I’ve been an outdoor enthusiast since my childhood, which I spent running off into the small patch of woods behind my house in the suburban Midwest. While I may not have been able to articulate it then, the benefits of being connected to nature, what I’ll call nature connection, have always been an important part of my life.
As a student in the 2013 Certificate in Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) program, I was surprised to find scant evidence in the positive psychology literature of the role that being connected to nature plays in flourishing. Yet throughout the program, hints of nature were everywhere: a reference, an anecdote, an image. So what does the research say about the role that nature connection plays in our well-being?

First, it’s important to recognize that our brain has evolved in a natural setting. Modern mechanized society and even agriculture are relatively recent additions to human experience. According to environmental psychologists, exposure to nature offers a number of benefits, many documented in the references I’ve listed below:

- Better health
- Reduced stress
- Faster recovery from illness and injury
- Less aggression and violence
- Improved memory and attention span
- Higher test scores and graduation rates
- More creativity

Richard Louv even coined the term *Vitamin N* to describe how the mind/body/nature connection can enhance physical and mental health.

Looking through the lens of Seligman’s PERMA model, there are a number of mechanisms for nature connection to support flourishing. Here’s a sampling:

**Positivity**

- **Savoring:** Nature provides endless opportunities for savoring, from the sweet taste of a fresh-picked wild blueberry to the beauty of a sunset to the melody of a songbird.
- **Gratitude:** Elements of the natural world provide perhaps some of the most irreducible things to be grateful for: that sip of pure water when we’re thirsty, the feeling of sun on our face on a cold day, or that first harvest from a bountiful backyard garden.

**Engagement:**

- **Mindfulness:** Nature constantly invites us into a state of present awareness, engaging our senses with the wind against our cheek, the call of a bird on our backyard feeder, or the sound of rustling in the bushes in bear country!

*Curiosity:* According to Kashdan, curiosity plays an important role in our well-being. Native cultures had a knowledge that modern culture has largely forgotten: tracking. More than just animal footprints on the ground, everything leaves tracks. A tracking mind follows the trail as the story of the tracks reveals itself, asking questions such as “Who left these tracks? What was it doing? Where is it now?”

**Attention Restoration:** Baumeister has demonstrated the numerous benefits of self-regulation and the impact of *ego depletion* on our ability to self-regulate. According to research from Taylor, Kuo, and Sullivan, natural settings provide some of the most significant restorative benefits.
Relationships:

- **High Quality Connections**: Dutton cites the importance of high quality connections for well-being. Nature offers a powerful vehicle for learning about connection and community through the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the cultivation of empathy for other creatures.

- **Play**: The natural world provides endless opportunities for people (of any age) to move and play together. All who had the opportunity to build forts or play make-believe outdoors as a kid know how this builds strong, positive bonds.

Meaning:

- **Awe and transcendence**: This is perhaps the most easily recalled experience most people have of nature connection, certainly so for anyone who has experienced the sense of wonder at seeing a spectacular park, witnessed a large wild animal up close, or simply taken in a beautiful sunset.

Achievement:

- **Grit**: High quality, outdoor experiences provide fertile ground for building levels of self-efficacy and grit. Nowhere have I seen this more than in youth wilderness programs, where children learn to push through experiences of relative discomfort from cold, wet, or boredom, to arrive at wonderful moments of learning and accomplishment.

- **Self-efficacy**: Nothing beats the look of satisfaction and confidence on the face of someone who just started their first bow drill fire (without matches or a lighter). Realizing they have the ability to produce something as elemental as fire and the power to take care of themselves and others creates a genuine experience of self-efficacy.

Where can we find nature?

As it turns out, we don’t need to find a far off wild place to reap the benefits of nature connection. According to the Kaplans, research shows that most humans prefer not dense nature, but semi-open scenes with a parkland feel and a hint of mystery around the corner. In other words, it’s possible to find beneficial connections to nature right in our own backyards.

I found one such place when I was living outside of Seattle. For over two years, I went to this **sit spot** virtually every day, sometimes for only ten minutes. It was an area roughly 200 paces across, where I explored, ate wild blackberries in the sun, played in the snow, had warblers perch within arm’s reach, even watched coyotes rest not 15 feet away. I learned more in this small patch of nature than anywhere else in my life.

With all of its benefits, we cannot take nature connection for granted. According to the World Health Organization, by 2050 seven out of ten people on the planet will live in an urban area. What are the implications for our well-being?

We need positive psychology researchers to build on the findings of environmental psychologists. We need practitioners to use nature as an easy, free, and effective toolkit for supercharging positive psychology practice. Remembering where we come from as humans, it’s my belief that ultimately nature gives life to everything that supports flourishing. If we learn to nurture our relationship with the natural world, perhaps we’ll find it supports us in ways we never thought possible.

Recommended Reading:


References:


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MIND – the UK’s leading mental health charity – has just published a report from the University of Essex on the psychological and physical benefits of ‘ecotherapy’. The report also identifies substantial economic benefits. Main report at 

Ryan, 
Great article! I would add to your references the book, “The Last Child in the Forest”, which cites a large number of benefits for ourselves and our children through experiences in nature.
The fact that 7 of 10 inhabitants may be living in urban environments does not preclude interaction with nature. Urban gardening, neighborhood parks and pathways are all means of maintaining that contact.
My daughter spent two weeks on a NOLS backpacking trip, which solidified her love of nature and built tremendous confidence in herself (though we’d done many backpacking trips as a family). She came back and showed us how to make pizza on our next backpacking trip. That and the huckleberry pancakes (brought the dough, foraged for the huckleberries) were delicious!

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Alex Sternick: Dear Ryan, It is so warming my heart to read your testimonial Of course, Singing in Gibberish...

Ryan Niemiec: Dear Alex, I also love singing with my kids in Gibberish! You are a real “treat” for this...

CoolWriter: To tell the truth, we lie almost constantly and every day: from small tricks and hushing up small flaws...

Admin K.H.B.: John, Given that this article was posted in 2009 and the work by Brown, Sokol, and Friedman to...

Ruth Hayes: Nice article. Related to this – a framework for ethical speech that was shared with me and that I...

John: You support a completely discredited hypothesis (Losada Line)?

Eileen: Thank you Elaine. your review very great

Rebecca: This article really resonates with my personal journey of understanding my own cycles. Thank you for further...

David: As a man, I can say you nailed everything there is to know about men in relationships. In 2 lines! Secret #1:...

robinhoodi: Yeah! Very true, actually I heard about Carin Rockind even in the past that she has taught thousands of...

Lisa Buksbaum: You are both talented and wise.... think of all the lives you’ve enhanced. Twice graced with...

Eileen: I am a working hairdresser for over 30 years, also I am currently studying Mental Health Counseling/ Art...

List of positive psychology courses:

All Positive Psychology Courses HERE
(Over 50 courses listed so far in America and the world!)

If you are teaching or know someone who is teaching a course, please enter the positive psychology course information here for everyone to see! This is a public list, so please be aware of that when entering your email address:

Enter Your Positive Psychology Course Info HERE
The psychology behind happiness - how positive affect is quantified and what influences happiness. Happiness is often an elusive experience - people will go to great lengths for a fleeting moment of happiness. Even the U.S. Declaration of Independence, written in 1776, asserts the right to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”. Positive Affect. World Happiness Levels Mapped By Country In New Study. But what precisely is happiness - how can it be quantified, and is there any measurable benefit to possessing a happy mindset over that of a more stoic realist? “Happiness is a mystery like religion, and should never be rationalized.” G.K. Chesterton, English author (1874-1936). The positive psychology movement represents a new commitment on the part of research psychologists to focus attention upon the sources of psychological health, thereby going beyond prior emphases upon disease and disorder. 2. Goals To meet these objectives we must consider optimal functioning at multiple levels, including biological, experiential, personal, relational, institutional,
cultural, and global.