

COL: Nature Research.

How connecting with nature benefits our mental health

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/MHAW21-Nature-research-report.pdf>

We all remember the corona virus pandemic and for many like myself it was a life changing event.

In 2022, The Mental Health Foundation released a report following on from their comprehensive research program, of how nature had played a critical role in our mental health during that time, and that 45% of participants had stated that visiting green spaces had been beneficial to them, but it went on to say it was not just about the quantity of time spent in nature, it was the quality of the time, that was most beneficial, using the term connectedness to describe this.

The key message of the research was about removing the focus from getting people to visit nature, to one of how people can connect with nature, and being “where we are” through completion of simple activities, and by developing relationships that can be as simple as just noticing the nature around us, as in listening to a bird outside our bedroom window when we first wake in the morning.

The research was carried out using a nationally representative survey of over 4,000 UK adults, using in-depth one to one interviews or within small focus groups, with people spanning different ages, identities, abilities, and life circumstances. This balanced design allowed researchers to capture both broad statistical trends and rich personal lived experience, reflecting how people actually encounter and value nature in their daily lives.

The report adds substantial, actionable insight into the field of nature based wellbeing. It moves beyond general claims to identify precisely how different ways of engaging, mindful observation, gentle movement, or shared time outdoors, support different aspects of wellbeing. It also clearly highlights the inequalities, of engagement with nature.

The report of the work carried out is authentic and highly credible because it was led by experienced researchers in public health and environmental psychology, and published by the nationally respected Mental Health Foundation, with fully documented methods and a large, representative sample. Findings are transparent, balanced, and well-supported.

In relating to forest schools, the report is saying although this is a great way to enjoy connectedness with nature, many remain inaccessible due to location, cost and access

for those with disabilities due to accessibility itself, however this concept of engagement with open space was positively acknowledged.

The methodology was well-suited to the research questions, blending measurable data with personal accounts to avoid over simplification. There are some limitations within the report; including reliance on self-reported experiences or a follow up discussions to gain insight on long term interactions.

Again for myself, this aligns very well with the work I do and it confirms that combining time in the natural world with gentle, reflective conversation builds calm, clarity, confidence, and genuine connection, outcomes I observe in every session.

Reflecting further on my own experience of delivering nature-based wellbeing, this research echoes what I witness firsthand, in that nature offers a unique, gentle, restorative space to reset, grow, and feel more grounded and that freedom to explore nature is without walls, and a very personal experience.

Michael Harden