



Research Article

The Healing Power of Green Spaces: Combating Loneliness, Loss, and Isolation

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Abstract

This paper addresses the healing potential of natural spaces. The potential healing benefits of natural spaces are a powerful resource that has often been underutilized. Eco psychology is an emerging field that addresses the positive relationship between time spent outside and well-being. Access to nature, gardens, green and blue spaces have been found to improve physical and mental health and aid in coping with grief, loss, loneliness and isolation. Loneliness has been shown to have detrimental effects on physical and psychological health. It also reduces motivation for self-care, exercise, and recreation and may lead to alcohol and drug abuse. Studies indicate that loneliness and isolation have reached crisis proportions particularly in later life with more than 40 % of older adults reporting regular feelings of loneliness. In the face of multiple losses, the interplay of the social, spiritual, and natural world can provide one source of connection and healing. We interviewed a diverse group of older adults who spent at least 3 hours each week outdoors. We explored the ways that they felt their time in natural spaces provided solace and healing from loss. The results are discussed in relation to later life transcendence, connection, and well-being.

Introduction

The Healing Power of Green Spaces: Combating Loneliness, Loss, and Isolation

“The loss of relation to nature goes hand in hand with the loss of the sense of one’s own self.” [1] Access to nature, gardens, green and blue spaces can improve physical and mental health and aid in coping with grief, loss, loneliness, isolation, and alienation, particularly in later life [2]. The potential healing benefits of natural spaces are a powerful resource that has often been underutilized. Loneliness and isolation have been on the rise for some time, they reached crisis proportions during the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. In times of stress, loss, and loneliness, life may lose its meaning. Access to natural spaces can serve as a resource and healing tool [4,5].

There is a growing prevalence of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and isolation. These may, in part, be related to a growing

alienation with nature and concerns about climate change [5]. In contemporary industrialized societies, many people spend more than 90% of their time indoors in artificial light [6]. Spending just 2 hours each week outdoors can help improve immune function, increase positive affect, cognitive abilities, and boost depleted attentional capabilities [7]. Encounters with nature also increase meaning, transcendence, and spirituality. The natural world, with the cycle of birth, life, and death, and rebirth, can provide relief and understanding in the face of impending mortality, grief and loss [5]. Existential psychologists have long written about the relationship between meaning and the human need to be linked to nature [1,8,9]. Never have those thoughts been more important than in contemporary times of climate change, social turbulence, and crisis. Connecting to nature can build an appreciation of natural spaces, boost well-being, and aid in coping with later life losses, losses which often lead to loneliness and isolation, conditions that also make one acutely aware of one’s own mortality.

Loneliness, isolation, and green space access

Loneliness is widespread. It affects people of all ages and backgrounds. Ongoing loneliness is associated with a range of physical and psychological health concerns such as an increase in anxiety and depression, an increased risk of dementia, diabetes, heart disease, and even premature death. It is particularly a concern for older adults who are struggling with later life health concerns or coping with loss. More than 40% of adults over 65 have reported experiencing regular feelings of loneliness [10]. Loneliness reduces motivation for self-care, exercise, and recreation. It can also increase the desire for unhealthy “comfort” foods [11] and may also lead to alcohol and drug abuse and disrupted sleep [12]. Loneliness also lowers immune function and predisposes people to accelerated aging by disrupting the regulation of the body’s cellular processes [13,14] found that loneliness particularly impacted those diagnosed with underlying disorders such as chronic anxiety, heart disease, depression, Type 2 diabetes, and dementia [15].

Later life losses can result in feeling disconnected, lonely, and isolated [14]. Parks, walking trails, sidewalks, and green public spaces can serve as resources and a source of connection [16,17]. Access to community parks and walking trails can also increase leisure activity and exercise. Leisure is important in promoting social integration and preventing loneliness and isolation in later life [17,18] found that leisure time in nature helped in recovery from work related stress boosting work and life balance. Reviewing the benefits of access to parks, gardens, and green spaces, a report from the BBC [19] reported significant benefits to overall well-being. For those who can spend time outdoors there appear to be multiple benefits [20].

Chronic Conditions and Natural Spaces

Eighty percent of older adults suffer from at least one chronic condition. Time in natural spaces can aid in managing chronic conditions. Type 2 Diabetes, arthritis, Vitamin D deficiency, for example, affect millions of people around the world [21]. More than 30 million Americans struggle with Type 2 Diabetes. An additional 79 million worldwide are pre-diabetic and millions more are undiagnosed [22]. As many as 1 in 4 older adults have Type 2 diabetes, the 7th leading cause of death. Millions of Americans experience daily arthritis pain, and millions suffer from Vitamin D deficiency--a risk factor associated with increased cardiovascular disease--cognitive impairment, asthma, and other chronic conditions [23,24]. By adopting healthy lifestyle practices, many chronic conditions are treatable and manageable, but lacking access to spaces makes illness management more challenging. Coping with any chronic condition depends on the intersecting influences of personal, social, economic, and cultural factors [25]. Multiple studies have examined the relationship between self-care and illness management, but few have explored access to natural spaces and healing.

Although Eco psychology is an emerging field that addresses the positive relationship between time spent outside and well-being [26], the notion that fresh air and beautiful natural settings promote health is not new. Healing gardens have long existed in

many cultures and have been areas of solace and recuperation throughout history [27]. The “Persian garden,” for example, has always been considered a magical place, a place for socializing, relaxation, and spirituality, and prayer--a paradise on earth [28]. The word “paradise” is derived from the old Persian word that signifies an enclosed garden. Spending time in gardens, private or public gardens, is one way of building positive emotions and coping with negative ones and increasing resilience [24,29]. In one study addressing the benefits of hospital gardens, [30] explored relaxation and restoration from visits to green spaces and concluded that there is a healing power associated with green “window views.” [24] Found that the act of gardening may be particularly conducive to promoting enjoyment, relaxation, and even a spiritual experience. Therapeutic horticulture (TH) a treatment modality utilizing plants and plant-related activities has a positive impact on physical and mental health, cognitive functions, and sleep. Caring for plants also fosters a sense of purpose and satisfaction [31,32] explored feelings of gratitude, wonder, and resiliency from time spent in nature and found that even 15 minutes was beneficial.

Several therapeutic practices have also focused on the healing nature of the outdoors. For example, Shinrin-Yoku--a Japanese forest bathing therapy focused on healing and the senses--has multiple positive benefits [33]. Shinrin-Yoku promotes connection with nature through touch, smell, sight, and sound and aids in stress reduction [34]. In a meta-analysis of studies that explored the benefits of [33] found that the practice mediates the effects of anxiety on the sympathetic nervous and activates the parasympathetic nervous system. Forest bathing can aid in managing anxiety by reducing heart rate and blood pressure and increasing feelings of safety and connectedness. For those struggling with later life losses, these therapies have many potential healing benefits.

Eco-therapy addresses the benefits to be derived from time spent in the natural environment [35]. Emphasizing natural connection as a basic human need, this therapy stresses that people are wired to interact with air, water, plants, and other animals in order to be happy. Humans have historically lived with nature, and alienation from nature is as devastating for one’s health as alienation from social relationships [10]. Feeling disconnected to natural spaces also increases a sense of alienation from one’s community and society. The outdoors serves as a shared community space; a resource that can lead to increased cooperation and a sense of community [32]. Shared community spaces boost norms of reciprocity, empathy, and trust in one’s neighborhood. Natural spaces provide a bond that keep people of all ages healthier and happier and potentially mitigate the negative effects of later life losses.

Inequality in Accessing Natural Spaces

The healing power of green and blue spaces is not available to everyone. Environmental inequality is widespread. Many neighborhoods, particularly communities of color and urban neighborhoods with a high percentage of aging residents, lack access to safe green spaces. They may not have well lighted sidewalks,

walking trails, and clean safe parks. By 2050, 68% of the global population will be living in urban areas [36]. Today's cities provide many opportunities for residents, but they are not "healthy" places for all. Disparities in access to green spaces and natural spaces are widespread, which contributes to inequality in well-being, especially in later life. Residents in lower socioeconomic urban communities are often older, immigrant, and minority populations. In such communities, nature deprivation is a growing concern adding to the long-term cumulative effects of unequal access to health promoting resources and long-term discriminatory policies. Residents of communities of color and immigrant communities often suffer from multiple chronic conditions that in part, a lack of access to health promoting green spaces shape [37,38].

Later life grief and loss

The challenges of later life are many, aging is often accompanied by grief and loss. While many intersecting factors shape an individual's reactions to losses, natural spaces are healing resources that can aid in coping. According to existential psychologists we have a basic need for transcendent connections [8,39]. Natural spaces can fulfill such a need and serve as one spiritual connection [8,39,4] wrote about existential anxieties--the loss of meaning, a sense of isolation, a lack of freedom, and fear of death. In later life, faced with one's mortality, nature can fulfill, in part, the search for meaningful connections that transcend the individual.

As older adults attempt to cope with the various losses, particularly those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing epidemic of loneliness and isolation needs to be addressed on multiple levels. Focusing on community planning, education, public policies, and mental health services are important considerations, especially for older and marginalized populations [40]. As a healing tool, time in nature can provide one avenue of comfort and solace in times of loss and grief, foster connections to others and natural spaces, increase understanding and acceptance of one's mortality [33]. The pandemic changed the lives of every individual on the planet. At the same time the pandemic created an awareness of the importance of natural spaces as one way to maintain and foster physical and psychological well-being, develop positive emotions [41], reinforce social relationships, and build a sense of community. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (2021 – 2022), we explored the perceived benefits derived from time in natural spaces. We interviewed a group of older adults who had access to and make regular use of a large natural space in their community. We explored how spending at least 2 hours each week in a natural space influenced their subjective well-being.

Method

We conducted interviews with a group of older volunteers who made regular use (at least 2 hours each week) of a large city park. This exploratory qualitative study focused on understanding perceived benefits of time spent in natural spaces. In 2022 and 2023, as the world emerged from the pandemic, we interviewed 18 community dwelling residents over the age of 65. Participants

reported that they had access to a green space; that they utilized the outdoors at least 3 times each week (for at least 2 hours each week). Over the course of 6 months, we interviewed each participant at least 3 times and focused on the perceived benefits they felt they received from spending time outdoors. All participants lived in a city neighborhood and all stated that they primarily walked in the park. Participants were from diverse background--5 (4 women and 1 man) were Latinx immigrants, 6 European American women, 7 (4 women and 3 men) who were immigrants from the Middle East. Although several stated that they had health conditions such as Type 2 Diabetes and high blood pressure they all stated that their health was good and did not impact their mobility. Nine of the participants stated that they had experienced a significant loss--the death of a relative or friend during the past 2 years.

Interviews focused on understanding the subjective assessment of the experiences of participants and their relationship to the outdoors. They were asked to discuss their feelings about the outdoors, motivations for walking, benefits they received from being outside, the ways that their time outdoors helped them cope with loss and later life transitions. We attempted to capture detailed insights about each person's experiences and their respective perceptions of the relationship between access and use of outdoor green space and loneliness, isolation, and coping with grief and loss.

Interviews focused on the subjective assessment of the ways that participants felt time in natural spaces influenced their overall subjective well-being. Seventeen of the 18 participants stated that they would not have been able to cope with the pandemic and its associated losses without having access to green space. Analysis of responses indicated that several recurrent themes could be identified --safety, coping with loss, community, meaning, and continuity.

"Walking first thing in the morning is the best of my day" 75-year-old Alexa said. "I have always walked, I live in this area partially because of the park, but during the pandemic walking saved my life." This sentiment was consistent with the comments made by many others. In response to the question "Can you share some reasons why walking outside is important to you?" 99-year-old Maddie said, "I grew up in Vermont, I was always outside, when I lost my husband and my son, being outside was my only solace".

Safety was a concern and source of motivation for several of the participants.

"I am so grateful to live in this neighborhood where I can walk every day and feel safe doing it. In my old community there was a park, but it was not well kept, and I was too uncomfortable to use it." 72-year-old Abe said.

A long-term resident who had recently lost his wife of many years said:

"I was walked in this park as a baby in a stroller, it has gotten me through many hard times, this is the worst, but it still helps me. One day if I can no longer walk, I want to be pushed in this same

beautiful space.” 79-year-old Ron said.

“We live in the neighborhood, but we drive here so we have more time to walk, it is not far, we come before work every day to walk. It is beautiful and helps us start our day of work. We can talk and catch up, I come with my neighbor.” 69-year-old Marta said.

“I lost so much, especially during the pandemic, my sister died, had I not been able to walk in this park, I do not know what would have happened to me.” 71-year-old Sondra said.

“There are ancient trees here. I am so grateful to see them every day and wonder who in the past has appreciated them. It has made me committed to saving them for future generations to explore.” 82-year-old Ellen said.

“I am not religious but nature, trees, the sky shapes my spiritual journey.” 66-year-old Elli summarized what many of the participants also shared.

Johnson 82 summarized many of the stated sentiments by saying “the world is in trouble, a pandemic, turbulence, times are hard for most people, but mother nature never fails.”

Discussion

Interviews with older adults who had access to an outdoor green space supported the healing power of time in natural spaces as an important resource. Responses are consistent with the positive affirmation that the men and women interviewed gave regarding their experiences walking in a park at least 3 times each week. Unfortunately, no comparison or causal relationship can be determined given the ethnographic nature of the study. The participants were already committed to walking and had access to a park; however, their comments about the importance of their experiences and the healing benefits cannot be underscored. The results of the interviews indicate that there are multiple benefits associated with time in natural spaces. Future controlled and comparative studies can help clarify the relationship between use and access to natural resources and well-being in later life. Unfortunately, loneliness and isolation are widespread. There are many ways of preventing and treating these devastating conditions. Unfortunately for certain segments of the population, resources and services may not be readily available [40], access to natural spaces can serve as one healing resource. There are no easy solutions, time in nature is not a cure all, but it can serve as a buffer and one sense of connection and meaning in the face of later life losses [31]. For those living in communities affected by climate change, in unsafe communities, in communities where there is little access to natural spaces, the coping process may be more difficult in the face of greater challenges and fewer resources. The positive associations we found were expressed by older adults who did have access to a natural setting. They felt that time outdoors helped them develop more positive emotions, cope with later life losses, boost connectivity, and increase overall well-being. The path to well-being is challenging under the best of circumstances, natural environments offer one resource in coping with life’s difficulties.

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