Looking on the Bright Side... Outside

Most of us feel energized and happy after spending time outdoors. It may be because we’re breathing fresh air, enjoying a game of golf, having fun with friends and family or simply appreciating nature. Now, there’s scientific proof that sunshine and greenery are good for our bodies — and our souls.

According to Statistics Canada, the average Canadian spends 90 percent of his or her life indoors, and as we get older we become even more inclined not to venture out. Even summer days are not enough to entice many of us to spend extended periods outside. We’re soon complaining about the heat, bugs and pollen and heading back to the air-conditioned comfort of our homes. That’s too bad because there is increasing scientific evidence that suggests time spent outdoors not only protects us from many illnesses, but reduces stress, alleviates depression, improves our concentration, boosts our creativity and makes us happier. So why is it that we can’t help looking on the bright side when we’re outside?

A sunny outlook

A 2010 study looked at 280 healthy people in Japan, where visiting nature parks for therapeutic effect has become a popular practice called “shinrin-yoku” or “forest bathing.” On one day, one group was instructed to walk through a wooded area for a few hours, while a second group walked through city streets. The next day, they traded places. Those walking among plants were found to produce less cortisol (an essential hormone sometimes known as the stress hormone because it’s involved in the body’s natural response to physical or emotional stress), had slower pulse rates and lower blood pressure, as well as increased levels of white blood cells. In other words, they were calmer.

Another study found that people who live close to green spaces have lower rates of depression, anxiety and poor physical health than those who reside in more urban settings. Researchers found that having green space within a half mile of your house can also mean you’ll have lower rates of cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, mental illness, respiratory disease, neurological disease and digestive disease.

It’s also well documented that natural light affects our mood. Sunshine boosts our levels of serotonin — the body’s natural happy hormone. That’s why we tend to feel happier and more energetic when the sun shines.

It’s hard to feel glum when we look at a rainbow, a chipmunk, flowers or a breathtaking view. Nature makes us happy because it brings us into the present moment.
Bright ideas

Not having to deal with all the stimuli and stress of daily life, the mind can instead do other things — such as be creative, imaginative, and be able to problem solve. Taking your body and mind outdoors and away from phones, texts, emails, Internet, traffic and frantic schedules allows your imagination and creativity to take flight. You’ll feel happier, more productive and more focused. Your mind can have fun. Researchers at the University of Kansas reported a 50 percent boost in creativity for people who spent a few days communing with nature.

Spending time outdoors can actually sharpen your mind as well. A 2008 University of Michigan study demonstrated that after just an hour interacting with nature, people’s memory and attention spans improved by 20 percent.

The sunshine vitamin

We’re all happier when we feel healthy, energetic and rested and more and more research is demonstrating just how important the sunshine vitamin — Vitamin D — is to maintaining good health. It’s been shown to protect us against osteoporosis and some cancers while boosting our immune systems and balancing our hormones. Vitamin D is called the sunshine vitamin because it’s manufactured by our bodies when sunlight hits our skin. Unfortunately, two-thirds of Canadians have Vitamin D levels below the amounts research is associating with reduced health risks and one in ten of us have such low readings that we don’t have enough to maintain good bone health. Part of that is due to our climate, part due to demographics (darker-skinned individuals make less Vitamin D because their skins have more pigmentation, a natural sunscreen) and part from lifestyle. And when we do go outdoors, we’re slathered in sunscreen that protects us against harmful sunburns by blocking ultraviolet B (UVB) light. However, UVB also begins the process of Vitamin D production in our bodies.

The good news is that adequate amounts of Vitamin D can be obtained through a healthy diet — and sunshine (10 or 15 minutes a few times a week for those with fairer skin — but not enough to cause a reddening of the skin.)

Look on the bright side — outside

So if you want to feel energized, positive, creative and happy, think outside the box — or at least the brick and mortar box in which you live. Go outside and have some fun.

For more information, to book a counselling session, or to access any of your EFAP services our Client Services Representatives are ready to speak with you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in English or French. All calls are completely confidential.

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