

# Rural older women offer insight for why nature is important when aging in place

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Credit: Pennsylvania State University

In a new study, Penn State College of Nursing Project Director Erica

Husser—a developmental gerontologist with a passion for nature and older women's health—investigated the perceived influence of nature on the daily lives of rural older women living with multiple chronic health conditions.

According to Husser, we are hard-wired to pay attention to nature early in life, but as we develop, the ways in which people come to understand, value, and experience nature will vary. Considering how dramatically many lives have shifted and how uncertain the days continue to be in response to the coronavirus pandemic, Husser said the perceptions and experiences that rural [older women](#) have with nature can offer insights that may help others cope with, and adapt to changes that are out of our control.

Husser said that culture, demographic characteristics, family norms and behaviors, and [personal experiences](#) all shape who we are and how we experience nature with differential impacts, but the science is clear: nature can nurture. Research examining the influence of nature on behavioral and psychosocial characteristics has showed positive outcomes for factors like heart rate, blood pressure, attention, cognitive function, social interaction, neighborhood satisfaction, and quality of life.

"Traditionally, older women have had fewer seats at the table and their voices marginalized," Husser said. "They seem to disappear from society and not many people pay attention to them. Institutionally, academia has mostly overlooked older women, so we don't have much research on their views about the natural environment, and they have a set of values I think we could all learn from."

## **Rural older women and the importance of nature**

Research conducted through Penn State College of Nursing investigated

the perceived influence of nature on the daily lives of rural older women living with multiple [chronic health conditions](#).

Understanding those values and the potential impact nature could have on older women's health and well-being, Husser sought to learn how rural older women related to their natural surroundings. She conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with 34 women aged 71 to 91, living in rural southwest Virginia. What she discovered were intimate and important connections between nature and the women's perceived well-being and quality of life, as they were experiencing aging in place.

"The women identified with nature, and they were immersed in it, daily," Husser said. "They felt like it was part of who they were, and it provided them joy, helped them relax, engaged their mental and emotional processing, and for some, it strengthened their sense of community."

Further elaborating on how the women identified with nature, Husser found that the women perceived nature to be the environment "right outside their door." Most women described a spiritual connection with nature, viewing it as God's creation. The study found that interacting with nature activated their faith in God, helping them reconcile and cope with health challenges, personal trauma, or natural disasters.

"At some point, people become less interested with materialistic and rationalistic ways of being and they transition toward a more cosmic perspective that involves less concern for self, and increased interest in reflecting, exploring, and engaging more cognitive energy toward intangible and often-times existential questions and ideas," Husser said. "Nature seems to be one of the spaces that really allows for reflection, and potential growth and existential understanding to be experienced."

Husser said that while nature served as a spiritual connector for a

majority of the women, several others also described their experiences as emotionally and intellectually stimulating, which motivated continued engagement. They felt nature provided them with relaxation, energization, liberation, and an opportunity to learn more about nature, all of which contributed to enhanced cognitive engagement—an essential component of mental and emotional health.

As people struggle to cope with the developing coronavirus pandemic and its effects on their daily lives, Husser said these older women provide the perspective that time spent in nature can serve as an avenue for managing and adapting to feelings of loss, grief, isolation and confinement. Fear of contracting the virus, government mandated lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, and the transition to telecommunication emphasize the need to practice good self-care to help manage anxiety, stress, and concerns about liberty and independence. For these aging women, spending time in the natural environment enhanced their sense of freedom and provided a buffer against feelings of confinement.

"You just see things like rabbits and turkeys; the field will be full of turkeys," said one 75-year-old woman. "I just like it, and it makes you feel like you are not closed in."

These themes of enjoying nature, spiritual connections through nature, and emotional and intellectual health and well-being with respect to being immersed in nature do not translate across all groups, according to Husser, who added it's important to understand that as we age, we become more diverse, and that diversification paves the way towards more meaningful research.

"We have to steer this popular fear of aging away from a horrible doom-and-gloom type of scenario toward something more realistic," Husser said. "Aging can be about the beauty of your lifelong learning and the integration of your experiences coming to fruition to support yourself as

your physical health, and the world around both change. Knowing what you need to feed your own spirit and to energize yourself is important."

As research continues to untangle the relationship between the [natural](#) environment and improved mental, emotional, and cognitive health, individuals experiencing a loss of control or feelings of isolation due to the coronavirus pandemic may find comfort and support in learning about the life experiences and perspectives of these older women aging in rural America.

Husser directs Age Friendly Care, PA, a collaboration between the College of Nursing, CGNE, the College of Medicine, the Primary Health Network (PHN), Area Agencies on Aging, and the Alzheimer's Association, and the Pennsylvania Department of Aging. The program aims to educate and implement the 4Ms of Age Friendly Care—what Matters, Medication, Mentation and Mobility—across health systems, community groups, families, and individuals throughout the commonwealth over the next five years.

Putting her research into the context of the 4Ms of Age-Friendly Care, Husser explains that spending time in nature informs what matters to these [women](#). Knowing what matters empowers [health](#) care providers to individualize and align care that harnesses and supports the values of each patient. What matters anchors and informs the other care decision related to mobility, medications, and mentation.

"My colleagues in the College of Nursing and my supervisor provided me with flexibility, support, and the encouragement I needed to get this work published," Husser said. "I can't say enough about the power of mentorship and peer support; it has allowed this research to emerge."

For more information about Age-Friendly Care, PA, and how to stay healthy during COVID-19, click [here](#).

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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