

[IMAGE]

## The Healing Power of Nature

By Dr. Meridel Gatterman

In a world increasingly dominated by video games and processed foods - conveniences that typically keep people indoors and sedentary - spending time outdoors is an absolute necessity from a health and wellness perspective. Evidence suggests a lack of time spent enjoying nature and all it has to offer can directly and indirectly contribute to obesity, depression and other serious health conditions.

Wherever you are right now, stop for a moment or two and picture yourself outdoors on a sunny afternoon, taking a brisk walk on the beach or through a park. Feel the sun on your face and the wonder of your outdoor environment filling up your senses.

If you're outside already, good for you - it's a great place to be when it comes to physical and mental health. If you're indoors, which is where an increasing number of people spend the majority of their day, make sure you take time whenever possible to enjoy what nature has to offer, because research suggests it's an important contributor to your lifelong health and wellness. In short, the natural world offers something that the indoor environment cannot. The prevalence today of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, obesity, and health issues related to overstimulation by the ever-present electronic environment can be directly related to an absence of time spent enjoying nature, replaced by increasing time spent on the couch watching TV, playing video games and soaking in artificial light.

### Nature Deficit Disorder

The Healing Power of Nature - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark In Last Child in the Wood: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder, R. Louv links ADHD to a lack of exposure to nature and makes reference to *nature deficit disorder*. He reports that thoughtful exposure to nature can be a powerful form of therapy for ADHD. He notes that in addition to needing good nutrition and adequate sleep, children may well need contact with nature.

The triad of inattentive, impulsive and hyperactive behavior has increased dramatically in recent years. Thinking beyond the widespread use of drugs that is standard treatment for ADHD, exposure to nature can have a positive influence on concentration. Children are better able to focus after a 20-minute walk in a

natural setting. In fact, taking walks in nature (e.g., the woods or a beach), compared to in urban or residential areas, has resulted in improvements in ADHD symptoms. This form of natural therapy does not have the stigma associated with it that more traditional therapy has, is inexpensive, and does not have the potential side effects of drug therapy; not to mention that many children are resistant to taking ADHD drugs.

### **Depression: A Lack of Nature?**

Approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population is affected by depression during a given year. No one is immune: It affects males and females, children, adolescents, adults and older adults of all ethnic and racial groups, and people of all educational and income levels. Older adults have the highest rate of depression, with twice as many women as men afflicted. A common nonpharmaceutical treatment recommended for the prevention of depression is exercise. It has been found that "green" exercise provides adults with a "recess" in a natural environment. Joggers who exercise in a natural green setting with trees, foliage and landscape views feel more restored and less angry, anxious and depressed than people who exercise in a gym. It has also been noted that one of the main benefits of spending time in nature is stress reduction.

Kids get depressed, too. Parents, educators and health care professionals need to understand that nature can be a safe and useful antidote for emotional stress. One of the tragedies associated with the increase in depression in children is the rate at which American children have been prescribed antidepressants. Reports have linked this increased prevalence with elevated rates of adolescent suicide.

A number of factors may have led to the escalated use of antidepressants among children. These factors include increasing rates of depression in successive age groups, a growing awareness of and screening for depression by pediatricians, and assumptions that the effectiveness experienced by adults using antidepressant medications will translate safely to children and adolescents. The growth in such prescriptions written for children has occurred even though antidepressants were not approved for children younger than 18. Although exposure to nature may have no impact on the most severe cases of depression, we do know that nature experiences can relieve some of the everyday pressures that may lead to childhood depression.

### **Fitness, Fatness and the Absence of Nature**

There has been dramatic increase in childhood obesity during the past two decades. In the past 20 years, the prevalence among children ages 6 to 11 has more than doubled, going from 7 percent in 1980 to nearly 19

percent in 2004. The rate among adolescents ages 12 to 19 has more than tripled, increasing from 5 percent to 17.1 percent. This growing incidence is alarming given the short- and long-term consequences associated with obesity, and can be expected to increase health care expenditures (to treat obesity-related conditions) and negatively impact the overall health and well-being of the population. Although obesity-associated disease occurs most frequently in adults, important consequences of excess weight as well as precursors of adult disease occur in overweight children and adolescents.

An increase in overweight and obesity in children and adolescents can lead to an increase in type 2 diabetes, high blood lipids and hypertension, as well as early maturation and orthopedic problems. Overweight children and adolescents are more likely to become overweight or obese adults. In addition, the psychosocial problems and depression noted above are common consequences of childhood overweight and obesity.

### **Using Nature to Prevent Childhood Obesity**

The Healing Power of Nature family - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark The word *nature* seldom shows up in the literature on childhood obesity. Studies that have evaluated the outcomes of dietary and physical activity changes for the prevention of obesity in children showed only a small but positive impact on body mass index (BMI). Nearly all studies that focused on combined dietary and physical activity approaches demonstrated some improvement, but the effects of activities in a natural environment have not been adequately studied.

The complexity of childhood overweight and obesity is not addressed by simply blaming it on an increase in consumption of junk food and time spent watching TV, DVDs and other visual media. Just as important as the limitation of passive leisure time is playtime that is unstructured, imaginative and exploratory with exposure to the outdoors. Play in a natural setting seems to offer special benefits including better motor fitness, especially in terms of balance and agility.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention recommends key strategies to prevent childhood obesity including BMI measurement in schools and offering nutritious choices in school meal programs. Physical activity guidelines include daily physical education classes and intramural programs for all grades with active play and recess activities for younger students.

## Health in the Electronic Age

Children who prefer to play indoors "because that is where the electrical outlets are" can be deprived of sensory stimulation important to their growth and development. True, these days laptops, iPods and cellphones allow children (and adults) to play video games, watch movies and listen to music outside, but that's not really taking opportunity of the beauty and health benefits nature can provide.

Kinesthetic sense (the ability to monitor movement and know where the body is in space) is replaced by the secondary vicarious, often distorted, dual sensory stimulation of vision and sound only. A well-developed kinesthetic sense is important to health. Evidence suggests that people with a poorly developed kinesthetic sense are subject to alienation in addition to injury. Sensory experiences link us to our exterior world. A rigid and limited environment seriously limits healthy growth and development of individuals or the group.

Louv proposes that there is a direct relationship between one's exposure to nature and their health and well-being. Health is difficult to define because it is something you feel, not see. You feel one with nature not just through what you see, but how you *feel*. Nature should not be overlooked as a healing balm for mitigating the emotional hardships and stress of life. It is possible that the healing effects of spending time in nature is the most overlooked field in modern medicine, even though we know that exposure to plants or nature speeds up healing time following trauma. Something to consider as you pursue whole-body health and wellness. Talk to your doctor for additional information.

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