

Lloyd's Wellbeing Centre



The importance of nature for mental wellbeing

Over the last few months, it has been easy to look out of the window and see a dull, uninviting day and rationalise staying behind closed doors. However, as Spring arrives and the hope that it brings, as well as the gradual easing of national lockdowns, the thought of getting out into nature is much more appealing.

The national lockdowns over the last year have given us the opportunity to discover local green space, that we may not have known about before the pandemic. Some of our usual outlets for stress, such as going to pubs and bars, leisure centres and non-essential shops, are currently inaccessible, and so it makes sense that we have turned to walks in nature as a method of stress-release. As we start to think of coming out of lockdown and look forward to getting back to our new 'normal', it's worth remembering the importance of being outside in nature for the many benefits this can bring to our physical and mental wellbeing. Being in nature can take many forms, such as walking in the woods, watching the tide come in, watching the flow of a stream or river, listening to birds, watching the clouds, feeling the breeze on our face, or listening to the wind rustling through the leaves on the trees.

How much time do we need to spend in nature to feel the benefit?

A 2019 University of Exeter study used data from nearly 20,000 people and found that people who spend a minimum of 120 minutes per week in nature are more likely to report good health and higher psychological wellbeing than those who don't visit nature at all in an average week. The study showed that it didn't appear to matter whether the 120 minutes was achieved in one visit or spread out over several shorter visits during the week. It also found that the benefits applied to everyone; across all age groups, occupations, and economic and ethnic groups.

The majority of nature visits in the Exeter study took place within two miles of home, and showed that even visiting urban greenspaces can be helpful. You don't have to live in the middle of the countryside to feel the benefit of being in nature.

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How does being in nature help us?

According to research conducted by Harvard University, there is a strong association between the time one spends in nature and reduced levels of stress, anxiety and depression. In a 2015 study, researchers compared the brain activity from two groups of people; group A included individuals who walked for 90 minutes in a natural setting, and group B walked within an urban area, such as a town or city. Positron emission tomography (PET) scans compared the brain activities of the two groups. It was found that those who walked in nature had decreased activity in the prefrontal cortex, which is a part of the brain that manages emotional reactions to anxiety and stress. Therefore, if you are struggling to put unwelcome thoughts out of your mind, you may find that a walk in nature helps you to be more present, and put negative thoughts aside.

Stress-response and nature

It appears that interacting with natural spaces offer some other therapeutic benefits as well. In experiments it was found that calming nature sounds, and even outdoor silence can lower blood pressure and levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

Cortisol is your primary stress hormone, the chemical that makes your body think that it is in fight or flight mode, causing all your muscles to tighten, blood pressure to rise and sets the heart racing. If your body is continually experiencing stress, these symptoms can lead to major health problems, so finding a way to reduce cortisol levels is important.

Psychopathologies and nature

Evidence suggests that immersing yourself to nature has a significant association with reduced severity of insomnia, anxiety and depression. Immersing yourself within green spaces and nature, is helpful in reducing the symptoms associated with these disorders, and without the side-effects of anti-depressants. In fact, doctors in Germany have started to prescribe “nature therapy” for common psychological illnesses.

Cognitive benefits of interacting with nature

The cognitive benefits of interacting with nature were found during memory tests carried out in 2008 by Stephen Kaplan and his team. The study found that subjects who took a nature walk before a memory test, performed better in the test than the subjects who walked down city streets.

Creative ability and nature

A study in 2012 at the University of Kansas, found that spending more time outdoors and less time with our electronic devices can increase our problem-solving skills and improve creative abilities. The next time you need a creative burst, why not take a walk in nature?

Tips to improve your contact with nature

We've suggested some ideas that you can try, to benefit more from nature. You might like to give some of these a go! You may find a new connection with the natural world that you can continue to enjoy, even when our lives return to 'normal'.

1. Plan it in your schedule
One of the best ways to commit to doing something on a regular basis is to put it in your diary. Start small with just a short walk in your local green space each day, and increase from there.
2. Leave your phone at home, or at least in your pocket
Part of the benefit of being in nature means embracing it and getting away from the many distractions of modern life, such as your mobile phone!

When you are in nature, take the time to really immerse yourself. Take some gentle deep breaths, place your attention on what you can see, hear, smell, and feel. For example, you could start by focussing on what you can hear close by, and then widen your perspective to more distant sounds. If you find your mind wandering back to other thoughts, let them drift away and re-focus on your senses.

3. Take time to focus on the small stuff

In a recent podcast, David Attenborough gave his tip to connect with nature. He suggested that we take time to spend 10 minutes a day in nature, focusing on the local green space and wildlife that is all around us. He said "Sit down. Don't move. Keep quiet. You'll be very surprised if something pretty interesting didn't happen within 10 minutes!"

4. Arrange time to walk in nature with a friend or a family member

We all know it's easy to procrastinate or make an excuse not to get outside. Ask a friend or family member (socially distanced of course) to join you on a walk, then you can both achieve the benefits of nature, as well as the additional benefits of social interaction.

If you don't live close by, another option may be to arrange a time with a friend to both go for a walk individually in your own area and have a chat by phone while you walk. Bluetooth headphones are perfect for this!

5. Grow your own

If you are lucky enough to have a garden, getting outside and doing some gardening brings a number of benefits such as increases physical exercise, reduces stress and anxiety, and overall makes you feel happier.

If you do not have access to a garden, plant some window boxes or grow plants indoors, you may be surprised by the long-term positive effect.

6. Bring the outside in

Listen to recordings of nature sounds, such as birdsong, wind, or flowing water.

A report published in 2017 by Scientific Reports, suggests that if you listen to recorded nature sounds, you achieve some of the benefits that you would receive if you were in a natural scenario. An MRI scanner was used to compare the brain responses of people who listened to non-natural sounds (e.g. the radio) compared to sounds of nature. Listening to natural sounds caused the listeners' brain connectivity to reflect an outward-directed focus of attention, a process that occurs during wakeful rest periods like daydreaming. Whereas listening to non-natural sounds, created an inward-directed focus, which occurs when we are worried or anxious.

7. Visualise it

If you are feeling particularly stressed, take some time out, close your eyes and visualise a beautiful, natural space with all its components. In your mind, imagine the sun on your skin and the sound of birds chirping. In an instant, you will start to feel calmer and more able to deal with the issues at hand.

Keep this as a tool in your armoury, your 'go-to' nature place for stressful moments.

<https://www.lloydswellbeingcentre.co.uk/blog/importance-of-nature-for-mental-wellbeing/>