

Urban parks could make you happier

February 25 2019



UAB researchers found spending 20 minutes in an urban park will make someone happier -- whether they are engaging in exercise or not during the visit. Credit: UAB

Researchers from the University of Alabama at Birmingham Department of Occupational Therapy have published new findings that suggest spending 20 minutes in an urban park will make someone happier

regardless of whether they are engaging in exercise or not during the visit.

According to the study, published in *International Journal of Environmental Health Research*, [urban parks](#) have been recognized as key neighborhood places that provide residents with opportunities to experience nature and engage in various activities. Through contact with the natural environment and engagement in health-promoting and/or social and recreational activities in parks, users experience physical and mental health benefits such as stress reduction and recovery from mental fatigue.

Principle investigator Hon K. Yuen, Ph.D., OTR/L, professor in the UAB Department of Occupational Therapy, said the original intent of the project was to validate previous research findings on the impact of park visit on emotional well-being, and evaluate the contribution of choosing to participate in physical activity in the park in relation to emotional well-being after the park visit.

"Overall, we found park visitors reported an improvement in emotional well-being after the park visit," said Yuen. "However, we did not find levels of [physical activity](#) are related to improved emotional well-being. Instead, we found time spent in the park is related to improved emotional well-being."

Co-author and chair of the department Gavin R. Jenkins, Ph.D., OTR/L, said this means that potentially all people can benefit from time in a park. If you cannot be physically active due to aging, a disability or any other limitations, the study implies a person can still gain [health benefits](#) just from a visit to a local [park](#).

Participants of the study were adult visitors to one of the three urban parks—Overton, Jemison and Cahaba River Walk Parks—in Mountain

Brook, Alabama. Data were collected from 98 adult [park visitors](#); four visitors reported that they participated in this study twice. Data from the second participation were excluded, resulting in 94 unique participants participating in the study. These parks were selected for the study because they were the three main public parks in Mountain Brook and had a relatively high volume of visitors daily.

Yuen said several limitations of the study included the lack of objective data to measure [emotional health](#) and confining the study to just three urban parks in a six-month data collection period.

Although a small study, Jenkins said the significance of these findings helps reinforce the need for more urban parks and the conservation of those that already exist.

"There is increasing pressure on green space within urban settings," said Jenkins. "Planners and developers look to replace [green space](#) with residential and commercial property. The challenge facing cities is that there is an increasing evidence about the value of city parks but we continue to see the demise of these spaces."

More information: Hon K. Yuen et al, Factors associated with changes in subjective well-being immediately after urban park visit, *International Journal of Environmental Health Research* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/09603123.2019.1577368](#)

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

Citation: Urban parks could make you happier (2019, February 25) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-02-urban-happier.html>

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