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Green is good

Spending time in nature, whether at the neighbourhood park or by the beach, is good for both physical and mental health.

By Prof Dr VIREN SWAMI

THE idea that nature has the potential to promote physical health and well-being has a very long history.

Around 290 BCE, for example, the Roman-Jewish writer Josephus wrote about a remarkable feat of engineering in Babylon, with a series of ascending tiered gardens containing a wide variety of trees, shrubs and vines – what we now know as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

According to Josephus, the Hanging Gardens was built by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar for his wife Amytis, who had become ill.

It was thought that the trees and plants from her homeland in Medea would help cure her.

This idea was formalised by the garden city movement in the early part of the 20th century.

For this movement, nature was the most direct way of reducing the health problems associated with urban overcrowding.

In his book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, Ebenezer Howard envisioned a series of self-contained communities surrounding a central park, which is in turn surrounded by greenbelts consisting of open spaces and large gardens.

These “garden cities” were proposed as ways of promoting better physical health for people of all classes.

Better health

The problems associated with urban living are even more apparent today.

In Malaysia, for example, about three-quarters of the population now live in cities and towns, an increase from 27% in 1970.

Such rapid urbanisation is associated with a range of issues – such as air pollution, water contamination and overcrowding – that bring a huge cost in terms of physical and mental health.



For example, a wealth of evidence from both Malaysia and elsewhere shows that urban living is associated with increased likelihood of cancer, lung diseases, cardiovascular diseases, depressive symptoms, mood disorders and poorer cognitive function.

Conversely, it is widely known that spending time in nature has a wide range of benefits.

In terms of physical health, for example, studies have shown that residents of neighbourhoods with more green space tend to have lower rates of death, better physiological outcomes like better cardiovascular health and better immune systems, and fewer demands on healthcare systems.

Similarly, epidemiological studies have shown that people who live closer to natural environments or visit nature more frequently tend to have better physical health, including lower risk of lung diseases and diabetes.

Spending time in nature is also associated with better mental health, including lower rates of depression, anxiety and stress, as well as speedier recovery from mental ill-health.

One of the best examples of this comes from the British Household Panel Survey, which includes over 10,000 respondents from across the United Kingdom.

In this study, those living furthest away from green spaces were twice as likely to suffer from mental health distress, compared to those living closest to green spaces.

Experimental studies have also shown that going for a brief walk



Spending time in nature, like the family in this filepic, promotes not only better health, but also creativity and a positive body image.

in a green space reduces levels of anxiety and stress, and promotes a more positive mood.

Recent studies have also shown that nature exposure is associated with more positive body image.

In one study, led by the Centre for Psychological Medicine at Perdana University, Malaysian participants completed a measure of positive body image before and after going on a forest hike at the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) in Kepong, Selangor.

The results of the study showed that participants had a more positive body image post-hike.

The same research also found similar effects when participants spent time at Pantai Cahaya Negeri in Port Dickson, Selangor.

Happiness and creativity

Nature exposure also has benefits that go beyond physical and mental health.

For example, exposure to nature is associated with improved subjective well-being, including greater

happiness and satisfaction with life.

Likewise, living closer to green spaces has been shown to be associated with lower levels of fear and aggression, and with greater feelings of safety.

Spending time in nature promotes better attention spans and learning abilities, as well as better imagination and creativity.

It provides a better sense of self-awareness, facilitates identity development and promotes a sense of connectedness, both to other human beings and other living creatures.

It also promotes greater feelings of non-religious spirituality and a sense of fulfilment in life.

In short, there is simply no doubt that spending time in nature is good for us in many different ways.

In fact, spending time in nature is a simple and cost-effective way of promoting better physical and mental health, as well as many other benefits, for diverse populations.

It is therefore, vitally important that everyone should have easy access to nature, such as forests, beaches and urban parks.

This is especially the case in rapidly urbanising nations like Malaysia, where town planning and the protection of natural environments may often be at odds.

Prof Dr Viren Swami is the director of Perdana University's Centre for Psychological Medicine. This article is courtesy of Perdana University.

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