

Beating stress outdoors? Nature group walks may improve mental health

September 23 2014



Walkers participate in a nature group walk through national Walking for Health program in England. Credit: Walking for Health

They are common suggestions to remedy stress: You just need a breath

of fresh air. Walk it off. Get out and see people.

Turns out all those things combined may in fact make you feel better – a lot better – a new large scale study suggests.

Group nature walks are linked with significantly lower depression, less perceived stress and enhanced mental [health](#) and well-being, according to the study conducted by the University of Michigan, with partners from De Montfort University, James Hutton Institute, and Edge Hill University in the United Kingdom. The findings appear in a special issue of *Ecopsychology* devoted to 'Ecopsychology and Public Health'.

People who had recently experienced [stressful life events](#) like a serious illness, death of a loved one, marital separation or unemployment especially appeared to see a mood boost after outdoor group walks.

"We hear people say they feel better after a walk or going outside but there haven't been many studies of this large size to support the conclusion that these behaviors actually improve your [mental health](#) and well-being," says senior author Sara Warber, M.D., associate professor of family medicine at the U-M Medical School and member of the Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation.

"Walking is an inexpensive, low risk and accessible form of exercise and it turns out that combined with nature and group settings, it may be a very powerful, under-utilized stress buster. Our findings suggest that something as simple as joining an outdoor walking group may not only improve someone's daily positive emotions but may also contribute a non-pharmacological approach to serious conditions like depression."



Participants in the Walking for Health program in England, which helps facilitate nearly 3,000 weekly walks and draws more than 70,000 regular walkers a year. Credit: Walking for Health

Researchers evaluated 1,991 participants from the Walking for Health program in England, which helps facilitate nearly 3,000 weekly walks and draws more than 70,000 regular walkers a year.

"Given the increase in [mental ill health](#) and physical inactivity in the developed world, we are constantly exploring new, accessible ways to help people improve their long term quality of life and well-being," Warber says.

"Group walks in local natural environments may make a potentially important contribution to [public health](#) and be beneficial in helping people cope with stress and experience improved emotions."

More information: "Examining group walks in nature and multiple aspects of well-being: A large scale study," *Ecopsychology*, [DOI: 10.1089/eco.2014.0027](https://doi.org/10.1089/eco.2014.0027)

Provided by University of Michigan Health System

Citation: Beating stress outdoors? Nature group walks may improve mental health (2014, September 23) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-09-stress-outdoors-nature-group-mental.html>

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