

Solutions

The fresh-air brain cure



How going outside can change the way we think.

IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, the “fresh-air cure” was the hot wellness trend. In fact, an entire branch of medicine was dedicated to studying how different climates influence health. During the tuberculosis epidemic, patients were shipped to sanatoria tucked deep in the Laurentians.¹ Doctors believed clean, country air and walks through pine forests would heal infected lungs.

With the advent of penicillin, the fresh-air cure fell out of favour, but now it is once again on the cutting edge of health care. Instead of studying the impact of nature on the lungs, however, scientists have shifted their focus to another organ: the brain.

According to the studies described below, being in nature offers rewards beyond decreasing stress and replenishing mental energy. Being in nature can actually change the way we think.

Three ways going outside affects our brains

1. Discourages rumination

We know that a walk outside clears the head, but why? Stanford University researchers found that it reduces activity in the part of “the brain responsible for obsessive negative thought – or rumination.²

And it’s not just the exercise. In the Stanford experiment, two groups of participants went on walks. One walked along a highway, the other through a grassland. The brain scans of the grassland group were noticeably different than those of the highway group.

Being in nature makes us less likely to dwell on what’s going wrong with our day, our fears and anxieties. In fact, seeing greenery prevents our brain from doing that *on a physical level*. If our negative thoughts are getting out of hand, “walk it off” is good advice – but “walk it off in a garden” is even better advice.

2. Boosts concentration

Being in nature restores our capacity to concentrate. Gazing at a lake or mountain range is like detox for our brains. A study by Uppsala University in Sweden revealed that participants who spent a short time in a nature preserve performed better on detail-oriented tasks than participants who walked through the city or relaxed indoors.³

¹ commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1281&context=master201019

² news.stanford.edu/2015/06/30/hiking-mental-health-063015

³ www.businessinsider.com/boost-concentration-and-memory-by-going-outside-2014-8

Think of the great outdoors as an attention-span enhancer. In fact, spending time outside can mirror the effects of meditation. And we don't have to plan a hike or a trip to the beach to reap the rewards. Any natural space can do the trick.

3. Sharpens memory

A University of Michigan study revealed that participants who walked around an arboretum performed 20 per cent better on a memory test than participants who walked down a city street. Simply looking at photos of landscapes can also help. When our minds start to wander, a picture of a forest might be as effective as the real thing.⁴

⁴www.springer.org.uk/2009/01/memory-improved-20-by-nature-walk.php

In all the studies, a walk surrounded by grass or trees was enough to positively affect the brain. Whether it's to decrease rumination or to improve concentration and memory, experiencing the mental health benefits of being outdoors is usually a matter of just getting out the door. Hiking for miles or spending hours in the wilderness – or in a sanatorium in the mountains – is unnecessary. Even a small amount of green space can be restorative. The fresh air cure for the brain is as easy as a walk in the park. Literally. ■



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