

What About Green Exercise?

If you look around at people being active and having fun outdoors, you will notice that they are much happier than those in a gym. This is because exercising outdoors appears to be much more beneficial to mental health than doing the same movements indoors. The benefit is more when an element of play and having fun is incorporated in the exercise.

Our Historic Relationship with Nature

One theory is that humans are born with an emotional connection to other living organisms, which may mean that part of our genetic makeup is innately predisposed to desire contact with nature. We love to be in and around it.

Nature provides an environment that does not require our direct attention (you can't easily run while texting), giving the great outdoors some wonderful restorative properties that encourage our recovery from mental fatigue and attention restoration. Studies have found that green exercise may help motivation to undertake physical activity by increasing enjoyment and escapism from everyday life. There is also both social and entertainment value added when exercising outdoors.

Although in urban settings fewer and fewer people are getting involved in the natural environment on a daily basis, many people do seek out green spaces and get involved in outdoor activities. Currently, there is an increasing trend of fit folks signing up for outdoor endurance challenges, like obstacle course races, cross-country and trail runs, and mountain bike events, but also, there is an even greater number of sedentary folks who are simply getting insufficient physical activity to meet even our low current health guidelines.

Green Exercise

Recent studies indicate that getting out and exercising outdoors appears to be a lot more beneficial to mental health over the same indoor activities, and natural environments have a far greater impact on psychological health, especially when an segment of play and having fun is involved. So much so that a term 'green exercise' was adopted to describe the health benefit that happens when we exercise in nature. The term was adopted in 2003 and then published through peer-review in 2005.

Five groups of 20 people were shown a sequence of 30 scenes projected on a wall while they exercised on a treadmill.

Four categories of scenes were shown to the treadmill-bound participants: rural pleasant, rural unpleasant, urban pleasant, and urban unpleasant. There was also a control group who was running on a treadmill while staring at a blank wall. No rural or urban photos for them.

For the test, blood pressure and the psychological measures of self-esteem and mood were measured before and after the intervention. In the end, there was a clear effect of both exercise and the different scenes on the participant's blood pressure, self-esteem, and mood.

Living in Rural or Urban Areas

80% of the U.S. population lives in urban areas. This is an increase from 79% in 2000.

Most people live in urban areas but there is still access to outdoor spaces.

Urban settings, simply by definition, have less nature than rural ones. But still, according to research, less green space means we may have reduced mental well-being and less opportunity to recover from mental stress.

Depression and depression-related illness is set to be the greatest cause of bad health by 2021. Yes, this is due partially to some other unhealthy activities, such as smoking, overeating, and alcohol abuse, but some believe that these are coping mechanisms for both mental ill-health and general stress.

Nature and Psychological Wellbeing

Nature exposure can be broken into three levels.

**Viewing nature: as through a window, or in a painting.

**Being in the presence of nearby nature: which may be incidental to some other activity, such as walking or cycling to work, reading on a garden seat, or talking to friends in a park.

**Active participation and involvement with nature: such as gardening, farming, trekking, camping, cross-country running, or horse-riding.

That study indicates that while nature can make positive contributions to our health, it can also help us recover from pre-existing stresses or problems. And maybe exposure to nature can have an 'immunizing effect' that will protect us from future stresses, and can help us think more clearly.

The Problem

The general decline in physical activity in most countries is resulting in a large increase in physical disability, disease, and a rising number of cases of mental ill-health. Those that live in large cities often don't have access to a nature setting.

By encouraging more and more fit folks to get out and enjoy some green exercise (or even simply the great outdoors), city planners and the people who live there will continue that evolutionary connection with nature, and also take steps to not only maintain it, but fight to increase it.

Ways to Get Outdoors and Other Tips

Take a walk in your lunch break. Rather than eating your lunch at your desk or staff room, take a stroll outside. The fresh air and movement will leave you with more energy for the afternoon.

If you can, consider ditching your gym workout (at least a few days a week) in favor of outdoor cardio activities.

Try going for a walk or run around your neighborhood or Local Park. You can head out before you go to work, or go for a quick jog when you get home.

Many of us spend hours sitting at a desk all day, followed by hours sitting in a car getting to and from work. To sneak in a bit more activity (and some time outside), try mixing up your commute. Hop on your bike and cycle to work, get off the bus one stop earlier, or try parking a bit further away.

Make your commute to work your workout for the day. Skip driving or taking the train and walk, bike or run to work.

Buy a reusable water bottle. A very easy way to make your workout greener, is by using a reusable water bottle. Since over 50 billion plastic water bottles are used yearly, much of that excess plastic ends up in landfills.