How the Natural Environment Can Help with Stress: Engaging with Nature to Improve Mental Health

COMMUNITY MATTERS
By Allison Linville

“Nature matters.” That’s the primary message that Michael Edwards, M.A., Licensed Addictions Counselor and Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor with North Valley Behavioral Health conveys when discussing the connection between mental health and the environment. Edwards has studied the correlation between nature and mental health extensively and published a graduate thesis on the topic, and he is passionate about recognizing the positive effects of nature on mental health. He explains that the benefits of the environment aren’t just imagined by those who feel better after a walk outside—there is objective data that shows advantages to time spent in the great outdoors.

“Evidence pointing to the psychological benefits of nature has accumulated at a remarkable rate in a relatively short period of time,” states Dr. Steven Kaplan in his article “The Restorative Benefits of Nature: Toward an Integrative Framework,” one of the resources Edwards references. The measurable benefits show that spending time outside—and really being mindful of the natural world while doing so—can reduce anxiety, blood pressure, and insomnia. These classic symptoms of extreme stress can be mitigated by going outside and appreciating the environment to reset your mind and not let the cumulative effects of stress build up. “Natural environments turn out to be particularly rich in the characteristics necessary for restorative experiences,” Kaplan writes.

Journalist Richard Louv cites the connection between nature and psychology in his book Last Child in the Woods, where he coins the term “Nature Deficit Disorder” in relation to society becoming alienated from the natural world. Edwards confirms his strong belief in this issue and Louv’s research, and makes it clear that the problem is not just for children. In the novel, Louv outlines the benefits of connecting to nature, which include increasing mental acuity and creativity in addition to reducing obesity and depression, which are two of the most pressing health concerns in the United States.

The key, Edwards emphasizes, is that you can’t just be in nature, you have to be fully present and focused on your surroundings. In a sense, it’s also a mindfulness activity. Edwards explains, “There’s two ways to approach any type of treatment, and this is true with mental health as well. There’s a passive role – “Give me something to make it better,” – which is rarely effective, or an active role, like engaging with the world around you.” It’s important to
recognize that just going outside when you’re stressed and looking at your phone or blankly sitting under a tree won’t make you feel less stressed or help anxiety. “It’s a two way process,” Edwards says. “You have to reach out and actually realize the positive effects to experience them.”

In Montana, we are lucky to live in a place where it’s easy to get outside and enjoy nature, but it’s also possible to take this accessibility for granted. In addition to being in nature, finding a purpose and creating connections with others are two additional ways to improve mental health. “The main thing is to find your own way, using this information. Some people find that the environment is isolating and then they don’t have social connections. For those people, it would make more sense to find a regular group to go outside with,” Edwards states. “The most important point is that feeling happier in nature is not just going to happen to you. You have to make the effort to find your connection with the environment, and then you may experience the positive effects. It is essential that we become active participants in the environment instead of passive observers of nature; then, we can truly reap the benefits of our surroundings,” he explains.

Another way to engage with nature goes beyond appreciation and mindfulness and toward taking an active role in protecting the places we love to go. This conscientious approach can be in regards to many things—from recycling to speaking out about protecting the environment in your neighborhood to building a new trail for conserving wildlife habitat. “Often, those who are conscientious about their surroundings and express concerns about the loss of the natural environment find this purpose to be rewarding,” says Edwards. “It goes back to recognizing the connection between environment and health and fully appreciating and protecting that connection as humans.”

“For some, connecting with nature can literally be a psychological and physical grounding,” says Edwards. “This ability to recharge and restore in nature can improve anxiety, depression, and help manage stress. As an ongoing part of your routine, engaging with nature can be a huge part of maintaining positive mental health.”

Michael Edwards, M.A., LPC, IAC is a licensed clinical professional counselor and licensed addiction counselor at North Valley Behavioral Health. He sees individuals age fourteen and older for anxiety, depression, stress management, PTSD, marriage counseling, and couples/family counseling. He also sees individuals who may have a substance use disorder: alcohol, prescription drugs, marijuana and/or opiates. Michael is originally from New England, and prior to North Valley Behavioral Health had a private practice in the Mt. Washington Valley, Conway, NH. He and his wife, Christina live in Whitefish, and both enjoy hiking, running, snowshoeing and spending as much time in the outdoors. For more information, please call 406-862-1030, or on-line at www.northvalleyhealth.org.