

Exposure to Nature: An Underutilized Component of Student Mental Health

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Abstract : Introduction: Nature-exposure interventions on university campuses may serve as an effective addition to overburdened counseling and student support centers. Nature-exposure interventions can work as a preventative well-being enhancement measure on campuses, which can be used adjacently with existing health resources. Specifically, this paper analyzes how spending time in nature impacts psychological well-being, cognitive functioning, and physical health. The poster covers the core findings and recommendations of this paper, which has been previously published in the BYU undergraduate psychology journal Intuition. Research Goals and Method: The goal of this paper was to outline the potential benefits of nature exposure for students' physical health, mental well-being, and academic success. Another objective of this paper was to outline potential research-based interventions that use campus green spaces to improve student outcomes. Given that the core objective of this paper was to identify and establish research-based nature exposure interventions that could be used on college campuses, a broad literature review focused on these areas. Specifically, the databases Scopus and PsycINFO were used to screen for research focused on psychological well-being, physical health, cognitive functioning, and nature exposure interventions. Outcomes: Nature exposure has been shown to help increase positive affect, life satisfaction, happiness, coping ability and subjective well-being. Further, nature exposure has been shown to decrease negative affect, lower mental distress, reduce cognitive load, and decrease negative psychological symptoms. Finally, nature exposure has been shown to lead to better physical health. Findings and Recommendations: Potential interventions include adding green space to university buildings and grounds, dedicating already natural environments as nature restoration areas, and providing means for outdoor excursions. Potential limitations and suggested areas for future research are also addressed. Many campuses already contain green spaces, defined as any part of an environment that is predominately made of natural elements, and these green spaces comprise an untapped resource that is relatively cheap and simple.

Keywords : nature exposure, preventative care, undergraduate mental health, well-being intervention

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