

Beach Chemistry



By Lizzi Larbalestier



There is a difference between exposure to nature and connection with nature – I often talk in terms of developing an eco-centric world view linked to nature connectedness – something which is likened to having a deep ongoing relationship with nature. One where we are fully immersed and at one with the natural world – so much so that we do not distinguish between nature and self and as a result we consciously and consistently place value upon the whole ecosystem.

Nature exposure is something more fleeting and relates more specifically to including nature within our experiences... This is something we can each gently introduce for ourselves and to our clients for immediate benefit (and of course if we do this regularly enough, it may well over time lead to a shift in nature connectedness).

One client recently told me that getting a rescue dog has been a revelation for her. Whilst I am sure it has in lots of ways, she was referring to the fact that she is now getting a lot more 'nature exposure'. She described getting outdoors in all weathers and enjoying feeling more aware of nature's changing clock and her own circadian rhythm, noticing changes in temperature and "feeling more energised, resourceful and alive".

It is amazing the internal alchemy a dose of nature can create within us... but what do we mean by 'a dose'?

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Research from Exeter Medical School back in 2019 searched to discover an 'optimal' dose of nature. Their research suggested that even two hours per week could make a positive difference for our mental health and wellbeing... but of course there are so many variables in terms of the quality and frequency of our time in nature, for example if you take your phone out and scroll your emails whilst in nature you are likely to diminish the benefits gained.

I am an advocate for the ocean as my favoured natural space but there are few who would argue that being out in blue spaces doesn't make us feel better. The activities we undertake when exposed to nature are likely to promote a number of changes within our internal physiology and whilst I use coastal examples in all my articles, these insights can translate to any outdoor coaching location.

Let's look into some 'happy chemicals', asking how and why nature exposure promotes these and, importantly, how these link to our work as NLP professionals.

Have a think about any memories the term 'beach time' evokes for you. It

could be family holidays, bringing to mind a sense of nostalgia; perhaps it is simply the idea of time off for rest and relaxation. Maybe you are a regular recreational beach goer and for you the term 'beach time' conjures thoughts of surfing with friends or dining at a beach café. For lovers of scenery, the romance of watching the sun rise or go down over a coastal horizon can immediately create a shift in state.

As NLP professionals, we know that learning is state-dependent and, as coaches, it can be super useful to know a little about some happy neurochemicals at play in moments like these. By actively planning our outdoor coaching sessions and aligning our coaching programmes with our client's energy we can keep these potential 'resources' in mind, really making the most of our time outdoors.

Of course, for those who wish to dive a lot deeper into the neuroscience you will find volumes of reading material, but for now as modellers, and for practicality, let's chunk up to an abridged journey through a small selection of these and ask... so what?

Dopamine

Let's start with dopamine since this is a neurochemical linked to reward-seeking behaviour, for instance, setting goals (and to some extent achieving them) and therefore one which has obvious relevance in the domain of coaching.

She described getting outdoors in all weathers “feeling more energised, resourceful and alive”.

How does coaching outdoors promote dopamine?

Well, firstly dopamine’s link to ‘pleasure-pursuing activity’ can make the very fact that you are going to be working out in nature in and of itself something that boosts this neurotransmitter before our client even arrives. Artful pre-framing can have a vital role here too in creating a sense of expectancy.

Physical activity promotes an increase in dopamine, and if you plan to work ‘on the move’, taking any form of journey will provide a sense of beginning, middle and end – exploring and completing the route you planned out.

Perhaps you are working together whilst stand up paddling a stretch of river, or maybe you are taking a simple coastal walk – the very nature of travel can bring feelings of achievement.

Since dopamine can be somewhat addictive, finding a balance is key if we are to avoid our client attention becoming scattered... and here is where distilling our goals into smaller streams and stepping-stones can help.

Recognising progress can be tricky when working towards tougher aims – working spatially enables us to landmark how far we have come, creating anticipation for the next chapter. Dopamine will not give you longer-term subjective well-being, but it does support shorter bursts of step-by-step motivation.

Endorphins

These are the neurochemicals that inhibit pain and reduce symptoms of discomfort and as such they have a role to play in the alleviation of depression.

How does coaching outdoors impact endorphin production?

Once again, movement plays a key role here, particularly short bursts of higher intensity exercise, like walking up a steep sand dune. But exercise is not all. Enjoying amazing scenery, listening to birdsong, and laughter are found to be great ways of boosting endorphins. When we step outside, formality shifts and we hold our bodies with less tension, breathing more fully. Meditation boosts endorphins too, so even wave watching can help since we move into a blue mind meditative state when we observe swell.

Interestingly, ‘volunteering and giving’ has also been noted by the National Institute of Health as an activity that boosts endorphins – so that mini beach clean we might do whilst coaching at the coast is working its magic in more ways than simply through the metaphors we can create from it.

Oxytocin

Often described as the bonding hormone, oxytocin is linked to loyalty and intimacy.

How does coaching outdoors promote oxytocin?

Firstly, for those who have spent a lot of time on Zoom lately, we know all too well the level of connection we feel


when we work in person with clients; it allows a resonance far deeper than a screen can convey. Add to this working in territory that is less familiar (to the client), requiring a degree of trust and teamwork to navigate the terrain together, and we have the perfect conditions for boosting oxytocin.

Oxytocin has been linked to social bonding and inter group dynamics and there is certainly something tribal we feel when we spend time out in what we might view as our coastline or our local countryside.

Empathy too sits within this domain and watching wildlife at play can foster new and more deeply connected perspectives. Sharing a packed lunch on a coastal coaching adventure or physical contact in the form of helping somebody climb over a coast path stile can break down barriers and create bonds.

The links between oxytocin, compassion and pro social behaviour are well documented. Sharing self-transcendent experiences of awe, such as mind-blowingly beautiful scenery, can strongly influence vision alignment and decision-making, enabling our clients to create a greater sense of collective-self leading to deeply purposeful action.

Serotonin

I am sure most of us are familiar with time outdoors being linked to serotonin levels – a key influencer of our cognition and mood. Serotonin impacts us in many 

ways, including influencing our sleep patterns and our ability to learn.

How does coaching outdoors impact serotonin?

Natural daylight is one of the most common recommended remedies for optimising our serotonin levels. Making time to get outdoors in the hours of daylight during the winter, for instance, can combat the 'winter blues'.

A failure to take time to 'just be' increases our levels of cortisol (the body's alarm system and key stress hormone) and negatively impacts our serotonin levels. Taking our clients away from the hectic work environment allows focus and a rebalance of these key neurotransmitters.

Poor sleep habits negatively impact serotonin production. We have likely all experienced the type of deep sleep that follows plenty of fresh air and exercise. Coaching outdoors provides time and space to reflect and problem solve, and it can help as a precursor to a good night of sleep.

Exercise has been shown to influence all the happy neurochemicals mentioned in this article and serotonin is no

exception – research from Stanford University has shown that exercise in nature has a greater mood enhancing impact than in highly urbanised settings.

Serotonin is also linked to rejection sensitivity and self-esteem – pushing our boundaries, trying new things outdoors and developing positive feedback loops can boost our mood and resilience.

Adrenaline

This molecule has a huge role to play in our fight and flight responses. Of course, addiction to adrenaline can lead to chaotic hedonistic lifestyles – but occasionally putting our minds and bodies into a degree of pressure prepares us for dealing with life's challenges.

How does outdoor coaching influence adrenaline?

Stepping outside our comfort zone creates a surge of energy. I regularly encourage my clients to take up cold water immersion, for all the many benefits they can gain from challenging their nervous system in this way.

Perhaps the adrenaline hit is a little less extreme – walking along some high cliffs, for instance, or climbing over some rocks

to reach our destination on one of our slightly more demanding coastal rambles and awakening our awareness to our heartbeat and breath.

Due to the magic of empathy – even watching surfers in big swell can give a hit of adrenaline (cortisol also plays a role here) – the boost of energy this provides can ignite new insight during a coaching conversation at the coast.

Whilst adrenaline's link to mild anxiety might make it seem an odd one out in terms of the other neuro chemicals we have explored here, its ability to spark us to feel alive is a perfect antidote to boredom and stagnation.

In summary

Working outdoors undoubtedly allows us to bring our most creative minds to our NLP and coaching – whether we are in the role of coach or client. Each and every time we offer one another exposure to nature we are positively disrupting our and their neurochemistry significantly the moment we step outside. Raising our conscious awareness of this can add true depth to both our coaching in nature – and to the very nature of our coaching. ■

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Lizzi Larbalestier is an ICF professional blue health coach and coach trainer specialising in marine-based change work in Cornwall and California. Disarming humour supports a highly provocative coaching style and she uses the coast as a landscape for trajectory-led philosophical debate grounded in neuroscience. Lizzi is the founder of Going Coastal Blue and Director of Coaching for Blue Mind Works. For more information go to www.goingcoastal.blue