

Want to be Healthier? Spend More Time with Nature

A recent article in Time Magazine caught my eye because of the title; “The Healing Power of Nature”. I have long advocated, and frequently written in these columns, about how we would be better off, and in better moods, if we spent more time with nature.

The article describes a number of studies that purported to show that spending time in a nature setting was beneficial for both physical and mental health of adults and children. Here is a summary of the studies described.

In one study it was found that people who spent 40 minutes walking in a cedar forest had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol than those who walked the same length of time in a laboratory. Another study found that trees and other plants emit compounds called phytoncides, (antimicrobial allelochemic volatile organic compounds), and that these may be associated with changes in blood chemistry associated with better immunity and lower blood pressure.

A researcher in Australia found that that nearly 10% of people with high blood pressure could get their condition under control without medication by spending 30 minutes or more in a park. Part of that effect could be due to cleaner air in parks, but part was also believed to be due to lower stress in a nature setting. The researchers said “Nature is undemanding, it requires effortless attention to look at the leaves of trees, unlike the constant e-mails at work or the chores at home”.

A California study found that people who spent time looking up at tall trees were more likely later to help a stranger than those who spent the time looking at tall buildings. A recent study of 44 cities found those cities with more parks scored higher on measures of community well-being.

A recent study published in “Environmental Health Perspectives” found that women who lived in areas with a lot of vegetation had a 12% lower risk of death from all causes than those who lived in less green areas. The effect was ascribed to increases in cytotoxic lymphocytes critical to the immune system.

A study by the University of Illinois found that kids with ADHD could concentrate better after a 20-minute walk in a park rather than a walk in a neighborhood or an urban setting. Another study from the University of Michigan found that 20% of people with short-term memory loss were improved following a nature walk but not a walk through city streets.

A study published in the “Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences” found that after a 90-minute walk in a natural setting, people had a lower activity in the area of the brain linked to depression than people who walked in an urban area.

One study found that people recovering from abdominal surgery who had tree-lined views from their hospital rooms were released faster and experienced fewer complications and required less pain medication than people whose rooms faced a brick wall.

Most of the above studies were conducted at major universities or hospitals and many were published in peer-reviewed journals. As best as I can tell from the Time article, none of the researchers were likely being paid by any party interested in a particular result. So I don't have any reason to doubt the results described above.

However, most of us have lived through times when the "newest studies" said coffee was bad, then coffee was good, then bad and then good again. Ditto chocolate. So I also wouldn't necessarily assume that any one of the above findings will stand the test of time and be confirmed by larger, more rigorous studies.

But I believe one thing is clear. Even if not all of the effects discussed above are eventually confirmed to be true, there is certainly no downside, no "bad side effect", no unfavorable consequence, no problem, with spending time with nature. So even if all we do is take the attitude that "it can't hurt, might help" to take a walk with nature, at the very least it will be an enjoyable time.

I have had lots of conversations with friends and neighbors who live in the country. Many talk about how they disliked previously living in the city. I don't think I have ever heard from anyone that they wished they were back in the city.

Until next time...

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