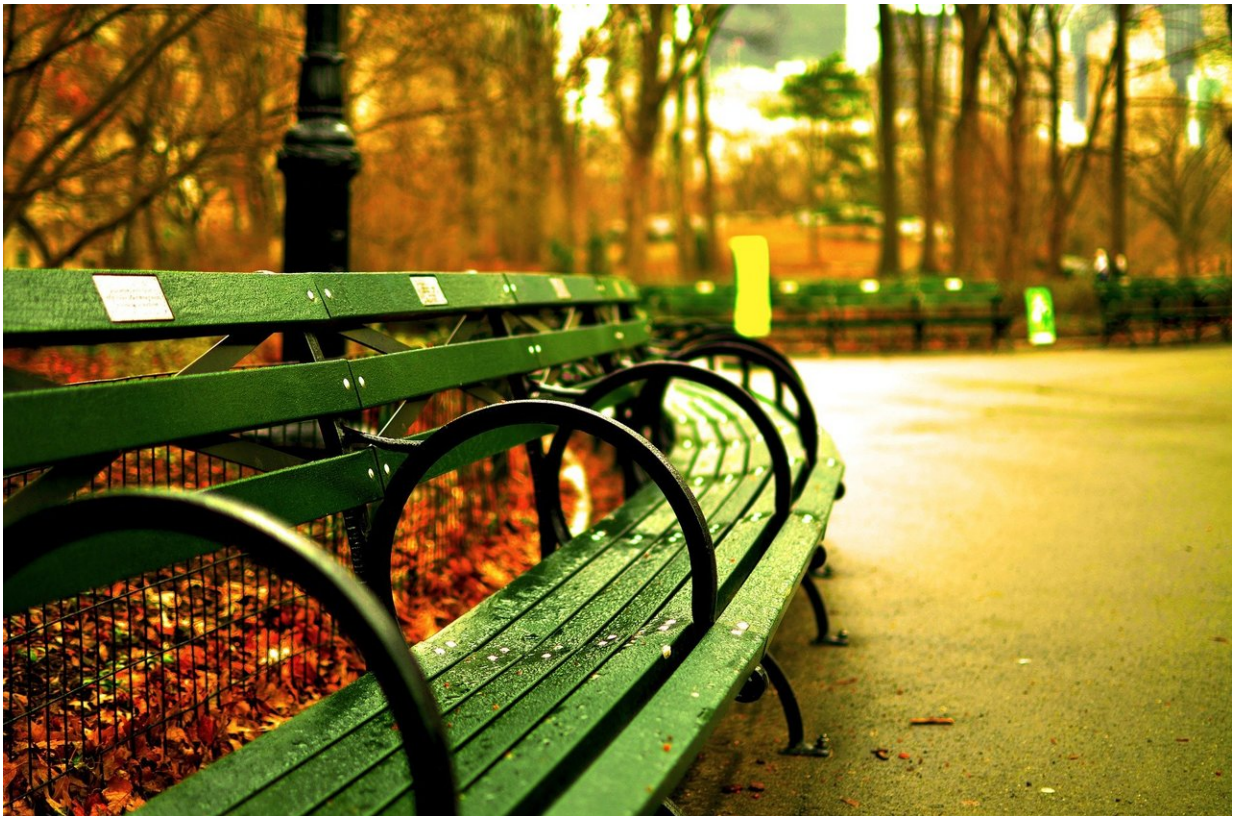


Parks and green spaces should feel safe to bolster mental health

April 19 2023, by Caitlin Hazell



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Researchers have co-produced [a series of short films](#) with people who have experienced mental illness to show the benefits of outdoor spaces.

The researchers were able to show that being outdoors has significant health benefits, but only if the participants feel safe and the spaces were well maintained.

The team at the University of York aimed to highlight the benefits, but also the barriers that restrict people, especially those with severe [mental illness](#) such as schizophrenia, from accessing natural outdoor green and blue spaces.

Key barriers

Through storytelling techniques, they were able to develop films that demonstrated the key barriers and benefits to spending time outside in [natural environments](#) such as parks or seaside spaces.

Participants described a range of positive experiences and benefits to being outdoors and in nature, including opportunities for relaxation, time away from everyday stressful experiences and the chance to take part in purposeful activity.

One of the biggest barriers identified was concerns about the safety of green and blue public spaces and the importance of spaces being maintained properly, kept clean, well lit and having wardens available.

External hazards

Professor Lina Gega, Director of the Institute of Mental Health Research at York, said, "Safety in an environment is an important consideration for all of us when we are in the middle of emotional or [mental health difficulties](#).

"Safety, or the lack of it, is first about external hazards, such as sharp

objects on the ground, [deep water](#), a high drop from a building or antisocial behavior; however feeling unsafe is also an internalized sense of vulnerability, a sense of being exposed in an environment because of our emotional state.

"Removing external hazards in physical spaces can increase our sense of safety, but we cannot assume that this will completely remove the sense of unease in [green spaces](#) because the internalized feeling of being vulnerable or exposed may still be there."

Buddy system

The participants were asked to discuss what might support them in overcoming some of these concerns about safety, and it was recommended that a "buddy" system could be used to encourage individuals to spend more time in natural environments.

A buddying system, often organized by mental health charities, is where a person experiencing mental health challenges is partnered up with a non-professional volunteer who spends a certain amount of time each week doing an activity like going for a walk or accompanying them to a social activity, as well as potentially helping with some everyday tasks they may find challenging.

Recovery

John Manson, one of the participatory film-makers, said, "Although I live in York—a city which has lots of green spaces—sometimes I want to spend time away for a couple of days at least, to switch off from city living for the sake of my mental health.

"The main difficulties that I experience are cost and access to transport

to different parts of the UK, but also trusting that the places I want to visit are safe spaces for me to be.

"It would be good if experiencing green and blue spaces is subsidized as part of the recovery process, as being out in the countryside, and especially by rivers and lakes, helps alleviate the symptoms of my PTSD, significantly more than drugs do."

Antisocial behaviors

The study highlighted that people experiencing [severe mental illness](#) may be particularly concerned about, or feel particularly vulnerable, entering environments that could attract individuals and groups looking to engage in antisocial behaviors, e.g., drug misuse, vandalism, and spaces that were overgrown, littered, vandalized or poorly maintained and lit (in an urban area).

Simona Manni, from the School of Arts and Creative Technologies, who coordinated the film contributions of those with lived experiences of mental illness, said, "It is important not only to make green spaces available and accessible but ensure that they are well maintained and appear tended and supervised so that people who could gain real health benefits from these areas feel less fearful taking these trips outside of the house, and are indeed more likely to be safe."

Mental health benefits

Research at the University of York has already shown that taking part in outdoor, nature-based activities led to improved mood, less anxiety, and [positive emotions](#), and that even greater mental health benefits were observed when outdoor activities were conducted in a group.

Researchers argue that there is a need for substantial, sustained investment in community and place-based solutions such as nature-based interventions, which are likely to play an important role in addressing a post-pandemic surge in demand for mental [health](#) support.

Provided by University of York

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