

Walking to Wellbeing: Why getting outdoors matters

We are more aware than ever of the damaging impact of our environment and lifestyles on our mental health and emotional wellbeing. Up to one in six people are thought to experience a common mental health problem such as anxiety or depression each week. The serious impact of these conditions is also more commonly recognised, with depression believed to be the second leading cause of disability globally. In spite of this upsurge, there is a simple way for many sufferers to counteract the worst effects: getting outdoors. What is it about connecting with nature that helps us to relax and disconnect from the stress of everyday life?

Statistics have highlighted the increase in poor mental health globally, with the World Health Organisation citing a 13% rise in mental health conditions and substance use disorders in the decade from 2007. The impact of anxiety and depression alone are estimated to cost the global economy \$1 trillion each year. Perhaps unsurprisingly, rates of depression rose in the UK in the fallout from the pandemic, increasing from 10% in 2019 to 17% in 2021. With this figure significantly higher in socio-economically disadvantaged groups, and governments only investing an average of 2% of their GDP on mental health care, the importance of readily available help is clear.

Evolutionary psychologists have theorised that we are attracted to those parts of nature that offer comfort, protection and nourishment. Such natural settings typically include lush vegetation and foliage, high open ground with good visibility, and running water such as streams or waterfalls. In contrast, we have a natural aversion to those places and creatures that present a potential threat such as cliff edges, poisonous insects and hazardous animals. This hypothesis goes further, suggesting that the increase in mental disorders in recent years is connected to our move away from such soothing natural environments and into densely populated and heavily industrialised urban settings. This theory has been labelled 'nature deficit disorder', a deficit most evident in those cities where green space is less easily accessible.

Research has been conducted on the positive impact of increased connection to the natural environment with a wide range of populations and setting. A study by the University of Gothenburg suggests that walking for just 120 minutes per week can help lower the risk of depression in the future by 63%. At a more dynamic level, structured outdoor adventures can improve social and emotional engagement of disaffected young people. Exercise conducted outdoors can improve outcomes on a variety of measures such as revitalisation, tension reduction, depression and anger, engagement, and confusion when compared with exercise indoors.

Although there are definite benefits to vigorous exercise, studies and surveys also show that we do not need to significantly exert ourselves to feel better through being outdoors. There is a correlation between simple exposure to a green space and physiological improvements, including lowered blood pressure and heart rate. Mental health conditions can be improved by gardening and walking. Just being outdoors can itself help, with 45% of people reporting that visiting a green space during the pandemic eased the impact of stress. Even more strikingly, seminal studies have suggested that increasing access to views of nature

improved outcomes in terms of recovery speed and rate in patients from surgery. This was replicated in a prison setting, showing that inmates with views of nature from the cells showed lower levels of stress and physical illness.

We know that stress is a significant contributory factor in the increasing instances of poor mental health. In the words of John Ratey, Harvard Professor of psychiatry, 'if you exercise or even just socialise, you're tapping into the evolutionary antidote to stress.' Whilst there are many additional causes, a lack of connection to the outdoors is one that we can do something about, and quickly. By walking, and especially walking with others, you are taking the fast road to reducing stress and feeling happier with each step that you take.