

Level of self-control linked to environment

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Credit: Vera Kratochvil/public domain

What should you do after a difficult day at work? Many people would take a peaceful walk in nature, but this may not be a wise choice for everyone.

A Journal of Consumer Psychology study found evidence that people who are more prone to anxiety should instead take a walk in a busy, urban environment.

"Previous literature says that natural environments tend to restore [cognitive abilities](#) better than urban environments, but we questioned whether this one-sided perspective was accurate," says lead author Kevin Newman, an assistant professor at Providence College in Rhode Island.

The researchers started by asking participants to perform tasks that drained them mentally, such as writing sentences without using the letters "A" or "N." Then participants answered questions that revealed their level of neuroticism, such as whether they were a worrier, irritable, highly strung or experienced moods that often go up and down.

Then all the subjects performed tasks that exposed them to words or pictures associated with either a natural or urban environment. Surprisingly, the results revealed that people with neurotic personalities had more success restoring their cognitive abilities after they viewed words related to a busy [urban environment](#). The nature-related words, however, were more beneficial for people who were not generally neurotic.

The researchers also discovered that neurotic people may not necessarily have to go to a busy urban setting to restore themselves mentally. In fact, nature could provide frenetic, stressful cues when the participants were exposed to words like "bear," "cliff" and "thunder." Similarly, [people](#) low in neuroticism may not need to seek out nature to revive themselves mentally. Cues from a calm place in a busy city—such as a bookstore or library—restored participants in this category.

"People tended to do better in environments that fit with their personality," Newman says. "Imagine someone with a neurotic personality like Woody Allen. If you put him in a forest it could be very off-putting rather than rejuvenating."

The researchers also discovered that restoring the mind was tied to one's

ability to exert self-control. This correlation between environment and self-control could have implications related to health outcomes, Newman says. People may make healthier food choices if they choose environments that match their personality type, he explains.

One of his experiments lends support to this theory. Neurotic participants had more financial discipline when they viewed safari vacation pictures and descriptions that matched their personality type. They were more likely to stick to a limited vacation budget when they saw safari photos with lions gnashing teeth and rhinos charging, but this was not the case when they viewed photos with leopards sleeping and rhinos grazing peacefully.

The findings could influence the way companies design retail and online spaces or offer products. If a product or store tends to attract a certain [personality type](#), then the company may want to design the environment to be compatible with consumers. An experiential product, such as a cruise, may want to offer activities that appeal to both neurotic and non-neurotic passengers, such as zip-lining or time on the beach, Newman says.

The different environmental needs of varying personality types may be increasingly relevant because studies show that Americans have shifted towards higher levels of neuroticism in recent decades, Newman says.

More information: When are Natural and Urban Environments Restorative? The Impact of Environmental Compatibility on Self-Control Restoration, www.journals.elsevier.com/jour...ronments-restorative

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