

Contact with nature

A big part of emotional difficulty is the fit between the person and his or her environment. An individual suited to one environment may experience difficulty when placed in another. Equally, a species (say, polar bears) that evolved in one environment may not adapt well to another (say, the desert).

Human beings did not develop in cities. We were not designed to walk on concrete, live in sealed buildings, breathe toxic fumes, see by artificial light, eat processed food, or travel by motorized vehicles. We developed in the natural world, and the natural world will always be, in some ways, more of a home to us than the homes we have built. Could it be that our separation from our original home contributes to our vulnerability to emotional distress?

We already know that this is true with regard to certain environmental factors. Lack of exercise (never a problem among primitive peoples) is a known risk factor for depression. A sugar-rich diet of overly processed food appears to be a problem. Lack of exposure to natural light can foul our circadian rhythms. Exposure to certain chemicals such as insecticides appears to be a risk factor for emotional and other problems. The noise of urban environments is associated with increased stress and fatigue.

Could something less obvious, less definable, also play a role? Could a simple lack of exposure to the natural world itself, to trees, plants, and water, predispose us to distress, and could contact with nature somehow be helpful or sustaining?

Well-controlled research on this question is scanty and difficult to carry out, so from a scientific perspective we're not really sure. But there are enough reports from individuals who suffer from depression and anxiety that it appears that contact with nature is helpful with these problems. Depressed individuals frequently report a sense of peace associated with gardening, paddling boats in quiet water, or walking in the wilderness. Those who take up walking for exercise in urban environments instinctively head for parks, trees, and natural spaces, and away from traffic and buildings.

How can such preferences, be explained? Is there, perhaps, some magical curative force emanating from trees, from mountain streams, from waves on the beach? Not likely.

We may never understand all of the influences, in part because they are so numerous. Fresher air. Less noise. More natural contours to look at. Fewer distractions. Fewer rapid shifts of focus than we get in our music-video urban world. Brighter light. An opportunity to settle away from the perpetual train of demands we impose on ourselves. And, yes, perhaps some mystical, spiritual, or indefinable influences besides. It is no coincidence that retreat centers and monasteries are built far from urban areas, in naturalistic settings governed by the rhythms of the natural world.

A walk through the park is unlikely to cure anyone's depression or anxiety problem, and indeed during depression many people find that the attraction of nature is less than it usually is. Nevertheless, the opportunity for quiet and contemplation should not be discarded lightly. When you feel distressed, consider boosting your dose of nature and monitor what happens to your mood.

Are you often in contact with the natural world? How so?

When you spend some time in a natural setting, what usually happens to your mood? Do you find these settings calming or settling? What about when you are depressed or anxious? Although the natural world may not eliminate the problem, does your mood change at all? By 1%? 10%?

Based on your own experiences with and relationship to the natural world, do you think it would be helpful for you to "push" your exposure to nature? If so, how would you do that?

If this seems like a good idea to you, come up with a concrete action that you could take in the next week. This doesn't have to be a big step – no need to plan the 10-day wilderness camping trip. It might just mean walking near a local park, or visiting a greenhouse, or starting a windowbox.

Like most mood management strategies, you should not evaluate the success or failure of the attempt based on immediate improvements. Remember that depression and anxiety do not respond quickly. Be prepared to continue your efforts even if your mood does not budge at first.