A digest on
NATURE, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

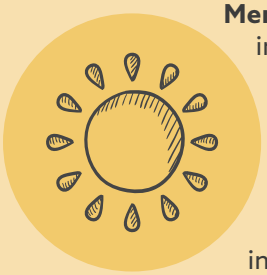
How the natural environment through social prescribing and nature-based interventions/activities can support health and wellbeing

Highlighted evidence

Headlines from the rapid evidence review on nature, health and wellbeing (2022) by the National Academy of Social Prescribing (NASP) for NHS England.

Evidence confirms that: Time spent in nature is linked to a range of positive mental and physical health outcomes:

Reduced blood pressure, reduced stress levels and associated symptoms, lower levels of cardiovascular and respiratory problems, and reduced risk of diabetes, obesity, and COVID-19.



Mental health benefits include increased mental wellbeing, increased mindfulness, happiness, resilience, and subjective wellbeing.

Nature-based social prescribing interventions can positively impact on **happiness and wellbeing** by reducing social isolation and developing connection to nature, particularly in people likely to be experiencing health inequalities.

Both **contact and connection with nature** play a role in improving health and wellbeing outcomes.

Ambient greenness, access to local green spaces, and subsequent mental health: a 10-year longitudinal dynamic panel study of 2·3 million adults in Wales led by Geary et al. (2023), at the University of Liverpool with collaborators, funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) and was published in The Lancet Planetary Health in October 2023.

- There is a beneficial role of greenness and access to green or blue spaces in reducing socioeconomic-related inequalities in mental health.
- Every additional 360m to the nearest green or blue space was associated with higher odds of anxiety and depression.

- "Our study has shown that green and blue spaces are likely to protect people from needing to see their GP for anxiety or depression, and in places where people have fewer resources overall, living near these spaces seems to have a bigger protective effect than for people living in areas with more resources." Professor Sarah Rodgers, Professor of Health Informatics at the University of Liverpool.

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The Restoration Trust

Digest compiled by Helen Shearn

Some proposed theories

Attention Restoration Theory (ART)

Attention Restoration Theory (ART) proposed by Kaplan, R. and Kaplan, S. (1989). ART has been summarised by Bragg, R. & Atkins, G. (2016) in A review of nature-based interventions for mental health care for Natural England (2016) and they comment that ART has been widely discussed theory:

ART focuses on two different types of attention (directed and involuntary) and the cognitive changes associated with restoration from mental fatigue (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989).

Directed attention requires mental effort and concentration and the individual must focus hard to process information (Bird, 2007).

In contrast involuntary attention or 'soft fascination' (Kaplan et al.) requires no effort and replenishes and restores an individual's capacity for directed attention.

Natural environments allow for much involuntary attention and so provide a 'restorative environment' through four key elements:

1. **fascination**
2. **being away from day-to-day routines**
3. **a feeling of extent (allowing for exploration)**
4. **compatibility with our expectations**

ART is referenced in the Handbook for Nature on Prescription to Promote Mental Health (see resources) and the Green Mind Theory by Pretty et al. (2017).

Some resources and toolkits

A Handbook for Nature on Prescription to Promote Mental Health, University of Exeter (2021)

NHS Green Social Prescribing Toolkit

Creative Health Review Report 2023 by the National Centre for Creative Health & All-Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing

National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP)

The Nature Connection Handbook, University of Derby (2022)

A Dose of Nature. Addressing chronic health conditions by using the environment. A summary of relevant research, University of Exeter

Natural England National Character: The Brecks (Area profile 85. 2015)

The Brecks Special Qualities Report

The Green Mind Theory

The Green Mind Theory has been proposed by Pretty, J.R. et al. (2017) at the University of Essex, and is cited in a study by O'Brien, L. (2018). The researchers found evidence of three different types of immersive – attention engagement:

1. **Nature engagement**: activities that deliver health benefits in nature i.e., walking, gardening, fishing, bike/horse riding, outdoor swimming, dog walking, bird watching, park running etc.
2. **Social engagement** low in material consumption yet delivering health benefits i.e., dance, drama and song/ choral groups, parades, fairs and fetes, horticulture societies, conservation volunteering, folklore ceremonies etc.
3. **Craft activities** that deliver attention and immersion, bringing further well-being benefits, i.e., painting, drawing, writing, baking, jam-making, carpentry, knitting, needlework, mindfulness and meditation, tai chi/yoga, boat-building, craft beer/ wine-making, pottery, stone masonry, dry-stone walling, and hedge-laying.

O'Brien, L. (2018) researching nature-based interventions for those with mental health and behavioural problems at Westonbirt Arboretum in England, found evidence suggesting the importance of 3 types of engagement: social; woodland craft and creative and sensory, which are meaningful and allowed for the immersion- attention adapted from the Green Mind Theory.

O'Brien also found that **Care for nature** is an essential component of human well-being and referenced the study Caring for nature matters by Jax, K. et al. (2018).

A key aspect of engaging with and shaping nature is also the concept of relational values; people do not only receive benefits from engaging with nature but shape it themselves through caring about nature and taking action to care for nature.

Caring is described as one of the mechanisms that are common to many types of Nature on Prescription in The Handbook for Nature on Prescription to Promote Mental Health (2021) by the University of Exeter -Relationship with nature; being outside; making a difference; being in a group; physical activity; personal achievement; having fun; personal growth; creativity and caring.

For a full list of references scan the QR code or visit:
www.brecks.org

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