

# Go green and conquer stress

**Advice Line**

by Dr. Betty Phillips



The stress monster does not live in the leafy green forests, among the waving strands of daffodils and daisies, the gently flowing streams, the majestic rolling oceans, the warm sun and deep blue sky or the dark starry nights. No, the stress monster lives with car horns honking, phones jingling, TV blaring, within gray concrete buildings — you get the picture. You know how a sunny spring day or a walk in the park brings a smile to your face. We are lucky to live in or near Chatham County which still has an abundance of nature to help quell the stress of modern life.

Hundreds of research studies have verified that stress reduction is a key benefit of contact with nature. If you must be confined to a hospital, for instance, ask for room with a natural view. You will likely experience less pain, recover faster and have fewer postoperative complications. Students take note. Contact with nature has been found to improve test scores. Sitting near a window view of nature at your workplace will result in less perceived job stress, higher levels of job satisfaction and fewer illnesses. I've seen a medical office which has a beautiful nature scene on the ceiling above the examining table. I keep wishing my dentist would add a nature mural to the very boring white ceiling above the dentist chair.

Although pictures of nature assist stress reduction, contact with the real thing is clearly more effective. You know that exercise is a great stress reducer, but where you walk or jog does matter. Gym camaraderie may be a good motivator, but physical exercise in a natural setting accelerates the benefits. One research study, for example, found that 71 percent of walkers in the park reported a

decrease in depression and an increase in quality of life compared to 45 percent of walkers in a shopping mall. Another study found that walking in a park enhances cognitive performance, but walking around downtown does not. Looking at pictures of nature has been found to help attention and working memory, but this effect was not found when viewing pictures of urban environments. Your children will benefit from outdoor play versus indoor activities like video games. Research studies find that the "greener" the play environment, the better the children's functioning, even children with attention disorders.

To obtain maximum benefit from contact with nature, try a multisensory and meditative approach. Visual: turn off your mind and really look at all aspects of the scene around you. Auditory: listen to the birds, the wind rustling in the leaves, the busy hum of nature. Smell: the odors and fragrances of the flowers, earth, leaves, grass. Touch and kinesthetics: feel the breeze caress your face, your feet crunching in the grass, the softness of the leaves and the textures of tree bark. A meditative approach will help you turn off the busy chatter of your mind and stay in the present.

You can use CDs to learn walking or running meditations and you can use hemi-sync or other alpha/theta based music on your iPod, but also learn to experience nature directly. I've started experimenting with jogging at the first light of dawn. Originally I carried my iPod, but I soon learned to turn it off to fully enjoy the beautiful chorus of birds singing their hearts out with joy to the new day. If you come visit me at Forest Garden, you will experience the benefits of this peaceful natural setting.

Educate yourself about walking



while reducing nervous system over-reactivity. Health benefits are also being explored. We know now that vitamin D levels are very important to health maintenance and reduce the risk of developing influenzas (think swine flu) and chronic problems such as diabetes and heart disease. Vitamin D is directly boosted by sunshine.

Contact with the beauty of our natural world has powerful spiritual and mystical effects, including profound peak experiences when you surrender your ego/consciousness to the majesty of the cosmos. Natural environments can invoke a sense of oneness with all nature and the universe and can lead to transcendental experiences. To quote William Blake: "To see a world in a grain of sand, And a heaven in a wild flower,

Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour."

and living in nature. Local wildlife experts offer informative walking tours and classes. The psychological benefits of response to nature include feelings of pleasure, sustained attention or interest, relaxed wakefulness, and decrease of negative emotions such as anger, depression and anxiety. People feel that they can "clear their heads" by going for a walk outside. Research actually finds that natural experiences strengthen hemispheric synchronization and the right brain

**Need advice?**

Send Dr. Betty Phillips questions about individual, relationship, marriage or family issues to BettyPhillips@BellSouth.net or 466 Eagle Point Road, Pittsboro 27312. Questions can be anonymous. Betty looks forward to hearing from you!



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