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Coping with Grief and Loneliness: The Healing Power of Green Spaces

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WCU
WEST CHESTER UNIVERSITY
The many faces of Grief and Loss

Every person on the planet has experienced loss in the past 2 years, death, unemployment, increase in loneliness and isolation, loss of support, finances, freedom of activity.

- Understanding the experience of grief and ways of coping with grief and loss is an important part of well-being.
- The grieving experience can also be used as a journey to connect with nature, to introspect, to increase self realization, and build resilience.
Loneliness, social isolation, loss, and grief have become a part of many of our lives. Public health measures have, in some ways, increased poor mental health outcomes.

6 in 10 adults report ongoing symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Surveys indicate that many Americans are having difficulty sleeping (36%), eating unhealthy foods (32%), alcohol consumption or substance abuse (22%), and worsening chronic conditions (32%).
Loneliness has been a mental health crisis in the US for some time – as the country has attempted to deal with one social health crisis, another has arisen.

60 to 80% of all Americans report being lonely. The percentages are higher for older adults and vulnerable populations.

- Those living in poverty
- Residents in poor urban communities
- Immigrant populations
- Those struggling with chronic illness
- Those who do not have access to green space, gardens, outdoor spaces.
Alienation from nature is one factor that leads to an increase in stress related illnesses, loneliness, isolation, anxiety, and depression.

As devastating as is alienation from social relationships.

Nature exposure or time spent in green space is restorative to the mind and body.

In order to be well, happy, and thrive, we are wired to interact with air, water, plants, and other animals.

Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better

Albert Einstein
Social Science Research is exploring the ways that nature can help with the mental health crisis.
A new form of therapy: Ecotherapy and Nature Deficit Disorder
Promoting well-being for diverse populations through nature connections.

People who spent at least 2 hours each week outside were more likely to report better psychological well-being.

- In place of 10 hours each on technology
- The outdoors can serve as an antidote for stress.
- Multiple benefits were identified: Lower blood pressure and stress hormone levels, reduce nervous system arousal, enhance immune system function, increase self-esteem, reduce anxiety, and improve mood.

https://e360.yale.edu/features/ecopsychology-how-immersion-in-nature-benefits-your-health
Focus on the present moment experience in a deep way – similar to mindfulness practice.

Attend to “The sights, sounds and smells of the forest - take us right into that moment, so our brains stop anticipating, recalling, ruminating and worrying.”

- No judgment – feel, sense, smell, take a break from stress and concerns.
- Connect with natural sights and sounds.
Qualitative research: Results of Interviews in the Spring 2020 - Coping with Grief, Loss, loneliness, and Isolation

Results of interviews (Spring, 2020) 28 older adults from diverse backgrounds (65 +)
Walked at least 30 minutes - 5 times each week for 3 months - walking served as a beneficial coping mechanism with isolation, loneliness, loss, and grief.
Increased feelings of connection with others and something greater than themselves.
The world is aging: There were 703 million people over 65 in the world in 2022.

In order to help people of all ages and backgrounds maintain a positive quality of life - cities and communities worldwide - are focusing on ways to help residents have access to safe communities, clean air, healthy food, parks, and green space.

https://e360.yale.edu/features/ecopsychology-how-immersion-in-nature-benefits-your-health

US: The 10-minute walk campaign

The Consortium of cities and communities is a worldwide initiative designed to meet the well-being needs of all residents in a given place.

The Network provides an opportunity for cities and communities to exchange information, resources, and support one another through shared experiences.

- Identify what works
- Identify needs
- Share programs, plans, and strategies
West Chester, PA joins the Consortium

On April 1, 2014, the Borough of West Chester joined other cities and towns in the United States that have been designated as “Age Friendly” communities. Age friendly WC was achieved as a result of years of research and service addressing the health and well-being needs of community elders of diverse backgrounds.
West Chester, PA Age-Friendly Recognition

- World Health Organization Age-Friendly Cities & Communities Designation: Spring 2014
- Renewed: Summer 2016
- AARP Livable Communities Designation: Summer 2016
West Chester, PA Link on WHO Website

https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/search-network/?_sf_s=west%20chester%20pa

World Health Organization Website
The Loneliness Project: Combat loneliness and isolation by creating access to walking spaces, parks, green space, social connections, civic and political engagement, access to healthy food, physical activity, resources and services, LS.

- Work towards social inclusion access to green spaces and gardens for diverse populations.
- Longwood Gardens Project
Ethnography, Interviews, Media Analysis and Focus groups
The Results of qualitative analysis of West Chester Age Friendly Components
(Interviews and Focus Group analysis N= 68)

Satisfaction with the WCU community:

HIGH SATISFACTION
- parks and nature
- public spaces
- community organizations
- public events
- social participation

AREAS OF CONCERN
- congestion
- parking
- cost of living
- public transportation
Ongoing Projects and Activities: In Partnership with Students, Colleagues, Residents and Program Planners in PA

The Loneliness and Isolation project
- Mindfulness and Walking in nature
- The 10-minute project
- Lessons from my grandmother's garden.
- Creative coping with stress, grief, loss, loneliness
- An analysis of “Media Framing”.
- Day to day health promotion: The health benefits of eating right and walking: Managing chronic illness (obesity and type 2 Diabetes)

- Intergenerational Mentoring (ILEARN)
- Well-being and immigration
- Ageism in the Workplace and the Community
The “10-Minute Walk Campaign” is a nationwide movement to ensure that everyone has safe access to a quality park or green space within a 10-minute walk.
2022 - Longwood Gardens Project

Longwood and Lincoln University and EPA partnership – explore how inclusive and welcoming open green spaces such as Longwood Gardens are for people of all backgrounds and ages.

- Consortium of local leaders to explore safe spaces, diversity, and inclusion.
- Develop and assessment tool exploring opportunities and challenges in inclusiveness.
Covid 19 re-shifted focus on the importance of outdoor spaces and intergenerational relationships.

Lessons from my Grandmothers Garden (intergenerational learning, growing herbs and vegetables, time spent outside with elders).

The benefits of getting in the dirt (Schreber-garten’s and well-being).
Time in nature prompted more creative coping and increased positive emotions, a sense of spiritual connection, and increased motivation for life goals.
Immigrant population are at risk for increased health concerns. Lacking access to green spaces, parks, walking trails, healthy foods, health care, increased stress, premature aging. Challenges: language, cultural competence, health care, economic factors, work/life balance.
Covid-19 has resulted in an increase in outdoor activity. Studies have found multiple benefits for those who exercise outdoors: Decreases anger, depression. The majority do not exercise, take advantage of the outdoors. How can we increase motivations?

Energy: The Benefit to Exercising Outside
CAROLYN CUSMANO
A NEW AREA OF RESEARCH: CALMNESS: NATURE-THEMED VIRTUAL REALITY

Technology and nature
Virtual reality has been shown to have a calming effect
Social Isolation and Loneliness
Katherine Ford

Social isolation and loneliness has been on the rise for decades – they have reached crisis points in the pandemic.

Isolation - the absence of social relationships or lack of regular social contact. Loneliness – subjective and personal experience of isolation.

An American crisis- More than 60% of all American report being lonely – significantly higher percentages for marginalized adults, those living in poverty, many immigrant populations.
As we attempt to cope with one crisis there is another looming: A mental health crisis.

Ongoing stress has resulted in lowered immune system functioning, increase in cardiovascular disease, increased anxiety and depression, even increased mortality.

Creating awareness of the impact of small steps – taking a walk - helping motivate through education and awareness.
The relationship between nature and well-being is represented in art, literature, philosophy, and religion throughout ancient and modern times.

- Philosophers throughout history have linked spirituality, nature, and well-being.
- Ancient cultures – healing gardens
  - “paradise” – rooted in a Persian word meaning “enclosed garden”

Connection to nature may serve as a mediator for social and emotional well-being.

- Connection to nature emotionally
  - Leads to environmentally friendly behaviors
  - Leads to finding meaning & purpose (Eudemonic wellbeing)
Feeling awe – feeling a part of something bigger – feeling connected to nature

- Giving meaning, purpose, & sense of connection
- Connection to spirituality outside of religion
- Nature increases our generosity
- To others & the planet
- Sustainable behavior

Study in France & Mexico

- Nature connectedness
  - Linked to spirituality, sustainable behaviors, and wellbeing
- BOTH nature connectedness and spirituality linked to sustainable behaviors
  - *sustainable behaviors was a moderating factor for wellbeing
Time in nature makes people feel a connectivity with something greater than themselves – it also serves as social and emotional support.
Mindful time in nature leads to heightened sense of awareness to the senses. Restorative effects (e.g., attention restoration, mood improvement, memory and problem solving)
Mindfulness and Psychological well-being: The Attention and Restoration theory

The power of subjectivity: A natural setting supports beginner meditators in their practice

Boosts restoration Skills Training

Restores depleted attentional capabilities.

A natural connection

Can produce improvements in adaptive capabilities: Increased positive affect and reduces negative affect.
Psychological research is advancing knowledge and understanding of the ways that access to nature and green space can improve our physical and mental health and help us cope with anxiety, stress, loneliness, isolation, as well as grief and loss.
Thank you

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