



"Our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty."

- Albert Einstein

Finding Solace in Nature

In a recent Harris Poll/Grossman Group survey of 2,086 U.S. employees, 75 percent of employees and 63 percent of managers reported feeling burned out, overwhelmed or ambivalent at work. Causes of burnout for both groups included a "great deal of constant change" and "having to shift focus throughout the day."

Burnout affects physical and mental health and is a cause of workforce turnover, which puts pressure on employees who remain on the job. Steps employers can take to reduce burnout risk are addressed in the [Grossman Group's related white paper](#). Individuals can also take the initiative to incorporate consistency and improve focus in their personal lives. One way to achieve this is by connecting with nature.

What is Nature Connection?

Nature may be defined as all living and non-living things that occur naturally on earth. Nature connection refers to having a deep, meaningful relationship with the natural world. It involves recognition of and engagement with microorganisms, plants, animals, insects, features of the land, bodies of water, the weather, air and other natural phenomena.

It is widely accepted that spending time close to nature has positive effects on mental, emotional and physical well-being. People who feel connected with nature report experiencing a sense of self-worth, greater resiliency, mental clarity, happiness and contentment, as well as increased creative and physical energy.

Health Benefits

Scientific studies show positive associations between exposure to nature and improved overall health. Being in nature may have beneficial effects with respect to cognitive function, brain activity, blood pressure and sleep quality. (Refer to [Associations Between Nature Exposure and Health: A Review of the Evidence](#), *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.)

Studies show that microorganisms in natural environments may help stimulate the body's immune system. Meanwhile, trees convert carbon dioxide and water to life-giving [oxygen through photosynthesis](#).

Some evidence comes from biomarkers, such as comparative measures of heart rate, blood pressure and salivary cortisol levels. Other findings are based on self-reported perceptions of conditions such as fatigue, lack of concentration, anxiety and depression.

One systematic study found that physical and psychological connections with nature improved health outcomes and social skills among people in diverse geographic locations worldwide. Psychological connections with nature were also found to have

a significant positive impact on pro-environmental behaviors and values (nature conservation). (Refer to [Psychological and physical connections with nature improve both human well-being and nature conservation: A systematic review of meta-analyses, Biological Conservation.](#))

According to this systematic review, there is a “biophilia hypothesis” that humans have evolved to have an affinity with nature. The hypothesis is linked to two major theories – attention restoration and stress reduction:

- Attention restoration theory suggests that people experience mental fatigue when they are forced to use their attention to overcome the effects of constant stimulation in their environment. This is referred to as hard fascination. In contrast, when nature captures a person’s attention, it elicits soft fascination and feelings of pleasure. A connection with nature helps people overcome cognitive fatigue and restores their ability to focus. Restorative natural environments are also associated with a sense of “being away” or taking a break from the demands of life. (Refer to [The great outdoors? Exploring the mental health benefits of natural environments, Frontiers in Psychology.](#))
- The stress reduction theory describes ways in which spending time in nature activates the parasympathetic nervous system to reduce stress and autonomic arousal by taking advantage of humans’ innate connections to the natural world. For children, it is theorized that green spaces provide opportunities for discovery, creativity, risk-taking, mastery and control, with positive effects on brain development.

Expanding Your Horizons

You may or may not consider yourself to be an outdoorsy person. Some people spend a lot of time in nature, but they may not experience a profound sense of connection to it. Conversely, someone who experiences a strong affinity with nature may not spend that much time outdoors but still feel deeply connected to the natural

Gardening Goodness

Planters, pots and garden plots are convenient ways to connect with nature and eat fresh foods:

- *Fresh fruits and vegetables are rich in nutrients and free of additives.*
- *Planting and harvesting provides a sense of accomplishment and purpose.*
- *Other people can benefit when you produce and share a bumper crop.*
- *Growing your own food encourages sustainable practices.*
- *Having a food source is a positive aspect of preparedness planning.*

world. For example, a person might enjoy creating art with natural objects such as shells, rocks or dried flowers, growing houseplants, watching birds or just sitting outside.

Activities that involve the use of all five senses can enhance nature-connection. A connective experience might involve listening to the sound of waves, watching a beautiful sunset, tasting freshly picked fruit, petting an animal or smelling freshly mowed grass. Some people enhance their connection by writing or talking about their encounters.

Exposure to natural light and fresh air can help regulate the body’s circadian rhythm. Outdoor activities that involve physical movement, such as walking, hiking, biking, gardening or playing a sport promote cardiovascular health, muscle strength and flexibility, and they contribute to a better night’s rest. To protect your skin when outdoors, it’s advisable to wear sunscreen. It won’t block the benefits of exposure to vitamin D for healthy bones.

The next time you intentionally connect with nature, turn off or silence electronic devices, take a mindful pause and evaluate the holistic benefits. You will likely find that it was time well spent.