



Nature and Mental Health Promotion

Why spending time in nature is good for you

Getting in to nature has been shown to have many positive effects on physical, social and mental health. Evidence of the positive links continues to grow, however individuals may have a limited understanding of how to protect their mental health and wellbeing, and how getting into nature can help them to feel better.

The [Healthy Parks Healthy People SA framework](#) seeks to promote contact with nature as an effective public health intervention tool, and as a vital asset for population mental health and wellbeing activities. This nature-based approach is essential given the escalating increase in mental illness within our community:

- Each year, one in every five Australians will experience a mental illness – it is the third leading cause of disability burden nationally (Mindframe 2014).
- Suicide is also a significant social issue, an average of 8.3 Australians die from suicide each day (ABS 2016).

We want access to nature to be seen as part of a range of therapies, for the treatment of mental health problems, but also as a daily or weekly habit for all South Australians to better protect their mental health and wellbeing.

What is Mental Health Promotion?

Mental health promotion is about positively framing mental health and wellbeing, promoting the importance of protecting it and highlighting the types of activities that can help to achieve this.

One of the challenges is confusing language, where mental health and mental illness are often seen as the same thing. However, the World Health Organization (2013) defines mental health in this positive way as:

...a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.

Mental health promotion strategies are primarily about promoting mental health rather than focusing on treatment or recovery from mental illness. It is important that they are inclusive of everyone however, from those who are suffering from a mental illness, to those who are experiencing good mental health and wellbeing.

Does nature really make you feel better?

Nature has been shown to be both restorative, for those recovering/suffering from mental illness (Alvansson et al. 2010), and protective for general mental health. For example:

- Exposure to nature has been shown to evoke positive emotions, as well as strengthen individual resilience (Marselle et al. 2013) and coping skills (van den Berg 2010).
- Getting into nature has been shown to have positive impacts on concentration, learning, problem solving, critical thinking capacity, and creativity as well as enhance mental health and wellbeing through encouraging physical fitness and social engagement.

Many initiatives that explore the mental health benefits of time spent in nature remain treatment focused however. Forest therapy for example (see inset box), is a mental health treatment approach targeted at stress-related illness. Initiatives like forest therapy can easily be framed for promotional purposes as well, as you don't have to have a stress-related illness to experience the benefits of nature immersion.

What is Healthy Parks Healthy People SA doing?

One of the first key actions to come out of the *Mental Health Benefits of Contact with Nature* focus area of the Healthy Parks Healthy People SA framework, was to develop a discussion paper to highlight the importance of mental health and wellbeing promotion in South Australia and present contact with nature as an effective public health tool. To learn more, we encourage you to download our Discussion Paper [Connecting nature and parks to mental health promotion and mental illness prevention strategies in South Australia](#).

A key recommendation of this paper is to promote the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* in SA (New Economics Foundation 2008). The *Five Ways to Wellbeing* is a population wide promotion campaign that has been adopted in many regions internationally. The five simple, easy to remember actions have been proven to be effective in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing, they include: *connect, be active, give, keep learning and take notice*. Our aim is to promote the *five ways* broadly, but also promote nature as an ideal setting for achieving them.

We want all South Australians to have a better understanding of what they can do regularly to protect their mental health and wellbeing, and how this can be achieved by spending regular time outdoors and in nature.

If you would like to know more about this work please contact the Healthy Parks Healthy People SA Project Leaders - Carmel Williams, the Department for Health and Ageing, carmel.william@sa.gov.au, or Jane Crosby, the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources, jane.crosby@sa.gov.au.

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NATURE THERAPIES

The Conservation Council SA currently offers a number of initiatives promoting the wellbeing benefits of spending time in nature, including [nature wellness walks](#) with SA's first trained forest therapist.

Forest therapy is a form of nature immersion that aims to reverse the impact of stress-related illness and connect people better with the natural environment.

Forest therapists are trained to expose participants to a sensory experience. The approach involves walking in nature slowly and mindfully so that all senses are engaged (Krieger 2015). Research has shown that the practice provides a host of physical and mental health benefits (Lee et al. 2012).

The practice originated in Japan where it is known as *Shirin-Yoku* - which translates to 'forest bathing.'