

CHANGING SPACES

If you had any doubts about the real benefits of switching off and spending time in the great outdoors, science is now telling us to put those uncertainties to rest, as getting back to nature is proving to have a profound effect on our health and sense of wellbeing.

Words by **Joanna Tovia**



When author Richard Louv turns off his computer and phone and heads out of town for a weekend away with his wife, he gets withdrawal symptoms.

“I have to pull myself away from that screen; I’m the first to admit I struggle with it,” Louv says. “But by the time I get out to the mountains, that’s largely lifted and it’s like a weight has lifted off my shoulders. My sleep patterns return to normal; it does the world [of good] for us.”

Going on a “techno-fast” isn’t easy, but it could do more for your wellbeing than you think. In fact, Louv – author of *The Nature Principle: Human Restoration and the End of Nature-Deficit Disorder* – says we are genetically wired to need nature.

More and more researchers believe our disconnection from nature affects our health. The biophilia hypothesis, first put forward by Harvard University scientist Edward O. Wilson, argues humans are innately attracted to nature and that our tendency to affiliate with living things separate from ourselves is genetically based.

Research spanning 10 years confirms

strong, positive changes in people responding to trees, landscapes, forest trails and scenic vistas, not to mention the love and connection we feel to animals. Even watching fish in an aquarium has been shown to have therapeutic effects.

There is also a growing body of research to support the idea that when we fix our attention on screens and phones, it’s a different kind of attention than we use when we’re immersed in nature – this, scientists call fascination.

“Fascination is a state of immersion where you’re paying so much attention, you’re not aware you’re paying attention,” Louv says. “They state the best way to do that is go outside in nature.”

But what are the real benefits of spending time in nature? As well as lowering blood pressure, reducing pain, strengthening our immune systems and reducing the risk of many types of cancers, nature has a profound effect on our mental health, too.

Depression levels plummet, we can focus better, think more creatively and feel far less stressed. In hospitals, studies have shown that even patients who have a view of a natural setting heal faster than those

who don’t. One 10-year study of recovering gallbladder surgery patients compared those who faced a view of trees with those facing a brick wall – the patients looking out at nature went home sooner. Another study found prisoners with a view of farmland rather than a courtyard made 25 per cent less sick visits.

“People who watch images of natural landscapes after a stressful experience calm markedly in only five minutes: their muscle tension, pulse and skin conductance readings plummet,” Louv adds.

BALANCING ACT

We live far differently today than we did even 100 years ago, when most people lived on the land and worked outside. Now, the vast majority of jobs require us to spend most of our time in front of a screen. And take a look around next time you’re on the bus or train – it’s rare to see someone who isn’t bent over their tablet or smartphone.

“The more high-tech our lives become, the more nature we need to balance it out,” Louv warns. The problem is that if we are spending most of the day in front of a screen, we are blocking out the majority of our senses – even the ones we’re not aware



of – because we’re focusing on that screen. But not engaging all our senses is the very definition of being less alive, Louv says.

“Who among us wants to be less alive? Yet that’s the environment we are increasingly creating,” he says.

MAKING IT WORK

Louv isn’t anti-tech – he loves his screen time as much as the rest of us – but says there has to be balance if we’re to avoid burnout.

The constant interruptions caused by obsessively checking your phone – “I do it, too, I check my phone way too much,” Louv admits – for texts, social media alerts and emails, interfere with our ability to think clearly and to create, as well as impacting on how burnt out we are and how engaged and enthusiastic we feel about life.

Designers are responding to the call for a healthier and more productive workforce by weaving nature in and around work spaces, as this means productivity goes up, turnover improves and sick days go down.

A greener office is just the beginning, though. Sitting is the new smoking, according to many, and, as author and businesswoman Nilofer Merchant writes in the *Harvard Business Review*,

all that inactivity can contribute to the development of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and breast and colon cancer.

As well as encouraging the use of standing desks, Merchant decided to incorporate some real exercise into her day by holding walking meetings.

“I liked it so much, I now average four such meetings and 20-30 miles a week.”

Merchant found she could listen more effectively when she was beside someone rather than across from them; the act of moving meant mobile devices mostly stayed in pockets; and she was able to give people her undivided attention. After such a meeting, people often say to her that it was the most creative time they’ve had in a long time. “And finally, we almost always end the hike joyful,” she says.


While there’s much we don’t yet understand about exactly why nature makes us feel better, there is plenty of evidence to support the idea.

UK mental health charity Mind found reduced depression in 71 per cent of people who spent time walking in a woodland park, as opposed to those who walked through a shopping centre – 22 per cent of this latter group felt their depression increased.

A recent study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* found that the more green spaces people had in their neighbourhood, the happier they were.

“That has huge implications for what kind of neighbourhoods we build or rebuild in the future,” Louv says. “I think cities can become engines of biodiversity and we can actually have higher human density but more natural habitats, too.”

Louv says conservation is not enough for the biodiversity we need to support our health. “Now we need to create nature where there never was nature.”

Greening city rooftops, for example, could be just the start of a more natural – and healthy – existence for us all. 



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KEYWORDS: OUTDOOR, FITNESS

NATURAL REMEDY

An increasingly common approach to tackling mental health problems is ecotherapy. Also called Green Care, this approach uses nature-based interventions in natural settings to help people feel better and recover from mental illness, and also to help them feel less isolated from society.

According to the World Health Organization, depression is predicted to be the second leading cause of disability in the world by 2020, following only ischemic heart disease.

UK charity Mind reports that exposure to nature enhances mood and self-esteem, reduces feelings of anger, confusion, tension and depression, and improves physical health and a sense of connection with others.

Mind has funded 130 ecotherapy projects and helped more than 12,000 people in the process. One such project uses gardening and growing food to help people with mental health issues improve their sense of wellbeing. Green exercise therapy – walking in nature – has also proven to be effective.

Exercising in nature is far more effective at improving low to moderate rates of depression than exercise alone and the more frequently we visit natural spaces, the lower the incidence of stress, according to Mind.

A Coventry University study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* found children exposed to scenes of nature while exercising are more likely to experience health-enhancing effects. Kids aged 9-10 were asked to ride a stationary bike in a series of 15 minute bursts, one group while watching a video of a forest track, the other with no visual stimulus. The children whose bikes were synched to the forest track had substantially lower blood pressure post-activity.