



Upper Arlington Preventative Primary Care

Walking in Nature: Therapeutic Medicine

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Those of us that are regular exercisers, no matter how strenuous or for how many minutes per week, know we receive a tremendous number of mental and physical health benefits as a result of staying with our routine. The type of exercise is not really important, it is the simple act of moving and allowing ourselves time to focus on something unrelated to the pressures and stressors of daily life. Recently, researchers have focused on a particular type of exercise that can be especially restorative for our minds. Actually, it is not so much the type, as where the exercise takes place: in nature – walking in a forest, by the sea, or in the mountains.

The researchers have been studying what happens to not only our physical selves, but also our brains when we take walks in nature. The research field related to this so called “green exercise” or “nature exercise” usually falls under the umbrella of environmental psychology (or ecopsychology). In Japan, scientists have been investigating what they have termed “forest bathing”. Specifically, they have been focused on what potential therapeutic effects there are to simply spending time in nature walking and being disconnected from our daily routines and stressors.

The results have been promising and quite remarkable. For example, when compared with a 20 minute walk in the city, researchers have shown increased memory skills and heightened attention to various visual and audible stimuli following a 20 minute hike in the woods. Additionally, when compared with indoor treadmill walking, individuals report increased levels of physical and mental energy and a general increase in overall well-being following 20 minute walks by rivers with tree-lined walkways. Related to these findings is the knowledge we have had for years that hospital patients report faster recovery times if they are able to view trees from their room windows.

The five minute to 20 minute window of time for walking in nature seems to be consistent across all the published studies in order to gain the positive benefits that have been reported. Although some research has noted that even longer walks can be of greater benefit to lower stress, decrease blood pressure, and even assist with strengthening several immune system functions. The physiological benefits that have been measured in these studies appear to be maintained for a few hours up to as long as a few days after hiking through forests.

The exact mechanism for what causes these findings is not known. However, it has been proposed that by walking in nature, as opposed to being inside in a gym, your brain is given a sort of “down time” from all of the tasks and stressors it must process during the day. If you have ever spent much time hiking you know it does not take long once you are on your way to note that you become increasingly tuned into your surroundings - the sights, sounds, and smells – and it is easy to lose track of time. The result seems to be that your brain becomes refreshed, cleared, and you are able to retain information better.

For those that prefer the ocean, or the foothills and mountains, or even a large city park, over hiking in a forest, by all means partake in your desired natural location for a long walk. Although specific research related to other natural environments is not available, the mental and physical health benefits may be similar. Get out. Enjoy. Disconnect. Let your mind wander and become a healthier version of yourself.