

Pandemic got you down? A little nature could help

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A Japanese word meaning 'forest-bathing' suggests time in nature can reduce stress; researchers say there's a lot to that. Credit: Peter Morenus/UConn Photo

Having trouble coping with COVID?

Go take a hike. Literally.

Researchers have long been aware of the positive impact of a connection with nature on [psychological health](#) and, according to a new study published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, the pandemic hasn't decreased the power of nature to improve mental well-being.

"Thinking about the natural world in an interconnected and harmonious way corresponds to improved psychological health, no matter where you are," says Brian W. Haas, the lead author of the new study and an associate professor in the Behavioral and Brain Sciences Program at the University of Georgia.

Haas and his collaborators—Fumiko Hoefft, a professor of psychological sciences at UConn and director of UConn's Brain Imaging Research Center; and Kazufumi Omura, faculty of Education, Art and Science at Yamagata University in Japan—used a survey in America and Japan to measure worldviews on nature as well as how much the pandemic impacted people's lives, and their current psychological health.

The survey sought to gauge whether the participants had a worldview in harmony with nature—being in tune or connected with the natural world, or a worldview of mastery over nature—the belief that people have the ability to control the natural world. They also reported on their stress levels and were asked if the COVID-19 pandemic has affected them personally or impacted their employment or finances.

The researchers found that, while participants in general report greater stress levels during the pandemic, individuals with a harmony-with-nature worldview were coping better regardless of whether they lived in Japan or in the United States.

"Clearly, there's great need for study as relates to the pandemic, not just now during COVID, but also of previous pandemics and for possible future pandemics," says Hoeft. "I feel like this is a really great lesson, and a moment for us to really appreciate that things like our relationship with nature do matter and make an impact on more tangible things, like our mental health, which we often forget."

The researchers found that the difference between the two cultures, however, became apparent when looking at individuals with a mastery-over-nature worldview.

"We found that the Americans who believed that humans are, and should be, the masters of the natural world did not tend to cope well during the pandemic," Haas says. "While this was not the case in Japan."

Rather, in Japan, having a mastery-over-nature worldview was not correlated with poor coping. The researchers suggest the difference might be rooted in the concept of naïve dialecticism—the acceptance or tolerance of contradiction.

"In other cultures outside of the United States, people tend to be more comfortable with contradiction; in other cultures, it is generally more accepted to possess conflicting ideas within your mind at the same time," Haas says. "But in the United States, it's not. We can apply this concept to nature and the current global pandemic. For instance, if I hold a view that I am the master of the natural world, and then a global [pandemic](#) happens, this is a clear natural disaster. If I believe that I am the master of the natural world, then surely I would never allow a [natural](#) disaster to happen. These concepts are inconsistent with one another, and a consequence of inconsistency is often negative mood."

While the study offers only a snapshot view of just two cultures, Haas believes other cultures would likely demonstrate a similar positive

association with a harmony-with-nature worldviews, predicting that "it's likely a universal phenomenon."

Both Haas and Hoefft say that, in an increasingly virtual and technology driven world, taking a moment to appreciate nature has clear benefits regardless of where you live.

"In Japanese, there's this word called 'forest-bathing,'" Hoefft says. "It's basically when you go out into nature, and enjoy being surrounded by trees. It's usually for forests, but you go walking and it's supposed to refresh you. People often talk about how they went out 'forest bathing.'" I love thinking about these kinds of old phrases—do they have some real impact or real scientific background in the end? And I think this is one of them where this really does have a connection. There is some scientific truth behind this."

"Think about taking a step away from Zoom for a moment and taking a walk and listening to the birds chirp," Haas says. "I mean, just the benefit of that, and understanding that we have a role in this [natural world](#), and we're part of it. I think that's really intuitive and it's obvious, but I think it's also really, really important. We're showing very convincingly with empirical data that, during a very difficult time like we are in now, that it's important to do these things to maintain your psychological health."

More information: Brian W. Haas et al. The role of culture on the link between worldviews on nature and psychological health during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2020.110336](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110336)

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