

A walk in the park a day keeps mental fatigue away

December 18 2008

If you spend the majority of your time among stores, restaurants and skyscrapers, it may be time to trade in your stilettos for some hiking boots. A new study in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reveals that spending time in nature may be more beneficial for mental processes than being in urban environments.

Psychologists Marc G. Berman, John Jonides, and Stephen Kaplan from the University of Michigan designed two experiments to test how interactions with nature and urban environments would affect attention and memory processes. First, a group of volunteers completed a task designed to challenge memory and attention.

The volunteers then took a walk in either a park or in downtown Ann Arbor. After the walk, volunteers returned to the lab and were retested on the task. In the second experiment, after volunteers completed the task, instead of going out for a walk, they simply viewed either nature photographs or photographs of urban environments and then repeated the task.

The results were quite interesting. In the first experiment, performance on the memory and attention task greatly improved following the walk in the park, but did not improve for volunteers who walked downtown. And it is not just being outside that is beneficial for mental functions—the group who viewed the nature photographs performed much better on the retest than the group who looked at city scenes.

The authors suggest that urban environments provide a relatively complex and often confusing pattern of stimulation, which requires effort to sort out and interpret. Natural environments, by contrast, offer a more coherent (and often more aesthetic) pattern of stimulation that, far from requiring effort, are often experienced as restful. Thus being in the context of nature is effortless, permitting us to replenish our capacity to attend and thus having a restorative effect on our mental abilities.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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