

# THE OUTDOORS & NATURE

Spending time in nature is linked to many positive mental health outcomes – improved focus, lower stress, better mood, and reduced risk of developing a mental health condition.<sup>1</sup> Most studies on nature and well-being look at green spaces like parks and forests, but researchers are also beginning to look at blue spaces – places with ocean and river views. However, you don't need a picture-perfect outdoor experience to get the benefits of nature.



## PLANTS & GREEN SPACE

Seventy percent of respondents to a Mental Health America Connection Survey reported wishing they had more time outdoors, ideally in nature away from their neighborhoods. Cities often have more stressors to physical and mental health, but green space (like parks and gardens) can reduce their impact. Even spending some time in your backyard (if you have one) can produce positive outcomes, and feeling connected to nature helps your mood even if you don't spend time outdoors.<sup>1</sup>

Children living in neighborhoods with more green space had a reduced risk of developing depression, mood disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and substance use disorder.<sup>2</sup>

Even being in the presence of indoor plants is worthwhile – studies have found this to improve focus, memory, and stress tolerance.<sup>3</sup>

### WHAT CAN I DO TO FIND GREEN SPACE?

**Don't discount the little things.** While being in the wilderness is especially nice, even city parks, a small garden, or sitting under a tree can support your mental health.

**Bring the outdoors in.** Adding greenery to your space can have a similar effect to seeing plants outdoors – and some, like snake plants and bamboo palms, can purify your air.<sup>4</sup>

## NATURAL LIGHT

Sunlight triggers the release of serotonin and vitamin D, which are associated with boosting mood and focus and reducing stress.<sup>5</sup> Without enough sun, these levels can drop, leading to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. Light exposure also has a direct impact on your body's sleep-wake cycle, and consistent sleep is one of the most important factors in your well-being.

- More time spent in outdoor light is associated with lower odds of using antidepressant medications and fewer symptoms of insomnia.<sup>6</sup>
- The natural lighting of a home is known to impact how you describe your own mood. Improvements to natural lighting have a positive impact on overall emotional social well-being, particularly among women and younger population.<sup>7</sup>

### WHAT CAN I DO TO GET NATURAL LIGHT?

**Enjoy the sunshine.** Just 10-15 minutes of sun on your arms and legs a few times a week has the potential to generate all the vitamin D you need; however, this depends on factors like the season, time of day, pollution, skin tone, and more.<sup>8</sup>

**Try a light box.** Light therapy can help with symptoms of depression and sleep disorders. The bright light from a light box mimics natural sunlight, causing the brain to produce serotonin and regulate your internal clock.<sup>9</sup>



## CONNECTION

One of the greatest benefits you get from nature is connection, which is linked to a better connection to self, community, and purpose. Time in nature benefits personal growth, self-esteem, emotional regulation, and social skills.<sup>10</sup> When children connect with nature, they're more imaginative and independent, and they feel more connected to the peers they're playing with and other living things.

- Accessible nature in a neighborhood, such as parks, lakes, or gardens, are associated with an increased sense of community belonging.<sup>11</sup>
- Of respondents to MHA's Connection Survey, people who reported not feeling connected to nature also didn't feel connected to themselves, to others, or to spirituality/purpose.

### WHAT CAN I DO TO CONNECT?

**Plant something.** Gardening is a great mindfulness activity. Getting your hands in the dirt can help you feel more grounded, and helping a plant grow can even boost your self-esteem.<sup>12</sup>

**Practice gratitude.** Nature is everywhere – even in cities, you can find places like community gardens, little courtyards, or trees full of birds and squirrels. Once you start tuning into your senses and appreciating the unexpected, it often feels more meaningful.

Sources available by downloading the 2023 May is Mental Health Month Toolkit at [mhanational.org/may](https://mhanational.org/may).

If you're taking steps to incorporate nature into your surroundings but still feel like you're struggling with your mental health, you may be showing the early signs of a mental health condition.

Take a free, private screening at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) to help you figure out what is going on and determine next steps.

