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## You're never too old to climb a tree

Author of 'The Tree Climber's Guide' explains how we can get back into the branches.



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October 13, 2015, 12:46 p.m.

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When was the last time you climbed a tree? (Photo: LoloStock/Shutterstock)

You may have spent your childhood shimmying up tree trunks and daringly testing the strength of trees' outer branches, but odds are your children don't do the same.

A 2011 survey by [Planet Ark](#) found that fewer than 20 percent of children climb trees and one in 10 children play outside once a week or less. In fact, children are more likely to injure themselves [falling out of bed](#) than out of a tree.

However, kids aren't the only ones who aren't climbing trees. Adults aren't either.

Until recently, [Jack Cooke](#), author of "The Tree Climber's Guide," hadn't climbed a tree in 20 years. He thinks the reasons once-frequent tree climbers quit as they age is both fear and shame. But while fear of leaving the ground behind is natural, he says our shame is a product of social conditioning.

"Adults are embarrassed to be seen in trees, and it's a vicious circle. It's such an unusual sight in the city that people don't know how to react. A lady spotted me 40 feet up a pine tree and rang the police to tell them a man was about to commit suicide."

Cooke started climbing again last summer while working in a London office that overlooked a park.

"I found an oak with low branches and climbed up to eat my lunch in the top of the tree," he said. "From that point, I started climbing every day and it quickly became an obsession."

His obsession led to a tree-climbing book that sparked a bidding war among publishers who clearly saw the appeal in providing children and adults with a guide to getting back in the branches.

"I was inspired by the disconnect between the way children and adults look at the natural world," Cooke said. "I also wanted to write about escape — trees are spaces where we can let our imagination run wild. The book focuses on climbing in [urban environments](#) as a way of connecting city dwellers to nature and breaking with routine."

Cooke certainly isn't the first adult to rediscover a love of tree climbing.

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The vague cultural concept doesn't translate easily into English, but it works.

In 1983, Peter Jenkins, a retired rock and mountain climber-turned tree surgeon, established [Tree Climbers International](#) (TCI).

TCI promotes "rope and saddle tree climbing so everyone can experience the joy and wonder of seeing the world from the heights of the treetops." The organization has schools and tree-climbing clubs scattered throughout the world.



The view from up here is much different than you might expect. (Photo: Imgorthand/Stockphoto)

### Why climb a tree?

In addition to introducing your children to the joys of tree climbing and getting a great workout, there are also numerous scientifically proven benefits to engaging with trees.

A [Stanford study](#) found that people who spent time in nature "showed decreased activity in a region of the brain associated with a key factor in depression."

Other studies have found that exposure to [phytoncides](#) — naturally produced compounds found in trees such as pines, cedars and oaks — can lower blood pressure, relieve stress and boost white blood cell count.

John Gathright, founder of Tree Climbers Japan, has conducted numerous studies on the physiological and psychological [benefits of tree climbing](#). In one, he tested participants before and after climbing both trees and man-made structures and found that the tree climbers indicated "greater vitality and reduced tension, confusion and fatigue."

### How to get started

Ready to give tree climbing a go? TCI advises you ask yourself these three questions first:

1. Am I allowed to climb this tree?
2. Are the tree's branches big enough to support me?
3. Is the tree safe to climb?

Remember it's illegal to climb trees in national parks and most city parks, but climbing is [allowed in national forests](#).

TCI also has an abundance of [safety guidelines](#) and tree-climbing techniques detailed on its website, and Cooke has some advice of his own.

"Go climbing in the company of a friend and start slowly. Try spending time balanced on low perches a few feet off the ground. As your confidence grows you can explore more of the tree — humans are remarkably good climbers and it doesn't take much practice to reawaken your ape DNA! Always watch out for dead wood and remember that what goes up must come down — it's always harder to climb in reverse.

"As far as possible, climb with the gifts that nature gave you and nothing more. Bare feet cause less damage to the trees, and you're more likely to slip in rubber soles. Climbing equipment is cumbersome and forms a barrier between you and the natural world. Return to the trees as you left them long ago."

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"The Tree Climber's Guide" will be published in spring 2016.



**Laura Moss** writes about a variety of topics with a focus on animals, science, language and culture. But she mostly writes about cats.

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