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How Nature Heals

Mixed media

If anything was made clear through my research and own experience with this topic, it's that we as a society have been deeply disconnected from nature. For my final project, I wanted to create something meaningful to me, and something that could change others' view of the world. I decided to take inspiration from my own experience of gaining back connection with nature and how much that has changed me and benefited my health. The collage I made includes pictures that I have taken and pictures that have been taken of me while in nature. One of my main inspirations for this project and the collage element was my time I spent at the Traveling School. The Traveling School is where I learned to reconnect to nature.

I assume that not many people will relate to being able to reconnect with nature with how urbanized all our lives are; however, I do hope everyone will one day, once again, have the chance to understand what nature can do for humans,

I have very specific elements to this piece to add meaning and engagement. I have included live plants to make the viewer feel more immersed in the piece and in nature. I choose to add water because connection, travel, and community plays a big part in my relationship with nature; water connects us from all ends of the earth and is a piece of nature no living being could survive without.

Human Connection and Disconnection to Nature and the Effects on Health



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OS47

Writer's Note: I am writing about the effect nature has on your health because of my personal experience with nature and how it helped me. Throughout this paper, I discuss change, experience, community, finding your place, home, physical health, mental health, travel, and nature. My goal for this paper is to explain how and why my experience with travel and connection with nature was so life-changing for my mental health. As well as share the benefits of travel, being in nature, and what reconnecting to nature could do for your health.

I. Introduction

I have always felt stuck, trapped, like I was missing and longing for something I couldn't ever find. Ever since I can remember, I have felt homesick, and I was never sure where that home was. About a year ago, I found that a house doesn't feel like my home, but the right people and the best spots in nature do. People can leave you; your house never does, but I took a risk, and I made a change. I left the person I was behind to find who I really am. I have always been searching for a version of me that is the happiest, a version of myself that doesn't wish to change, and I believe I have just begun to find that person.

The person I was before will always be with me; she might even come back once in a while and bring those old habits back, but I have learnt new things. I've learned how to heal and hope and not give up. Because of nature, I'm still standing because I found a home in the Earth in the people and the people I love in it.

I won't always be able to stay with my home, and my home won't always stay with me, but I will always love my home. Most of the time, I don't feel at home. Even though I found a home in the Earth and the people, I still can feel a longing and a feeling that I'm missing home, and I don't know where that home is. But sometimes, you have to go through pain to find happiness, and

that's exactly what I did. I made a change and explored how being connected to nature and traveling make a difference to your life and to your mental and physical health. After coming to a realization of how much nature and travel have changed me and having the opportunity to create anything through this project, I wanted to be able to share the effects that nature has had on my mental health and what it could do for other people. How can being connected to nature and traveling make a difference to your life and your mental and physical health?

II. How and why can nature be so healing to your health?

Humans have become increasingly urbanized over the past century, with more than half of the world's population now living in towns and cities. As a result, people now interact less with nature and spend more time inside. Plus, most young people in America spend at least seven hours a day using electronics; this leaves little time outside the school day for much else. There is limited research on the connection between nature and mental and physical health, but the little we do know says a lot. Places with natural features can provide a setting for behaviors that enhance health and well-being, such as physical activity and social connections.

Over 100 years ago, naturalist John Muir (1901) was heralding the mental health benefits of nature from forested valleys to the tops of snow-capped mountain peaks: Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people were beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; and that wilderness is a necessity. Muir's words remain relevant today. The need to rid humanity of 'over-civilized rust' and 'disease' through connecting with the natural world is far more dire than it has ever been. As a society, our relationship with nature is suffering - and in turn, we are too.

The healing power of nature is an ancient medical principle and foundational belief of

naturopathic medicine predicated upon the idea that the body possesses the innate ability to repair, rebuild, and heal itself. The healing power of nature comes from immersive contact with the natural world. These are deeply-rooted, old-established, far-reaching relations between humans and nature which we cannot ignore without loss.

III. How can experience and exploring change how you feel

A vital experience that has changed how I have felt is traveling. I firmly believe that travel brings positive change and lifelong experiences to someone's life. It is also proven that traveling boosts your mood and even increases your happiness. Traveling changes us as a person. Traveling has given me the confidence to talk to new people and go to more places on my own. I have become more open-minded, spontaneous, self-confident, independent, creative, reflective, and productive. Travel brings you experiences that you can't find anywhere else. You will learn things that you would otherwise have never known and meet people that live halfway across the world that you might never see again, but those people will change your life more than both of you will ever know.

Travel makes you more interesting, improves your health, and opens you up to a new way of living. While traveling, you can start to disconnect from daily routines and old habits, create new and healthier ones, and learn how to live in the moment more easily. I have broadened my perspectives in so many ways while traveling, have learned to be much more flexible, and valued the experiences that have come my way. There are studies found showing that traveling can reduce stress and decrease risks of heart disease and depression. In addition, it was found that travel is also closely linked to brain health and offers many cognitive benefits when you step outside your comfort zone and experience new people and places.

While traveling, just being in nature and spending more time outdoors, you will get more exposure to sunlight which is beneficial to your health in so many ways. Being exposed to sunlight not only boosts your mood but can be an effective part of treatment for depression and anxiety as it increases serotonin. The sun can give you more energy, help keep you calm, positive, and focused. The sun can also bring down blood pressure and improve heart health, reducing your risks of cardiac disease and stroke. Sun exposure also improves the quality of sleep, state of sleep, and sleep patterns by producing melatonin and can help improve insomnia. It's still very important to use sunscreen or cover up if you're going to be outside longer than 15 minutes.

I have encountered and gotten the opportunity to learn about many different cultures while traveling, changing how I see community, traditions, and the way I take care of myself. Learning about how different cultures and countries focus on the quality of life and longevity or seeing people focus on nutrition and lowering their consumption of processed foods. Watching people take a break to socialize with their friends and family or to take a needed nap. And those cultures that haven't lost their roots with nature despite the many people trying to erase them and their roots. The cultures that still believe that nature is powerful, healing, and their home.

Travel also can make people feel more reflective. It has gotten me to the point of re-evaluating my goals and reinforcing my priorities. I felt like I tried every trick in the book to improve my mental health, and I never thought that travel and nature would be the thing to improve it the most. However, once I reconnected with nature, I realized how vital that is for your mental and physical health and how many people are lacking that connection.

IV. Can one experience and a few people change your life

This experience is challenging for me to write about; honestly, it's hard for me even to believe it's

over. If you had told me a year ago that I would have the best experience of my life, I wouldn't believe you, mainly because I had just gotten out of one of the hardest experiences of my life. I never thought that this would be something I would ever do. Before going to The Traveling School, I was never very fond of the outdoors; I never enjoyed camping or going on a hike, but one thing I did love was to travel, but after this experience, I am forever changed.

My semester at The Traveling School is the main reason why I chose to create this project, and I think about my time there every day. When I first applied to The Traveling School, I knew I needed to get away from home, but I was terrified that I would not like it and not be able to make it to the end. I had never done anything like it. But when the day came, I flew to Phoenix on my own, not to see or talk to anybody I knew from home for the next four months, except for the occasional two-week phone call with my parents. By not using screens for four months I was able to be more in the moment with the people and nature around me, it allowed me to focus more on myself and not be distracted and stressed about other people's lives and about the judgments and standards that we consume from the media. I enjoyed not having screens a lot more than I originally thought I would, it came to be much easier to live without them, and an important part of my experience of being in nature and the effect it had on my health.

I remember the day I got there, and everyone was strangers. After unpacking and going to my room, one of my first roommates for the night, who had gone to another semester school, said to me "we're all going to be best friends by tomorrow morning." I don't remember if I believed that, but I do know it made me less nervous. And either way, she was more than right. By the next day, we were more than friends. For four months, all fourteen of us traveled in a van from Arizona all the way to Montana.

While in nature, you build stronger connections, become closer with the people you're with,

and share the experiences even if you were total strangers. The first week we were together, we went on a backcountry canoeing trip in the Black Cannons, we slept under the stars and cooked our meals as the sunset, it felt like we had known each other forever. To be so far away from any other trace of human civilization, any technology, and just have each other, we built community, connection, and a home that wasn't a house. We built a family.

There were times when we were uncomfortable and got way out of our comfort zone. There were times when we were washing dishes in the rain or when we had been hiking mountains in the sun all day and thought I just couldn't keep going, when we had to write a five-page essay by hand or when we had to wake up at five a.m even when had to wear wet socks and shoes for a week and so much more. It wasn't always fun and easy, but we were together, and we got through it. I learned that I can be uncomfortable and do things that feel too hard.

I actually don't think I could tell you what exactly it was that changed my life. I don't know if it was the cuddles in the back seat of the van or the time we talked in Australian accents for three weeks, or the time we all got attacked by cactuses. I'm not sure if it was getting to see a new town every week or the gas station snack stops or the time I looked over the Mexican border. I'm not sure if it was when we went canyoneering or had prom in the backcountry. I don't know if it was when we backpacked for five days and didn't shower for a week. I don't know if it was the time I chopped all my hair off. It could have even been when we slept in a van or saw a bison highway or that we didn't have any phones. I'm not sure if it was while playing cards, learning about white supremacy or while Heather was telling us to drink more water. Or it could have been on one of those long nights around the campfire when we were sharing our life stories or even when we were singing The Spins by Mac Miller for the very last time or maybe even my birthday the last time

we said goodbye. It could have been all of that. It could have been none of that. It could have also been so much more than that.

But I do know the people I met and the places we went felt like home and definitely did have a big part in changing my life. I think about them and miss them every day. I couldn't have gotten to where I am today without them, and I wouldn't have been writing this paper if it wasn't for that semester. That time changed my perspective on nature and the outside world. I was immersed in nature more than I have ever been in my life, and I was the happiest I have ever been. This inspired me to share my experience with nature and how it helped me improve my mental health and change me as a person.

V. The reality of it all; after nature

Even though being in nature did drastically improve my mental health, I will not tell you that nature has magically fixed and cured all my problems. I still have my hard days. The days when I don't get out of bed, the times I feel like I can't shower for weeks, panic attacks, and other struggles. But I sure have come a long way from where I was before. I accomplished so much this year, and I couldn't have done half of what I accomplished without my time discovering and healing in nature. Even though some days happen to still be challenging, they are half as hard as they used to be. I now have new ways to cope and have found ways of a healthier lifestyle. I continue to be able to accomplish new things every day, battle struggles, and keep getting healthier and happier.

VI. Conclusion

Overall, this topic of Human connection and disconnection to nature and its effects on your mental and physical health is vital to consider because it can make changes in your life that many people

are unaware of. I wanted to tell my story about how nature changed my life so other people know what nature could possibly do for them and their health. I now feel that, as humans, we have been severely disconnected from nature. I have learnt and seen that it can help us and our health to reconnect and relearn to be with nature. I encourage you to take a break from your screens and go outside. Even if you feel healthy, getting outside and reconnecting with nature can improve your overall energy, happiness, and longevity of your life. If you take anything away from this, one thing to remember is not to give up, keep trying new things and immerse yourself in new experiences. I also hope you remember that nature is our home, the Earth is our home, and the people is our home. Even if you don't feel at home now, you will find it, take a risk, make a change and try looking outside once in a while. Sometimes the least expected things can change your life.

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