

Let's Get Outside

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Description:

Time spent outdoors is good for our health, so why are we not spending as much time outdoors? According to the National Wildlife Association, the amount of time spent outside for adults and children alike is alarmingly low- only minutes per day- while screen time is at an all-time high. All the while, there are many health benefits of green time and connecting with nature. Feeling sluggish? Let's get outside.

Objectives:

Participants will be able to identify benefits of connecting with nature.

Participants will be able to understand how nature affects our well-being.

Participants will learn what they can do to increase time outdoors.

Activity 1: Play Memory Field Trip!

This is a quiet, guided imagery exercise. Encourage participants to get comfortable. Use a soothing voice. Take your time as you walk them through each of the steps. They should end the exercise feeling relaxed and happy.

1. Tell the group they are going to go on a little field trip in their memories- across the years back to childhood.
2. Ask the group to close their eyes.
3. Ask them to **think back to their favorite place to play as a child**- encourage them to really picture it in their mind's eye. Give them a minute to get a place in their mind before you move on.
4. Ask them, *What did it look like? Imagine the colors. Were there any special smells, sounds, or textures that you remembers?* (Remember: they are not answering out loud, but you will be able to watch facial expressions and track how they are engaging)
5. Encourage them to think about how being in that place made them feel and to let those feelings wash over them.
6. Next, tell them we are going to end the little field trip but to keep those feelings with them throughout the meeting today to remind them of the importance of this topic.
7. Ask the group to open their eyes.

Process the Experience

1. Tell the group that you see lots of smiles on their faces and anything else you noticed.
2. Ask them to stand if their space they imagined as a child was outdoors. (Typically most or ALL of the group- if so comment on this fact, ex: backyard, park, grandparents' house, farm, garden, tree house.
3. Ask a few to volunteer to share the feelings brought up by thinking about their favorite play spaces.
4. Reiterate why this topic is so important- many kids and us today are missing these experiences and will not have these memories. Who would we be without these type of memories?

What are the facts?

Many of us remember the phrase, “Go outside and play!” from childhood, but children today spend less time playing outdoors than any previous generation (Clements, 2004; Hofferth and Curin, 2006). Children model the behavior of the adults in their lives. People today are spending less time outdoors than any previous generation. According to the National Wildlife Foundation:

- Children are spending half as much time outdoors as they did 20 years ago.
- Children who play outside are more physically active, more creative in their play, less aggressive, and show better concentration.
- Sixty minutes of daily, unstructured free play is essential to children’s physical and mental health.
- The most direct route to caring for the environment as an adult is participating in “wild nature activities” before the age of 11.

Today many children and adults suffer from what Richard Louv calls “nature-deficit disorder”- reduced awareness and a diminished ability to find meaning in the life around us.

Adult activity levels are declining, survey found that two-thirds spend more than two hours a day watching TV or videos. Adults are becoming more sedentary due to increased use of technology. The American Cancer Society found that women who reported sitting more than six hours a day were 37 percent more likely to die than those who sat fewer than three hours a day. The most sedentary men were 18 percent more likely to die than the more active.

How Nature Affects Our Well-Being

(Excerpted from *Benefits of Connecting with Nature*, 2017. Hunt, Molly; Pedigo, Lindsey; Williams, Rod; and Zuber, Katie)

Natural environments have been shown to:

- **Heal:** Natural settings, whether in real life or pictures, have been shown to reduce anger, fear and stress, as well as increase pleasant feelings. A reduction in blood pressure, heart rate, muscle tension, and stress hormones are all reactions of the body to experiencing a natural environment.
- **Relieve & Refresh:** Nature helps people cope with pain. Trees, plants, water, and other elements of the natural environment are captivating and interesting to humans, so being in the presence of natural elements distracts people from pain. For this same reason, nature increases our ability to focus and be attentive. Nature gives our brains a break.
- **Connect:** Time spent outdoors connects people to one another and society. Research has shown that when people view nature scenes, the parts of the brain associated with empathy and love activated, but when they view urban scenes, the parts of the brain associated with fear and anxiety activate. Therefore, it could be argued that nature rouses feelings of connectedness with each other and the world around them.

Activity 2: Experience Nature through Sight

If you are able to go outdoors for the activity that would be the best option. If not please collect enough pictures of nature or natural environments- cutouts from magazines or printed from a computer. You could also have partners access a Youtube video of relaxing nature sounds from their smartphone, if accessible and wifi is available at your meeting place.

Materials needed include a timer or stop watch and pictures of natural settings. You will want to set a timer for 3 minutes.

1. Encourage participants to get comfortable.
2. Ask them to sit quietly and observe nature.
3. Ask that they view their picture of nature for up to 3 minutes.

Process the Experience

1. Ask them how did this environment make you feel? Possible answers could be calm, content, grateful, etc...
2. Ask a few to volunteer to share the feelings brought up by observing nature or the picture.
3. Reiterate why this topic is so important- Research has shown that when people view nature scenes, it can direct their thoughts towards relaxing thoughts, decrease stress, change mood, and increase pleasant feelings.

What can you do?

1. Hang a bird feeder outside your window and refill the feeder daily to keep birds visiting frequently
2. Gardening is a nice leisure activity to connect with nature. Not much land is needed, and even pots can do. This activity should be followed during the morning and evening time to avoid peak sun hours
3. Spend some time by water to promote a feeling of relaxation and well-being, whether by a local pool or lake
4. Go for a walk and enjoy a low-impact activity that boosts your heart rate slightly
5. Have a picnic for a great way to combine the healing benefits of getting outdoors with the positive benefits of being around friends and family
6. Look for community summer programs like outdoor symphony concerts or farmers markets. Some places offer summer ticket discounts (senior discounts, too) for events
7. Volunteer during the summer, or year round, at a summer reading program for kids, local animal shelter, church day camp, or become a Master Gardener
8. Fishing promotes interaction with nature, while enjoying the calmness that comes along with it for inner peace
9. Golfing has many health benefits, including physical and mental well-being. Whether it is hitting the ball or walking the golf course, golfing is a great way to keep your heart and your brain healthy.
10. Metal detecting is another way to help keep you physically active while searching for hidden treasure
11. Nature photography is one way to be submersed in nature and admiring its beauty has a definite relaxing effect on all
12. Bird watching inspires a harmonious union with nature while learning more about these incredible creatures

13. Catch an outdoor sporting event by attending a grandchild's soccer game or professional baseball game for an action-packed way to enjoy the outdoors
14. Be a tourist by enjoying a Sunday drive to a nearby town and enjoy the blooming flowers and trees, or festivals and community events
15. Indulge in the simple yet incredible pleasure of looking at the stars and promote the feeling of calmness and lose the sense of the passage of time. Something we all need in today's busy lifestyle.
16. Outdoor games like shuffleboard or and croquet are a great way to get outdoors while enjoying friendly competition with friends
17. Biking is an aerobic activity to help get your heart pumping, which will improve endurance and heart health and lower blood pressure and stress levels
18. Painting fosters creativity and strengthens memory; pair with going outdoors will create a perfect muse while enjoying the health benefits of being outdoors
19. Swimming is another great aerobic activity to help improve your heart health and mental wellbeing
20. Kayaking improves cardiovascular fitness, while creating a clear and happy mind while being outdoors

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