



How Nature Benefits Your Mental Health

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By Lucy Jones

Have you ever come home from a day in the countryside and felt... better? Mood altered, anxiety soothed, mind hushed? It seems obvious that getting out of the clanging grind of the city every once in a while might be good for your mental health, but recently, scientists have been working out whether flowers, grass, trees, and wild animals could be used to treat depression or anxiety.

The field of ecotherapy—the idea of connecting to nature to aid your well-being—isn't new. In his 1984 book *Biophilia*, Edward O. Wilson put forward a theory that the affiliation we have with nature is rooted in our biology and genetics. Around the same time Wilson was writing, Japanese doctors began to prescribe forest bathing for optimum health. In Norway, 19th-century poet Henrik Ibsen coined the word "friluftsliv"—meaning "open-air living," which soon turned into a Scandinavian cultural phenomenon. But until recently, strong scientific evidence to back up anecdotal evidence that nature is good for your mental health was scant. That's changing, however.

In April, Peter James and a team at Harvard University published a study into the relationship between exposure to green spaces and mortality rates. They studied 100,000 female nurses living across the US over an eight-year period and found that those living in the greenest areas had a 12 percent lower mortality rate compared with those living in the most built-up areas. To find out what factors might explain this, they collected information on doctor-diagnosed depression and antidepressant medication. Improved mental health, measured through lower levels of depression, was estimated to explain nearly 30 percent of the benefit from living around green spaces.

"We weren't expecting the magnitude [of the results]," says James. Their results show that Wilson's theory of "biophilia" is true: "That there's a direct cognitive benefit and restorative quality of being in nature, that we've evolved in nature to enjoy being in nature."

James is quick to point out this isn't just about moving to the countryside. With 84 percent of people in the United States living in urban areas, the study suggests that small things like more trees in the street and more parks in urban areas can have a significant benefit for health.

I'm a nature junkie, and that's definitely something I can relate to. I'm obsessed with a pear tree that's framed by my bedroom window, where I often work. At the moment, in spring, it's foaming with cream flowers and bright Kermit-green leaves. Last year, my neighbor put scaffolding up that blocked my view of it. I was surprised—and a bit weirded out—by how much it not being there every day affected my mood.

But research shows that something as small as seeing that pear tree every day could have a real impact on my mental health. A recent report from Natural England shows that taking part in nature-based activities helps people who are suffering from mental health problems and can contribute reducing levels of anxiety, stress, and depression.

MindFood is an allotment site in west London, which runs courses in how to manage mental well-being. The sessions allow people with common mental health problems to work together, improve the garden, learn new skills, and benefit from some gentle exercise.

Lucy Clarke is one of the MindFood's clients. She came to the project after a depressive episode and wanted to find something local to do before returning to work. Some of the benefits of the course were practical: "Having a regular visit to the allotment gives me a bit of structure," she says. "It gives you a sense of purpose when you really need it."



There's also something powerful about growing food in a natural setting. "You lose yourself in the moment, you forget everything around you when you care for something that's bigger than yourself, and when you look more closely at nature, it's a perpetual source of wonder."

"Simply speaking, working outside brings you out of your head and back into the world," says one of the project's employees, Ed Harkness. Most of the participants in the project, says Harkness, get referred to their services via their GPs, the NHS's Improving Access to Psychological Therapies initiative, and other health practitioners. "The culture is changing, and we are not alone in realizing the significance of preventative care," says Harkness. "Whatever the weather, however small or urban the garden, the gardener is made mindful of the here and now. Having your hands in the dirt and repeating tasks such as weeding or planting focuses your energy and allows you the freedom to escape the normal background noise of thoughts and feelings."

These ecotherapy projects sound great, but come at a time when our green spaces are increasingly under threat from residential development, building, and the government's decision to frack in national parks. "Open spaces are protected for leisure and ecological reasons but the connection for how valuable it is for our well-being isn't protected by law," says Joanna Ecclestone, who runs a project in London called Potted History, which offers horticultural therapy to bereaved, isolated, or depressed older people. Organizations like the Wildlife Trust are trying to redress this—urging the government to consider a nature and well-being act, which would enshrine in law the need for green spaces to improve our mental wellbeing.

Elsewhere, ecotherapy and "biophilic" thinking continues to be on the rise. There are three therapeutic "healing forests" in South Korea (with 34 more planned by 2017) and, in Sweden, virtual nature spaces are prescribed for stressed-out workers. Don't be surprised if you see "Vitamin G" (green) or "Vitamin W" (wilderness) on a prescription from your doctor someday soon.