

## HEALTH AND NATURE

### Nature is beneficial for mental health

Nature and health are inextricably linked but societal changes have significantly reduced the amount of time that most people spend outdoors and therefore in nature. Exposure to the natural environment both promotes and maintains health and wellbeing, and also contributes to recovery<sup>1</sup>.

#### Examples

- Walking for Health  
[www.walkingforhealth.org.uk](http://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk)
- Green Gym  
[www.tcv.org.uk/greengym](http://www.tcv.org.uk/greengym)
- Ecominds  
[www.mind.co.uk/ecominds](http://www.mind.co.uk/ecominds)
- Ecotherapy  
[www.ecotherapy.org.uk](http://www.ecotherapy.org.uk)
- Dementia Adventure  
[www.dementiaadventure.co.uk](http://www.dementiaadventure.co.uk)

#### Public health practice

Public health practitioners should work in partnership with local services in the environmental sector to engage with healthcare commissioners and providers to:

- raise awareness and understanding of the potential benefits of nature-based interventions
- identify and address barriers to accessing nature
- ensure clear links between nature-based services and local referral pathways
- support equity of access



People experience nature in many different ways and for many different reasons but however we interact with the natural environment it has the potential to improve our health and wellbeing. The natural world is a resource full of potential health benefits and it is essential that it is adequately resourced in return; sacrificing nature and green space for further urban development or economic reasons is shortsighted and likely to have a detrimental effect on health.

The Marmot Review (2010) describes how nature contributes to both physical and mental health, as well as to wider social determinants: 'High-quality natural environments foster healthy neighbourhoods; green spaces encourage social activity and reduce crime. The natural environment can help children's learning, whilst low engagement is likely to lead to impacts such as lower involvement in wider issues of sustainability'<sup>2</sup>.

Exposure to nature has been shown to increase happiness, improve mood, reduce anxiety, increase resilience and improve concentration, among other beneficial health effects<sup>3</sup>. The mental health benefits of exposure to nature are enhanced and prolonged if this exposure includes



## Resources

- FPH Briefing Statement: How Our Natural Health Service Uses Green Space To Improve Wellbeing  
[https://www.fph.org.uk/media/1433/r\\_great\\_outdoors.pdf](https://www.fph.org.uk/media/1433/r_great_outdoors.pdf)
- Natural England <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/natural-england>
- Institute for European Environmental Policy: Nature for Health and Equity  
<https://ieep.eu/publications/access-to-nature-reduces-health-inequalities-an-ieep-briefing>
- RSPB: Human health and nature  
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/our-positions-and-casework/our-positions/health/>
- The Wildlife Trusts: Nature, Health and Wild Wellbeing  
<http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/living-landscape/nature-health-and-wild-wellbeing>
- Forestry Commission  
<https://scotland.forestry.gov.uk/supporting/strategy-policy-guidance/health-strategy/branching-out>
- Full literature review available from [drjoparry@gmail.com](mailto:drjoparry@gmail.com)

participating in physical activity in a natural setting, even for as little as five minutes<sup>4</sup>.

For people with dementia, exposure to nature enhances mood and can reduce aggression and agitation<sup>5</sup>.

## Nature-based interventions

Nature-based interventions are diverse and wide-ranging and can include:

- Increased individual and community exposure to natural environments, for example through improved access to and maintenance of local community green space
- Participation in outdoor exercise and activity schemes
- Volunteering in nature, particularly in environmental enhancement and conservation activities, or social and therapeutic horticulture projects
- Volunteering on farms (care farming)

## Nature and health inequality

There is a link between access to nature and health inequalities. People living in deprived areas have less access to green spaces, and for people living in cities, income and wealth are determinants of access to nature<sup>3,4</sup>.

Mental health problems disproportionately affect more deprived populations. Access to nature and nature-based activities have been shown to improve mental health and wellbeing in disadvantaged groups, with the effectiveness of nature-based interventions being greatest in those with poorer mental health to begin with<sup>6</sup>

There is evidence that living in areas with green space can actually reduce health inequalities, even counteracting the effects of deprivation<sup>7</sup>

## Advocating for health equity and efficiency

The potential cost savings to the health service from improved access to green space are significant. Investment in nature volunteering interventions to create and maintain green spaces in areas where access is poor has the potential to benefit local areas, reduce health inequalities, improve health and wellbeing, and relieve pressure on services<sup>8</sup>.

## References

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3. Richardson M, Cormack A, McRobert L, Underhill R (2016)  
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4. Barton J and Pretty J (2010)  
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5. Clark P, Mapes N, Burt J and Preston S (2013)  
Greening Dementia – a literature review of the benefits and barriers facing individuals living with dementia in accessing the natural environment and local greenspace.  
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6. Lee A and Maheswaran R (2011)  
The health benefits of urban green spaces: a review of the evidence. *Journal of Public Health* 33(2): 212-222
7. Mitchell R and Popham F (2008)  
Effect of exposure to natural environment on health inequalities: an observational population study. *The Lancet* 372: 1655-1660
8. The Wildlife Trusts (2017)  
Volunteering: A Natural Health Service  
<http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/living-landscape/nature-health-and-wild-wellbeing>

### FPH General CPD Questions

1. What did I learn from this activity or event?
2. How am I going to apply this learning in my work?
3. What am I going to do in future to further develop this learning and/or meet any gaps in my knowledge, skills or understanding?