catching up to what we've felt all along: spending time under the night sky can boost physical and mental health.

Being “in nature” has health benefits. For example researchers have found that walking through green spaces boosts immune system white blood cell levels more than walking alongside city buildings. Nature really does change us, right down to the cellular level. And it makes sense that “nature” extends to the starry night sky. Indeed, research published last year in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* indicated that the more someone felt connected to the night sky, the more positive was their mental health and happiness.

I often feel a sense of awe when looking at a star-filled sky or an aurora, or viewing Saturn’s rings or the moon’s craters through a telescope. Several studies have shown that experiencing “awe” tends to lower heart rate, increase the presence of the happy-hormone oxytocin, and reduce inflammation.

Stargazing can be active and/or meditative. I love recognizing constellations, stars and planets, and looking through telescopes and get a thrill from the “Wow, look at that!” joy. Other people enjoy a more relaxed form of stargazing, lying back and simply soaking in the beauty and watching for meteors, letting their minds drift away from daily stress. This is close to deliberate “mindful stargazing”, observing the stars without evaluation or judgment (or technology!), keeping your mind on the stars and not on thoughts of the future or past. A few writers have recently used the term “*star bathing*” to refer to mindful stargazing, a take-off on “*forest bathing*” —the Japanese practice of immersing yourself in a forest for benefits to mental and physical health. Mindful stargazing is a form of meditation, which is beneficial for balancing stress.

The body’s response to stress is to flood our bodies with cortisol. This is great unless we live with on-going stress, since chronically high cortisol levels can lead to multiple health issues. But we can interrupt the overproduction of cortisol by “mindful” practices that quietly focus the mind on the present (like meditation, yoga, or – you guessed it --

stargazing). Research studies confirm that these practices can lead to measurable health benefits, such as reduced inflammation, lowered anxiety and depression, and a greater ability to fight off infections.

I don't imagine we'll ever be given a prescription for "20 minutes of stargazing daily" to lower blood pressure or reduce anxiety. But sometimes when I am enjoying the star-filled night sky, I will take time to do some "mindful stargazing" and literally stare into space, deliberately not thinking about anything, with a smile on my face.

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