



HOW NATURE IMPROVES MENTAL HEALTH

'CONNECTEDNESS' TO NATURE

The term 'connectedness' is meant to describe the way that we relate to and experience nature. According to research, people who have a stronger 'connection' to nature in most cases tend to be happier. Beneficial emotions, including serenity, creativity, and the ability to focus better, are proved to be evoked by spending time in nature. Some research indicates that our level of well-being is influenced by our proximity to green spaces and that spending time in these spaces is linked to low levels of mental illness, specifically anxiety and depression. There is also evidence that people who have a stronger connection to nature actively seek out opportunities to spend time in it thereby receiving its psychological benefits and develop a positive attitude towards the environment. Individuals that feel this way are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviours and conservation actions.

BENEFITS OF GETTING OUTDOORS

- **Attention:** Nature has been shown to restore attention and our ability to concentrate and has also been found to reduce symptoms of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- **Mood:** nature can make people feel happier and improve symptoms of depression
- **Stress:** Nature reduces symptoms of anxiety, physical stress, and heart rate. It also helps us feel more relaxed.

HIGH QUALITY NATURAL SPACES

"High Quality" natural areas benefit us greatly. Positive mood, decreased anxiety, and enhanced well being are all associated with biodiversity in nature, measured by species richness and habitat variety. "Serenity" of natural spaces might also have a high positive impact on our mental health. Peaceful and quiet areas are associated with reduced levels of stress, anxiety and sadness. Another factor that creates a high quality space is how clean the natural areas are, including whether or not there is any trash there. Reduced rates of depression have been associated with cleaner natural settings.

OUTDOOR PLACES NEAR CAMPUS

- **Marshlands Conservation Area:** This protected green space includes hiking trails, boardwalks and many native species.
- **Kingston waterfront trail:** 8 km waterfront pathway suitable for walking, running and cycling with sightseeing along the way.
- **Lake Ontario park:** the City's largest urban waterfront park with walking paths to the shoreline, a beach volleyball court and a natural skating rink during the winter

HOW GARDENING IMPROVES MENTAL HEALTH



There is increasing evidence that exposure to plants and green space, in particular gardening increases both mental and physical health. Therapeutic gardens have been used in hospitals for thousands of years, due to their beneficial effects on stress. While gardening it is important to intentionally slow down; To listen; touch; see; smell; and taste, as this slows down your nervous systems achieving a calmer state. Being outdoors and engaging with plants is associated with feeling calmer and less irritable, allowing for better control of our impulses. This then results in reduced symptoms of anxiety, depression, physical stress, blood pressure, and heart rate. Nurturing plants, and spending time in the garden, requires physical activity to grow and maintain.

Physical activity is directly linked to better mental and physical health, and overall well-being.

TIPS ON STARTING YOUR OWN MENTAL HEALTH GARDEN



You can start a garden, even with limited space, and materials. Begin by deciding the location of your indoor or outdoor garden. Indoor gardens can be ideal for dorms, apartments, or if you have limited space outside. You can utilize pots and planters to create an indoor garden, with vertical planting techniques (hanging plants, or a shelf) to maximize space. These materials can be bought cheaply second hand or created through items already owned. For example, old food containers can be used as planters.

Next, choose your plants. Choose the plants that best accommodate your specific environment by considering aspects such as access to sunlight and water. Some plants are known to be beginner friendly, low-maintenance, and have mental health benefits. Great beginner plants include succulents, lavender, and herbs. Seeds can be collected outside, existing plants can be propagated and turned into more plants, and or local community seed swaps are a great way to collect free seeds.

UNABLE TO START A GARDEN?



There are many community gardens located on and off campus. Community gardens can increase collaboration, reduce social isolation and promote a sense of belonging. Our club also maintains a Native Edible Garden and a Native Pollinator Garden located in front of the biosciences complex. Feel free to enjoy these gardens or join the club!



An image of our gardens outside the biosciences complex taken by Charlie

REFERENCES



“Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Benefits of Nature Exposure - Canadian Psychological Association. (2024, April 15). <https://cpa.ca/psychology-works-fact-sheet-benefits-of-nature-exposure/>

Mental Health Foundation. (2021). How Connecting with Nature Benefits Our Mental Health. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/MHAW21-Nature-research-report.pdf>

Thompson, R. (2018). Gardening for health: a regular dose of gardening. *Clinical Medicine*, 18(3), 201–205. <https://doi.org/10.7861/clinmedicine.18-3-201>



More images of our gardens outside the biosciences complex taken by Charlie