

Health Insights

July 2023

Nurtured by Nature

How much time do you spend staring at a screen each day? For most Americans, that number clocks in at more than 10 hours, according to a 2016 Nielsen Total Audience Report. Our increasing reliance on technology, combined with a global trend toward urban living, means many of us are spending less time outdoors.

From a stroll through a city park to a day spent hiking in the wilderness, exposure to nature has been linked to a host of benefits, including improved attention, lower stress, better mood, reduced risk of psychiatric disorders and even upticks in empathy and cooperation.

“There is mounting evidence, from dozens and dozens of researchers, that nature has benefits for both physical and psychological human wellbeing,” says Lisa Nisbet, PhD, a psychologist at Trent University in Ontario, Canada. “You can boost your mood just by walking in nature, even in urban nature. And the sense of connection you have with the natural world seems to contribute to happiness even when you’re not physically immersed in nature.”

Cognitive Benefits

Spending time in nature can act as a balm for our busy brains. Green spaces near schools promote cognitive development in children, and green views near children’s homes promote self-control behaviors. Adults assigned to public housing units in neighborhoods with more green space showed better attentional functioning than those assigned to units with less access to natural environments. Experiments have also found that being exposed to natural environments improves working memory, cognitive flexibility, and attentional control, while exposure to urban environments is linked to attention deficits (Current Directions in Psychological Science, Vol. 28, No. 5, 2019).

Experimental findings show how impressive nature’s healing powers can be—just a few moments of green can perk up a tired brain. Australian researchers asked students to engage in a dull, attention-draining task in which they pressed a computer key when certain numbers flashed on a screen. Students who looked out at a flowering green roof for 40 seconds midway through the task made significantly fewer mistakes than students who paused for 40 seconds to gaze at a concrete rooftop (Lee, K.E., et al., Journal of Environmental Psychology, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2015).

Nature and Happiness

“While such laboratory experiments are intriguing, they don’t fully capture the diverse benefits that go hand in hand with time spent in the outdoor world,” says Cynthia Frantz, PhD, a professor of psychology and environmental studies at Oberlin College in Ohio. “Spending time in nature has cognitive benefits, but it also has emotional and existential benefits that go beyond just being able to solve arithmetic problems more quickly.”

In a review of the research, Gregory Bratman, PhD, an assistant professor at the University of Washington, and colleagues shared evidence that contact with nature is associated with increases in happiness, subjective well-being, positive affect, positive social interactions, and a sense of meaning and purpose in life, as well as decreases in mental distress (Science Advances, Vol. 5, No. 7, 2019).

Weir, K. (2020, April 1). Nurtured by Nature. Monitor on Psychology. Retrieved April 24, 2023, from <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/04/nurtured-nature>



Mental Health Moment

Your Health and the Environment

Environmental health is the relationship between your health and your habitat. Good environmental health fosters healthy and safe communities and promotes better health and well-being for the people living in them. Environmental health focuses on many different areas including food safety, air quality, climate, and chemical exposure. Regardless of where you work or live, there are lots of great ways to get involved with environmental wellness. Here are some simple strategies for improving your environmental health:

1. **Make your home healthier.** Look around your home and become aware of potentially harmful substances such as cleaning chemicals. Consider clearing them out to keep you and your family healthy.
2. **Reduce your allergies.** Airborne substances like pollen can flare up allergies. Wash your bedding regularly to reduce dust, vacuum your floors, give your pet a bath, or try an over-the-counter medication to alleviate your allergy symptoms.
3. **Learn about air pollution.** Avoid outdoor activities if you know that air pollution is higher on a certain day. Consider getting an air purifier for your home to reduce dust, smoke, and other pollutants in the home.
4. **Practice food safety steps.** Make sure that you always use clean utensils and surfaces, separate raw foods, cook foods to the right temperature, and store food properly to keep germs from spreading.
5. **Living sustainably.** You may consider things like taking public transportation instead of driving to reduce emissions, using less water and electricity in your home, or using recycled products to help keep the environment healthy.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2022, July 21). Environmental Wellness Toolkit. National Institutes of Health. Retrieved March 7, 2023, from <https://www.nih.gov/health-information/environmental-wellness-toolkit>

Environmental Factors That Impact Mental Health

Our environment plays a large role in the context of our lives, so it is important to understand whether the impact on our mental health is positive or negative. Here are some things to look for when understanding how you can improve your relationship between the environment and your mental health.

- **Hazardous working conditions** can refer not just to physical danger, but any work environment that puts significant strain on the body or mind. If you're overly stressed at work, your mental health can suffer. Consider talking with your manager about your stress level to see what can be done to reduce it. Use resources like your workplace EAP for additional assistance.
- **Sleep deprivation** is considered one of the root causes of depression. If you find that noisy neighbors, busy roads, or uncomfortable temperatures are keeping you awake, ask around for suggestions on how to neutralize these factors. You may consider utilizing technology or medication to help you sleep.
- **Lack of social support** can come from the environment due to where you live. Feeling alone is never good for your mental health. Try new activities to make new friends, get to know your coworkers, or connect with people online to start-up a new social circle.
- **Untidy spaces** may make you anxious instinctively. Humans are programmed to have a degree of anxiety with untidy spaces due to a potential health hazard. Take some time to clean up your work desk, living room, or other spaces that you spend a lot of time in to reduce stress and anxiety.

While there are many other environmental factors that can impact your mental health, it is important to manage the ones that you can control. If you find yourself overly stressed, anxious, or depressed, talk with your healthcare provider to see what options are available to help.

Source: <https://nationalcounsellingsociety.org/blog/posts/how-your-environment-affects-your-mental-health>



July Quiz

Baked Ziti

Ingredient List:

- 1 pound Italian sausage
- 1 small onion diced
- 28 ounces pasta sauce or marinara sauce
- 14 ounces diced tomatoes un-drained
- 2 teaspoons Italian seasoning
- ½ cup water
- 16 ounces ziti
- 15 ounces ricotta cheese
- 2 tablespoons fresh parsley
- 1 egg
- 2 cups mozzarella cheese shredded
- ¼ cup Parmesan cheese shredded

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 375°F
2. In a pan, brown ground sausage and onion, breaking up until the sausage is fairly fine. Drain any fat.
3. Add in Italian seasoning, water, tomatoes and pasta sauce. Simmer 10-15 minutes or until thickened. Meanwhile, boil ziti in salted water until al dente. Drain and rinse.
4. In a small bowl, mix ricotta, egg, parsley, 1 cup mozzarella cheese, and parmesan cheese. Add a thin layer (about 1 cup) of sauce to the bottom of a greased 9x13 pan. Layer half of the ziti, top with all of the ricotta, and half of the sauce.
5. Add remaining ziti, remaining sauce, and top with cheese.
6. Bake 25-30 minutes or until golden and bubbly.

Calories: 598, Carbohydrates: 54g, Protein: 34g, Fat: 27g

Nilsson, H. (2022, June 13). Easy Baked Ziti. Spend with Pennies. Retrieved April 24, 2023, from <https://www.spendwithpennies.com/baked-ziti/>

Quiz

Nurtured by Nature

1. Being exposed to nature has been linked to the following benefits:
 - a. Improved attention
 - b. Lower stress
 - c. Better mood
 - d. All of the above
2. Experiments have found that being exposed to natural environments improves and _____ attentional control, while exposure to urban environments is linked to attention deficits.

Your Health and the Environment

3. Which of these is not a tip for improving environmental health?
 - a. Reduce allergies.
 - b. Practice food safety tips.
 - c. Expose yourself to new materials.
 - d. Live sustainably.
4. Environmental health is the relationship between _____ and the environment.

Mental Health Moment

5. Which of these is an environmental factor that impacts mental health?
 - a. Lack of social support
 - b. Untidy spaces
 - c. Sleep deprivation
 - d. All the above



Healthy Habits Calendar

July 2023 - Nurtured by Nature

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
						1 Welcome to July! Start the <i>Ready, Set, Recycle Challenge</i>
2	3 Mindful Monday: Practice mindfulness for 10 minutes to start off your week right.	4 Independence Day	5	6 Thirsty Thursday: Remember to drink plenty of water to stay hydrated.	7	8 Sunny Saturday: Remember to wear sunscreen.
9 Self-care Sunday: Write in a journal today about things that you are grateful for.	10	11 Tuesday's Tip: Spending time with others can help boost your mood!	12	13 Challenge Check-in: How many activities have you completed?	14 Fitness Friday: Exercise for 30 minutes	15
16	17 Meatless Monday: Plan to have a dinner without meat tonight to promote more greens in your diet.	18	19 Wellness Wednesday: Take a break from social media today and spend time with friends and family.	20 Mighty Thursday: Remember to get some exercise in today; try out a new workout.	21	22
23 Self-care Sunday: Set out your work clothes the night before to prepare for the workday.	24 Motivation Monday: Write down some goals you want to accomplish this week.	25	26	27 Challenge Check-in: What activity will you continue to do?	28	29
30	31					



Challenge: Ready, Set, Recycle

Recycling is the process of collecting and processing materials that would otherwise be thrown away such as trash and turning them into new products. Recycling can benefit your community and the environment. For the next 30 days, try to do each of the 15 activities that help you recycle.

Learn the three basic rules of recycling by scanning the QR codes below!	Skip out on using plastic straws today. Consider investing in reusable straws.	Carry a reusable water bottle with you today.	Recycle your plastic bags by taking them to your neighborhood grocery store.	Recycle batteries or light bulbs at a local hardware store.
Start composting or recycling at home. Check your city's website for recycling programs in your area.	Bring your own reusable bags to the store.	Invest in reusable bags instead of Ziploc bags.	Gather litter and recycle it with friends or family.	Start using cloth napkins instead of paper napkins.
Audit the trash/recycling in your home or office. How can you reduce waste?	Say no and refuse single-use items for one day.	Donate clothing or other items you no longer use.	Use your own utensils today instead of plastic.	Switch to a compostable bamboo toothbrush instead of plastic one.

Visit these websites for more information on recycling!



Recycling Basics



Recycle Right

Answers to Quiz:

Q1: d. All of the above | Q2: working memory, cognitive flexibility

Q3: d. Expose yourself to new materials. | Q4: your health | Q5: d. All of the above