

Contact with Nature May Have Healing Properties

By Dulce Zamora

March 23 (CBS HealthWatch)--Having a pet, going for a hike, keeping a garden, or vacationing in a beautiful place could do wonders for your health, according to a review of scientific literature.

"Contact with nature not only feels good to people and is pleasant and attractive, but may have real health benefits," says the review's author Howard Frumkin, MD, PhD, professor and chair of environmental and occupational health at the Emory University Rollins School of Public Health. "Contact with nature may be right up there with some medications or surgery as ways of improving health."

Interaction with nature--whether through animals, plants, landscapes or wilderness--may help prevent and treat illnesses, says Frumkin. He cites a previous study that showed surgical patients have shorter hospitalizations, less need for pain medications, and fewer complaints about discomfort when they have hospital windows that overlook trees as opposed to brick walls.

In another study, he says prisoners with cell views of rolling landscapes were found to make fewer sick calls than inmates whose cell windows overlooked a prison courtyard.

"You ask how this might work, but the answer is 'I don't know,'" says Frumkin, who notes this is the reason why it's so important to have more studies on the subject. "Maybe it's stress reduction. Maybe there's something even deeper than that. Maybe there are some biochemical pathways [in the brain] that respond to contact with nature that would have had to have been developed over thousands of generations of evolutionary time."

More research on nature's healing properties could translate to different approaches in medicine, he says. Instead of prescribing drugs, doctors could recommend vacations, gardening or pet ownership as treatment for different ailments. On a community level, it could mean easy access to parks, and for kids, having recess in natural surroundings.

Experts have mixed opinions on the health benefits of contact with natural world.

"If I go into the woods, and all I do is basically look at trees and walk around, I am making a decided break from what I do everyday, which is sit at a typewriter or a computer, or read a newspaper," says Joseph R. Sanders, PhD, ABPP, a member of Health Enhancement Programs, a professional organization in Alexandria, Virginia. He says a balance of right brain and left brain activity helps people release tension, and temporarily let go of "fight-or-flight" instincts.

In addition, as a long-time consultant to nursing homes, Sanders says he sees the positive effect pets have on patients with dementia. Even with their impaired mental abilities, the patients are able to connect with the cats or dogs.

Oakley Ray, PhD, professor of psychology, psychiatry and pharmacology at Vanderbilt University, says people can get the same gratification from material things such as a teddy bear, or a favorite blanket.

"I do not believe there's any kind of an innate, biological, genetically-driven affiliation with Mother Nature out there," he says.

"But that's a personal philosophy, because there aren't any data that will speak to it."

Contact with nature may be pleasurable for some people, but not for others, Ray adds. "You go to the Grand Canyon and you look at it, and some people are just overwhelmed with awe," he explains. "And some people look at it, and they see that it's a place for a great big landfill."

Ray says each individual is unique in what they find relaxing, and the key is to determine what works for you. He suggests finding out what those pleasurable activities are and doing some of them everyday. Research has reportedly shown that doing so makes people happier.

A complete report of Frumkin's study appears in the April 2001 issue of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

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