



A Prescription For Nature

WHEN WE RESTORE NATURE,
NATURE RESTORES US.



THE EVIDENCE BASE





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In the UK, we are witnessing a mental health crisis

ONE IN SIX PEOPLE IN ENGLAND REPORT EXPERIENCING A COMMON MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM (SUCH AS ANXIETY OR DEPRESSION) IN ANY GIVEN WEEK.¹

One in six adults aged 16 and over across Great Britain reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms in autumn 2022.² In Scotland, national surveys in 2022 found that levels of mental wellbeing had fallen for the second year in a row.³

One in six children aged five to 16 were identified as having a probable mental health problem in July 2021 – an increase from one in nine in 2017 and now equivalent to five children in every classroom.⁴

THE BENEFITS OF NATURE

There is a strong body of evidence that engaging with nature supports good mental health.⁵⁻⁸ Accessing and engaging with natural environments can, among other things:

- reduce stress^{6,9-11}
- reduce anxiety^{6,10-12}
- enable psychological restoration – i.e. help us to rest and restore our minds^{8,13,14}
- improve mood and life satisfaction¹⁵
- improve self-esteem and confidence¹⁶
- have a positive impact on regulating emotion, e.g. reducing rumination or worry.¹⁷

Beyond spending time with nature, a sense of connection to nature is linked to improved hedonic wellbeing ('feeling good') and eudaimonic wellbeing ('functioning well').⁷

These positive effects are widely understood by the public too – 70% of UK adults say that being close to nature improves their mood.¹⁸

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The benefits of engaging with nature are universal and can play a significant role in supporting the mental wellbeing of children and young people. Both time spent outdoors and a sense of connectedness to nature have been shown to be related to reduced psychosomatic symptoms, such as low mood, anger or poor sleep.¹⁹

The types of benefits to children and young people are varied and can be different for boys and girls, but they include what is called emotional wellbeing, improvements in attention deficit disorder/hyperactivity disorder symptoms, boosted self-esteem and reduced stress.²⁰

One of the most notable examples of this effect in action is the 'Our Bright Future' programme to connect young people with nature for their wellbeing, which was led by the Wildlife Trusts across the UK from 2016 to 2022. It reached 128,000 young people, with 86% reporting that taking part improved their mental health.²¹ The independent evaluation at the end of the programme found the key outcomes for young people included improved mental health and wellbeing, and increased self-esteem and self-confidence.

Making the most of nature

Britons are not getting the full benefit of this opportunity as part of our response to the mental health crisis.

When it comes to time spent outdoors in nature, a survey conducted for WWF in 2024 by More in Common* found that over one third (34%) of people spend time in nature just once a week or less.

It also found that half (49%) of those surveyed wished they spent more time in nature. This rose to 60% among those living in large towns or urban city centres. When it comes to a sense of connection to nature, a survey in 2021 found that 44% of people said they were not connecting with nature often enough to help their mental health, and 38% said they wanted to do it more often.¹⁸ A survey in 2019 found that 80% of Britons rarely or never watched wildlife, smelled wild flowers or drew or photographed nature; and 62% of people rarely or never listened to bird song or took a moment to notice butterflies or bees.²² Only 24% of schools offer children daily opportunities to experience nature.²³

For each of us, there are different factors that limit our time in and engagement with nature. The More in Common polling in 2024 found that not having the time available was the most common reason given. People from low-income households and in urban areas spent the least time in nature.²⁴ Women, young people, disabled people and people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups report being less able to access nature for a variety of reasons, including safety, physical accessibility and race discrimination.¹⁸ The characteristics of these groups who spend the least amount of time in nature overlap with the characteristics of those who are most at risk of mental health problems.^{25,26}

And those in lower-income households and in more urban areas, and those classified as experiencing a mental health problem, have been found to benefit most from an increase in engagement with nature.^{27,28}

These findings illustrate that if we can lift these barriers and enable these groups to engage with nature, there is significant benefit to be unlocked.

To make the most of the nature around us for our mental wellbeing, we need to create more opportunity for people to connect with nature and encourage greater orientation among the population to do so.^{29,30} Opportunity relates to people's proximity and access to natural spaces; orientation relates to their interest and motivation to engage in activities in nature.



* More in Common x WWF research, August 2024. More In Common polled 2,083 people, representative of the GB population between 16th and 19th August 2024.

Increasing opportunity will require structural solutions – for example, investment in the creation, improvement or accessibility of green spaces in urban areas. A study of data from nearly 100,000 people in the UK found that more exposure to green spaces in residential areas reduced the risk of depression among this group.²⁷ Another study looked at data from 2.3 million adults in Wales covering a period of 10 years. It found that ambient exposure to green and blue spaces (e.g. parks and lakes) in their neighbourhood reduced people's risk of common mental health disorders (e.g. depression, anxiety).³¹ The effect in this study was so pronounced that living just 360 metres further from a green or blue space was associated with higher odds of a common mental health disorder. The UK government has acknowledged the need to improve access to local green spaces and has set a target for this in its '25-year plan for nature'.³² There are sizeable barriers that need addressing, but there are already some specific initiatives to work around them in the interim, such as information on accessible sites* and facilitated visits and funds** – more are needed.

Another large-scale solution is more widespread use of 'green' social prescribing. Social prescribing is 'an approach that connects people to activities, groups and services in their community to meet the practical, social and emotional needs that affect their health and wellbeing'.³³ The NHS Long Term Plan sets the intent to grow the role of social prescribing significantly, and the NHS in England recognises that 'green social prescribing initiatives such as walking groups and gardening clubs can also play a role in improving mental health'.³⁴

There are a diverse range of groups offering a diverse range of opportunities for green social prescribing, from horticultural therapy to animal care.⁸ From 2021 to 2023, the UK government tested how to embed green social prescribing in mental health pathways and across integrated care systems to improve mental health and tackle health inequalities. This resulted in 8,500 people being referred to a green social prescribing activity, with 85% uptake and leading to 'positive improvements in mental health and wellbeing and strong engagement in communities experiencing high levels of social inequalities that affect health and wellbeing'.³⁵

While medical practitioners have begun to recognise the social prescribing opportunity, there is some way to go to improve awareness among clinicians of the opportunities for nature-related activities. Government research published in 2023 found that 97% of clinicians were favourable towards the concept of social prescribing in general, while only 16% of clinicians had heard of and knew a lot about green social prescribing.²⁴ This illustrates the untapped opportunity to benefit people through engagement with nature. Several groups are working on unlocking this.

But there is something we can all do now. Something that's in our gift, that doesn't require an intervention from a doctor, if we are encouraged and enabled to do so. Taking individual actions to engage with nature and natural spaces more regularly can be a powerful complement to 'traditional' interventions like medication and talking therapy and can be freely available to us all.

* For example, this map of accessible woodland sites from the Woodland Trust: [Accessible nature reserves](#) | [The Wildlife Trusts](#)

** For example, the Aviva Access to Nature Fund with WWF and the Norfolk Rivers Trust Aviva Access to Nature Fund and groups like Black Girls Hike UK C.I.C (bghuk.com)

Mental wellbeing for all, naturally

The *Prescription for Nature* campaign is offering something that is accessible to all to support mental wellbeing. It will encourage us – because we all need that encouragement when we are struggling – to tap into nature for our mental wellbeing. It aims to boost our interest and motivation (or our *orientation*) to engage with nature for our own benefit. It is designed to be useful particularly for those groups who have limited engagement with nature at present, who stand to gain most, to help them make the most of the opportunities available to them. It complements the work of other groups who provide facilitated activities and therapy opportunities in nature.

TO FEEL THESE BENEFITS, WE CAN ALL TAKE THREE SIMPLE STEPS:

GET OUT INTO A NATURAL SPACE MORE OFTEN.

The amount of evidence on how much time in nature is recommended for our mental health is limited. However, research to date suggests that 20 minutes a day on average is enough to have a benefit for mental health. Spending around 20 minutes doing a nature-based activity, such as walking in the park or gardening, was found to be enough to have a positive effect on levels of depression, anxiety or stress.^{37,38} Another study found that spending at least two hours each week (however that time is divided over the week) in a natural space was associated with higher levels of health and mental wellbeing.³⁶

ENGAGE WITH NATURE MORE WHEN IN A GREEN SPACE.

While just being in nature in an ambient manner still has benefit for us all, feeling a connection with nature can deepen the benefit to our mental health. This is enabled through more use of the senses, more observation.^{10,18,39,40} Using our senses and asking ourselves what we can see, hear, smell or feel while in a natural space is a simple but powerful approach.

In fact, even if we don't increase our 'minutes' in nature, having more meaningful 'moments' in nature can still benefit our mental wellbeing.⁴⁰

BRING NATURE INSIDE.

As noted above, not everyone feels able to access natural spaces. For example, the prospect of going outside to a park or woodland or other space may be offputting for those experiencing depression, anxiety or other mental health challenges. In these circumstances, there are other opportunities: for instance, there are benefits in noticing nature through the window,⁴¹ viewing images of nature,⁴² hearing sounds from nature⁴³ and enjoying plants indoors^{44,45}. To meet people where they are, the Prescription for Nature campaign also supports options like these, which may help people get out into nature in due course.

Through one or all of these steps, we can access a 'daily dose' of minutes and moments in nature.



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A digital reminder

While benefits come when you are experiencing nature itself, evidence shows digital engagement can successfully encourage us to do this.

The simple question ‘what three good things about nature can you notice?’ via a smartphone app has been tested and found to boost mental health to a statistically and clinically significant degree – benefiting those classified as having a mental health difficulty the most.²⁸ Encouragement via an app or other online content to achieve a ‘daily dose’ of nature must be done sensitively to ensure this encouragement itself does not trigger anxiety or stress.

Such digital content could even be a social prescription option for GPs themselves – they have been willing to use such options in the past.²⁸ So this can serve to improve awareness and the universal availability of an option to help grow the social prescribing movement to support mental wellbeing.

By doing this, the Prescription for Nature campaign will put tested approaches into action at scale, complementing traditional therapies and medication as well as social prescribing. It will enable us collectively to unlock a nature-based solution to support the mental wellbeing of the nation.



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