

NATURE'S BEST MEDICINE: NATURE

In prison, most of us spend our days bathed in fluorescent lighting staring at four walls. If we're lucky maybe we have a TV or the occasional gym or yard recreational time. Most prisons are iron and concrete edifices; cold, austere human warehouses. Our separation from society is court mandated and unquantifiably painful, but our separation from the natural world is quantifiably damaging to our health and psyche. We came to prison as punishment, not for punishment.

Our connection to nature is far more important to our cognition and other aspects of our health than we generally think. "Time in nature is not a luxury but is in fact essential to our humanity," writes Florence Williams author of, The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative. The science is compelling and undeniable. Research has shown that after walking in a forest for as little as five minutes our body and brain start to change: our heart rate slows, facial muscles start to relax, hard-working frontal lobes begin to quiet down, e.g.. Time in nature or engaging with nature has also been linked to increased generosity, boosting short-term memory, lowering stress levels, decreasing blood pressure, enhancing focus, improving performance on creative problem solving, reducing inflammation, diminishing fatigue, reducing anxiety and depression, improving immune function, and even decreasing the risk of children developing nearsightedness. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true -- lack of connection with nature exacerbates all these potential issues damage to our overall health. It is clear that anyone would benefit from more time spent in nature, but it is the total disconnection from the natural world that inmates endure that is inhumane.

I'm lucky, my prison allows for daily yard and gym periods. We have a grassy patch used to play sports and a few solitary trees. Also, instead of a wall, we are surrounded by a chain-link fence that allows us to look out to the adjoining forest beyond. Maybe, you too, have some limited ability to connect with nature, but more likely, you don't. Fear not, there is hope.

Firstly, we have to take advantage of any low hanging fruit. We must take every opportunity to go outside whenever possible; even creating opportunities if necessary (put in for passes to barber shop or law library, etcetera). Once outside, focus on any nature available, try to engage with it: touch,

smell, meditate on it. Be that weirdo staring off and lose yourself in the moment. Block out the walls and bars even if for only a few minutes at a time. If all else fails, look up to the sky -- see the sun, clouds, moon, and stars. Contemplate the grandness and mysteries of the universe and your place in it. But unfortunately, even that might not be possible for many of us; especially in the post Covid-19 world of extended lock-downs across America's gray bar hotels. Now we have to get creative.

We must look for and watch any nature programming on TV (think National Geographic, PBS, Discovery, etc.); travel shows work too. Nature and travel magazines have similar placebo effects. Don't just skim through, take your time and really look. I found a few different full page photos in a nature calendar, pasted them together and put them up on my wall mimicking the look of a window -- where I could see it every day. There has been far less research done on the benefits of "unnatural nature," but it has worked, albeit to a lesser degree (there is no substitution for the real thing). But, our take-away is that they can work and that is all that matters. I encourage every inmate to find ways to engage with nature in every way and every day. God bless and good luck.

Sources: University of Chicago professor, Marc G. Berman, director of the university's Environmental Neuroscience Laboratory research, Outside Magazine, CNN.

"Research shows that mental fatigue, diminished memory, and concentration can be improved by time spent alone in nature or even looking at pictures of nature. For maximum effect you should avoid chitchatting or texting and focus on the environment...a 50-minute stroll showed a 15 to 20 percent improvement in memory function. Even more interesting was that the walk didn't have to be enjoyable; the benefit is the same, Berman said, whether you're ambling on a sunny afternoon in June, or freezing your butt off on a bitterly cold January morning."

By Leo Cardez