

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS WEEK 2021 - NATURE AND PLANNING

Posted on May 12, 2021



Mental Health Awareness Week 2021 is focused on nature, and its impact on mental health. We are intrinsically linked to nature, and it plays a huge part in both our physical and mental well-being.

'Studies have shown that people with close ties to nature have an increased sense of calm, reduction in depression, anxiety, and stress-related symptoms.'

A study from the 1960s showed that patients who had a view of nature recovered quicker than those who did not. Many other studies throughout recent years have proven time and time again that nature can provide extraordinary health benefits.

Many of us have been stuck within the suffocating walls of our homes for the past year, and so it is essential that we find excuses and motivation to get back outside. We all spend so much time captivated by our mobile devices that it is incredibly easy to forget how important it is to simply get outside, stretch our legs, and get our lungs working.

For those of us who have been trapped in London during lockdown, there are still a huge variety of places where nature can be enjoyed and appreciated. London is made up of 40% public green space, including 3,000 parks, totalling around 35,000 acres.

Despite this, many of us still struggle to access and benefit from being close to nature. Teenagers tend to be less connected, and around 13% of UK households do not have access to a garden.

Nature and the Planning System.

The Planning System manages how land is used, and shapes new developments and the places that we live in. Our environment has a fundamental impact on mental health, and an important aspect of this is having easy access to outdoor spaces and nature.

Opportunities to live and work near to nature tend to be limited in urban locations, however public green spaces provide improvements to the urban landscapes that improve air quality. As mentioned previously, having access to natural environments and open spaces has been consistently proven to improve mental health and general wellbeing.

'Having a system in place to protect these outdoor spaces and assets is critical to ensure that we can preserve them for the future.'

The planning system designates land, for example Open Land and Green Belts, ensuring their longevity.

Nature and wildlife are intrinsically linked. The Planning System is intended to protect our native species and ensure that development projects do not negatively affect our badgers, bats, and Great Crested Newts to name but a few. Planners work alongside ecologists and statutory bodies to achieve the best possible outcomes, and to balance the need for growth with protecting our most cherished species for the future.

Connecting with nature.

There are a range of things that you can do to connect with nature.

Here are five accessible suggestions:

- Eat your lunch outside
- Visit a botanical garden
- Grow indoor plants
- Enjoy nature in your local area
- Look up at the sky

There are many other ways to enjoy nature. Here are some great suggestions by [Mind](#) and the [Surrey Wildlife Trust](#)

It is important to take a moment to reflect on how we look after our own mental health, and it is crucial that we take measures to do things for ourselves. I recently spoke with the team to get an insight into what they do for themselves that help with their wellbeing, their responses were as follows:

Shona Bland.

- Cycling around London and to new places.
- Walking dogs.
- Growing indoor and outdoor plants.

Chris Kirby.

- Going out for a run or doing some exercise outdoors.
- I play a number of sports such as cricket and golf during the summer months.

- I do try get out for a walk during lunch to the nearby park or canal.

Alex Richards.

- Outdoor/wild swimming.
- Seeing wildlife.
- Cycling through different natural landscapes.

Garry Hutchinson.

- I go running (1,000km this year so far aka 7.3km per day).
- Cycling at weekends in the countryside.
- Walking.

Peter Higginbottom.

- Going for a walk during the working day to get some fresh air.
- Spending time in the garden.
- Growing butterflies with the children.

Saffron Frost.

- Consciously taking time away from screens.
- Finding walks I haven't taken before.
- Exploring new towns and green spaces, seeing new buildings, and commenting on the architecture, landscaping and visual appearance of these places.