

2019 September Health Notes by Evelyn Ames

Getting High on Nature! It's Out Health Pill!

“Take your free outdoor nature-pill, find outdoor beauty, plant seeds, touch, draw or picture, walk, observe, listen, and breathe.” (Mary C. Hunter, Univ. of Michigan)

Have you been outside today? Have you found beauty or something new in nature? This is the perfect time of the year to get outside, walk and experience nature. Spending time outdoors is known to improve people's health and reduce their mortality. Forget the TV and mobile phone; go outside. Experience new buds and flowers on plants and trees, observe bumblebees flittering among lavender pushes, see the birds/butterflies, or just watch the clouds pass by. Spend quiet moments to breathe, relax and observe. Or if one is not able to do so, turn on a computer screen and view pictures of nature.

Research findings, focusing on the cardiovascular system, stress, and depression, are showing “nature” makes people much happier and less depressed and stressed. A University of Michigan study “shows that for the greatest payoff, in terms of efficiently lowering levels of the stress hormone cortisol, you should spend 20 to 30 minutes sitting or walking in a place that provides you with a sense of nature.” The study's author (Hunter) included a few constraints to minimize factors known to influence stress: “take the nature pill in daylight, no aerobic exercise, and avoid the use of social media, internet, phone calls, conversations and reading.”

Getting outside may be difficult to achieve for those who have mobility problems. Step/move outside onto a deck or porch and view the sky and out-of-doors. Even looking at nature scenes on one's computer has been found to be effective. Most important is for one to choose the nature experience that accommodates one's living conditions. How to begin: make a commitment to do at least 5 minutes every day.

Experiencing nature and the effect on depression: A Stanford study in which two groups of participants walked for 90 minutes, one in a grassland area scattered with oak trees and shrubs, the other along a traffic-heavy four-lane roadway. Before and after, the researchers measured heart and respiration rates, performed brain scans and had participants fill out questionnaires. Little differences were found in physiological conditions, but researchers found “marked changes in the brain. Neural activity in the subgenual prefrontal cortex, a brain region active during rumination – repetitive thought focused on negative emotions – decreased among participants who walked in nature versus those who walked in an urban environment.” This finding may show how nature makes us feel better. There is now a growing body of research demonstrating the numerous physical and mental health benefits of walking. Getting your daily steps could lead to better cardiovascular health, reduced stress, improved mood and self-esteem, healthy weight, strengthened bones, and boosts in creative thinking. Suggestion: take a walk!

Interestingly, people have been found to have a Nature Deficit Disorder (term coined to describe lack of being out with nature) that needs to be addressed. Nature is good for the cardiovascular system. One is likely to lose weight or maintain it; be happier and improve memory; be able to better fight off illness; improve focus, concentration and productivity of brain; feel less pain; be revitalized. Sync to nature's rhythms and practice mindfulness naturally.

Sources:

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