

Solutions at the doorstep: Reflections on physical contact with nature for mental wellness

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Nature has been characterized as a valuable and versatile health resource,¹ with therapeutic value yet to be fully realised.² Contact with nature has been described as a mental health strategy that is cost-effective, widely accessible, clinically valid, and free of adverse side-effects.^{3,4} Access to green space has even been cast in terms of a mental health “necessity.”⁵ If, as predicted, depression will become the second greatest cause of ill health globally by 2020,⁴ the potential value of nature to mental health may warrant serious consideration.

A recent review of emerging research⁵ reveals the extent to which contact with nature can benefit mental health and vitality. Beneficial contact can range from simple exposure to a green view through a window, to active walking among trees, to engaged hands-on work with plants. Such contact can yield a wide range of benefits, including reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol, rapid and more complete recovery from stress when it occurs, lower blood pressure and pulse rate, higher alpha wave activity, and both cognitive restoration and better cognitive performance.⁵

A University of Essex (UK) research program focuses on the effects of green exercise, defined as “physical activities in nature.”⁶ Results from carefully controlled laboratory simulations demonstrate that exercise in natural outdoor locations is more effective at improving physical and mental health than exercise in other places, or than physical exercise alone. Green exercise is described in terms of synergistic benefit, with the key to the synergy being the green, outdoor setting of the physical activity.⁷

Studies commissioned by the English and Welsh mental health organisation MIND have confirmed this synergy. A summary of results indicates a 71% decrease in depression levels after outdoor walks, compared to 45% after equivalent indoor walks; a 71% reduction in tension after outdoor walks, compared to 28% after indoor walks; and a

90% increase in self-esteem after outdoor walks, compared to 17% after indoor walks.⁸ One research participant said, “My fitness has improved, I feel refreshed and alive.”⁴

Evidence also indicates higher rates of adherence to green exercise regimes^{1,5} – one reason why a program called “Green Gym” is increasingly being prescribed by UK general practitioners.⁹

Compelling Potential

The “Green Gym” program is managed in the UK by The Conservation Volunteers (TCV), a national organization which coordinates volunteer activities to help maintain urban green spaces and rural natural areas. Volunteers work in teams to perform a range of activities including planting trees, creating community gardens, managing local woodlands, and maintaining public footpaths.⁴ TCV and local MIND groups are working together to develop nearby Green Gym programs to help people experiencing mental distress.⁴

The UK’s Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is another organization that offers opportunities for physical outdoor conservation activity. One volunteer, who suffers from epilepsy and Asperger’s syndrome, speaks of experiencing unemployment and depression that plunged him into “a very dark spell”. Family and friends urged him to volunteer at a local RSPB nature reserve, and he has been working there for three years, performing various physically demanding tasks that he credits with building up his strength and his mind.²

“Tasks like digging holes are a real source of stress relief and act as a therapy,” he says. “I can also feel myself getting fitter and stronger and this all adds to my confidence.” He declares that nature volunteering has changed his outlook completely, giving him a new focus and helping him feel ▶

better both mentally and physically² – a powerful testimony to the benefits of physical engagement with the natural world.

Green exercise for mental health in Canada?

In Canada, no national version of the UK's TCV exists to coordinate outdoor conservation volunteering. Neither does Canada's MIND equivalent, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), appear to promote contact with nature or outdoor physical activity as discernible strategies for protecting and improving mental health.

Nevertheless, opportunities exist for local CMHA branches, mental health practitioners, and other interested parties to coordinate with regional partners to develop green therapeutic interventions literally at the doorstep. Community and botanical gardens, for example, offer opportunities to work with plants and soil in the outdoors. "Friends of ..." local parks groups often seek volunteers to work at local protected areas. Regional walking and hiking clubs organize guided outings, while field naturalist and birding groups coordinate field trips. Many of these groups are active during the winter with monitoring ski and snowshoe trails, tending plants in greenhouses, or exploring the snowy landscape at a time of year when weather conditions tend to limit outdoor exercise opportunities. ■

Physical activity in green settings is increasingly being proposed as a cost-effective and widely accessible intervention which can make significant contributions to protecting and enhancing mental wellness. While Canada lacks a national green therapeutic intervention network, opportunities exist to develop fruitful partnerships and solutions close to home, perhaps even growing to national proportions with time.

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