

Connecting with Nature



“In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows.”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, Author

“Wilderness is not a luxury but necessity of the human spirit.”

-Edward Abbey, Author

We do not see nature with our eyes, but with our understandings and our hearts.”

-William Hazlett, Author

A connection with nature is vital to the human spirit. Whilst some individuals may feel this connection more keenly, it exists within us all. Getting outdoors into the fresh air, sunlight and green space is important for both our physical and mental health, especially at the moment with our access to the outdoor world limited whilst we combat the spread of COVID-19. The UK Government has instructed people to stay at home as much as possible, and so we may find ourselves longing for the open natural world. Although our time outdoors and our accessibility to nature may be currently limited, even just 10 minutes outdoors can have a positive impact on our wellbeing. Nature is one of the best tools we have for self-improvement and it is entirely free. In this helpsheet, we will go over how nature has been linked to mental wellbeing and how you can get your nature fix during lockdown.

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Nature and Wellbeing

We have known about the connection between nature and positive wellbeing for hundreds of years. How often have you been recommended or advised someone to get some fresh air and take a calming stroll if their wellbeing is suffering? Research into this link and how we might use it has been very popular in recent years as we turn to nature in times of great urbanisation.

In a 2015 study by Bratman et al. participants who went on a 90-min walk through a natural environment reported lower levels of rumination and showed reduced neural activity in an area of the brain linked to risk for mental illness compared with those who walked through an urban environment.

In 2019, Hunter et al. looked into how urban nature experiences can reduce stress in the context of daily life. This study is extremely useful as approximately 55% of the world population currently live in urban areas - with this figure set to rise over the coming decades. During an 8-week study period, 36 urban dwellers were asked to have a nature experience, defined as spending time in any outdoor place that brings a sense of contact with nature, at least three times a week for a duration of 10 min or more. Spending time with nature produced a significant drop in the stress hormone cortisol, with the duration of the nature experience contributing to the amount of stress reduction. 20 to 30 minutes was the ideal time for reducing stress levels.



Getting Outdoors

Now that we know nature experiences are good for our mental health - how do we make the most out of this?

“Focus on places you find the most pleasing,” says Dr. Strauss of Harvard-affiliated Cambridge Health Alliance.

“The goal is to get away from stimulating urban settings and surround yourself with a natural environment.”

This does not mean that you need to get entirely away from urban settings, in our modern world, this can be quite impossible. Simply a visit to your local park will count as a nature experience. As long as you can surround yourself with some greenery, you will feel the benefits of this.

Any experience in these green spaces will help and these can be combined with other activities. Take a run around your local park, go for a picnic with your family, play a football game on the local field, take a walk along a riverside.

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Bringing the Outdoors Indoors

But how do we get these nature experiences when we are advised to stay at home? You are of course allowed to go outside and take a walk through any local greenery you have. However, there are a number of reasons why you may not be comfortable or able to do this.

The good news is that you can get some of the benefits of a nature experience from the comfort of your own home.

Nature Scenes

Simply looking at images of nature scenes, watching nature documentaries or nature videos has been shown to reduce stress levels in a number of studies. For example, Kim et al. looked into the subjective responses to scenic picture views. Responses were assessed from completed questionnaires for three different levels: peaceful, accustomed and suffocated. The rural scenery views showed levels of 'peaceful' for 27 subjects (90%), 'accustomed' for two subjects (6.7%) and 'suffocated' for one subject (3.3%). The urban scenery views showed levels of 'peaceful' for zero subjects (0%), 'suffocated' for 16 subjects (53.3%) and 'accustomed' for 14 subjects (46.7%).

Nature Sounds

Another way to get your nature experience indoors is by listening to nature sounds. There is plenty of apps, videos, and CDs that have recordings of natural sounds; rain falling, waves crashing or a storm. These have routinely been used to help with stress levels and are often used for those who have trouble falling asleep. Calming nature sounds and even outdoor silence can lower blood pressure and levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which calms the body's fight-or-flight response. Listening to recorded nature sounds can have a similar effect, in 2017 Researchers at Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS) found that playing 'natural sounds' affected the bodily systems that control the flight-or-fright and rest-digest autonomic nervous systems, with associated effects in the resting activity of the brain, there was also an increase in rest-digest nervous system activity (associated with relaxation of the body) when listening to natural compared with artificial sounds, and better performance in an external attentional monitoring task.



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Home Activities

Gardening can be an excellent tool to improve your wellbeing. Even if you do not have a garden at home, this can be utilised with an allotment or even by growing indoor vegetables, fruits or herbs or by making a window sill / balcony garden. In 2017, Soga et al. looked at the impact of gardening on mental health. Overall, the results suggest that participating in gardening activities has a significant positive impact on health. Indeed, the positive association with gardening was observed for a wide range of health outcomes, such as reductions in depression and anxiety symptoms, stress, mood disturbance, and BMI, as well as increases in quality of life, sense of community, physical activity levels, and cognitive function.

Potting plants around your home can also help improve your wellbeing. According to a survey by Arboretum,

42% of 2,000 participants said that being around plants improved their mental health. This figure was even higher in London, where more than half (56%) admitted plants make them happier.

Books on Nature

Another great way to feel in touch with nature is to read about it. There are countless books on nature, travelling and wildlife.

Some good books to get you started:

- H is for Hawk - Helen MacDonald
- The Hidden Life of Trees - Peter Wohlleben
- A Walk in the Woods - Bill Bryson
- The Shepherd's Life - James Rebanks

