

# Take time to notice nature for improved well-being

While standing in a long line at the post office during the holiday rush, I noticed how people passed their time.

Some were buried in their smart-phones, while others chose to socialize with friends and acquaintances. There were a few who seemed impatient, and I too felt restless. So instead of staring down the line of people waiting for their turn at the counter, I decided to look out the window. The view of the sparkling sunshine filtering through tall pine trees dusted in snow captured my attention. In that moment, I was transported away from the chaos and clamor, and I immediately felt a bit calmer.

Simply taking note of the natural beauty around us can elevate our emotions. Studies show that pausing to pay close attention to nature gives us an instant boost of calm. Even looking at a photograph of a natural scene has been shown to enhance well-being. Think about it. If you were seeking calm, would you rather gaze at a decaying building or a beautiful nature scene?

For most of us, noticing a natural landscape is not only more appealing, it is restorative. Scientists like prominent biologist E.O. Wilson and Dr. Yoshifumi Miyazaki, a researcher specializing in nature therapy, suggest that the beauty of nature attracts and

soothes us because it is part of our evolutionary process. Nature is where we come from and our physiology is still adapted to it. Because of this, it captures our attention effortlessly and helps us feel better.

When we notice the everyday nature that surrounds us, we automatically tap into its calming influence. A growing body of research shows that by taking the time to purposely notice the good things in nature, we can strengthen positive emotions like hope and connectedness. This practice is known as “Noticing Nature Intervention” or NNI.

In a study where participants either focused their attention on the built environment or on nature scenes by taking photographs of nature for two weeks, researchers found that those who focused their attention on the natural elements reported feeling more positive emotions and were significantly more likely to report feelings like hopefulness, peacefulness, rejuvenation and awe, which includes feelings of wonder, spirituality and transcendence. These positive results were even reported by those that had no affinity for nature.

Research shows that attending to

nature improves our collective well-being, too. One study in which participants stared at a grove of trees for as little as one minute demonstrated they became more helpful and approached moral dilemmas more ethically than those who spent time looking at a tall building. In another study



## Nature Rx

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where participants were exposed to beautiful nature scenes, participants acted more generously and were more trusting than their counterparts who were exposed to less beautiful scenes.

In a real-life application, a noticing-nature type of intervention was recommended to a friend of mine as a non-drug treatment for pain management after he had ankle surgery

a few years ago. His clinic gave him a brochure with suggestions for non-drug interventions, one of which was to think about positive images, which he quickly translated to looking at images of nature — wildlife and landscapes specifically. He reported that looking at the nature photographs helped him disassociate from his pain, and he felt better.

Because viewing nature has such a positive effect on health and well-being, medical professionals are starting to

incorporate views of nature into the architectural designs of their buildings.

It is no doubt that noticing nature allows us to flourish. Even in the cold of winter when we are spending more time indoors, we can take a minute to look out the window. To clear our clouded minds, we can look outside for a moment and look out into the distance. Noticing the bare trees or a far-off bird in the sky helps to restore and refresh us.

I often walk away from my desk and laptop screen to stare out at Flat Creek and watch the graceful trumpeter swans feeding and preening. Watching them float in the still waters of the creek in the early morning mist is breathtaking and even more so, inspiring and rejuvenating.

The practice of noticing nature is an easy and enjoyable way to promote individual and collective well-being. So the next time you need a little break, take a beat and take notice of nature, because losing ourselves in the beauty can help us to feel calmer, more relaxed and kinder.

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