

WELLNESS & COUNSELING

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MOTHER EARTH & MENTAL HEALTH

A growing body of research is finding that nature (in all its forms) is really good for our mental health. The [benefits](#) we gain from our experiences in nature can include reduced feelings of stress, anger, depression, anxiety, and loneliness, as well as improved confidence, attention, and focus. Nature has also been shown to [make us nicer](#) people! What is it about **being with nature** that makes us feel so happy, relaxed, and **connected**?

We may not always be consciously thinking about it, but humans are intimately connected with, embedded in, and inseparable from the rest of nature. Taking time to mindfully sit with this fact can shift our understanding of how to **heal the human psyche** and **repair the human-nature relationship**.

“Having any connection to nature, even if it’s just looking out a window and seeing what’s happening out there, can buffer you against the effects of stress for that moment.

– MAYRA MENDEZ, PHD, LMFT



CONNECTING TO NATURE DURING THE PANDEMIC

The overall decline in mental well-being during the **COVID-19 pandemic** has been gaining a lot of attention.

While the [long term effects](#) of the pandemic are still unknown, significant increases in stress, depression, and anxiety have been reported. Some policies aimed at controlling the spread of the virus, such as social/physical distancing measures and encouraging people to stay at home, are likely contributing to the increased feelings of **disconnection** and **isolation**.

Drawing from evidence that nature generally has a positive impact on mental health, one [recent study](#) asked if **having plants around the home** and a **view of nature or greenspace** from a window affected mental well-being during the pandemic when people were being advised to stay home. Their findings indicated that the more nature people had access to, the higher their reports of life-satisfaction, self esteem, and happiness.

Increased proximity to plants and nature was also correlated with decreased measures of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. While these findings are not particularly surprising, they do add to a growing body of evidence that supports **incorporating nature** into public health policy.

BE A LITERAL TREE HUGGER!

Legendary Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh developed a [hugging meditation practice](#) aimed at fostering interbeing, and understanding. He explains, "when we hug, **our hearts connect** and we know that we are not separate beings." Hugs are hard to come by these days, but luckily physical distancing measures don't apply to trees! Did you know every tree on the Ursinus campus is tagged and labeled on [Philly Tree Map](#) and [Falling Fruit](#)?

Click the links and see what trees look like they could use a hug on your way to your next class.



NATURE THERAPY & ECOPSYCHOLOGY

Ecotherapy (also known as nature therapy or green therapy) and the field of ecopsychology stem from the belief that humans are **woven into the web of life**, rather than isolated, separate beings living outside of it. In this way, the human psyche is understood as being part of a greater system of interaction with the natural world. Studying the **emotional bond** between humans and the earth has led some [researchers](#) to the conclusion that "nature is not only nice to have, but it's a **have-to-have** for physical health and cognitive function."

[Horticulture therapy](#) is one example of how interacting with nature can be used as a therapeutic tool. Through engaging in garden related activities like digging in the soil, horticulture therapy is used to treat substance abuse, reduce feelings of isolation among the elderly, and help military vets [coping with PTSD](#). People with physical and cognitive disabilities also benefit from horticulture therapy. By tending to the garden and caring for plants, people on the receiving end of health care actually **become care takers** themselves.

“Nature itself is the best physician.

– HIPPOCRATES



ENVIRONMENTAL PRIVILEGE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Environmental privilege refers to the ability of privileged groups to access environmental amenities and avoid environmental burdens while that ability is denied to others with less privilege. This reflects itself in a person's lived experiences. For many people living in wealthy countries, these privileges can look like this:

- When I go to parks or nature preserves, I see people who look like me.
- I have access to beautiful views of nature where I live, work, or play.
- My trash is hauled far away from my home.
- I use as much tap water as I like for my daily activities without having to think much about it.
- I have access to clean drinking water.
- I breathe clean air and do not have to worry much about air pollution.
- I own land.

Like other forms of systemic privilege and inequality, this can have an enormous effect on a person's [mental and physical health](#). While most of this newsletter focuses on how **access to nature increases well-being**, there is also a large body of research showing that people **living near environmental hazards** such as industrial pollution and waste sites experience much higher rates of **illness and psychological distress** (1, 2, 3) which must be acknowledged.



DIVERSITY & INCLUSION IN ENVIRONMENTALISM

Nature is for everyone, but certain voices that fit the image of the ["stereotypical environmentalist"](#) (white, affluent, college educated) might be distorting our idea of what it means to be an environmentalist. As we explore and embrace all the beautiful ways connecting to nature improves our mental health, it is important to engage with diverse voices so we can gain insight into other ways of being. We can feel the importance of this **reflected in nature**, whose incredible diversity is the very thing that makes it so beautiful and special!

Here are some folks whose passion for the great outdoors might inspire you to **get outside** and fall in love with nature:

[Alexis Nikole Nelson](#) uses her Instagram ([@blackforager](#)) and [Tik Tok](#) accounts to show the world how many outdoor "snacks" can be eaten off the ground in her funny and educational videos.

Queer environmentalist, photographer, and Eagle Scout [Wyn Wiley](#) developed a life long love of nature growing up in Nebraska. Wiley's alter-ego [Pattie Gonja](#) takes that love

of nature and activism and channels it through the art form of drag, while also challenging the hetero-masculine archetypes that are often associated with the outdoor industry.

[Karen Ramos](#) uses her Instagram ([@naturechola](#)) as a platform to talk about the need for diversity and inclusion in outdoor spaces. Her non-profit organization [Get Out, Stay Out](#) (Vamos Afuera) connects indigenous migrant children to positive, educational outdoor experiences.

Check out these resources to learn more:

[@blackmenwithgardens](#) // [@wheeltheworld](#) // [unlikely hikers](#) // [@autumn.peltier](#) // [wild diversity outdoor afro](#) // [guide to outdoor allyship](#) // [what the outdoor rec industry doesn't get about the LGBTQ+ community](#)



WAYS TO RECHARGE

Recognizing that there are varying levels of access and ability to engage with nature, here are some different ways to **connect with Mother Earth** and boost your mental health:

- **Get a house plant!** Indoor plants have been shown to improve air quality and **reduce stress**. [Pothos plants](#), [succulents](#), and [snake plants](#) are low maintenance, great for newbies, and do well in dorm rooms. They're also easy to [propagate](#) (aka: make more **FREE** plants!) and share. If you're interested in adopting a pothos cutting, email Ellen Macionsky at wellness@ursinus.edu and we'll happily give you one of ours!
- Take a virtual or self-guided [Green Tour](#) of the Ursinus College campus.
- Visually impaired or no view of greenspace from your window? **Engage other senses**. Some research has found that multi-sensory elements like [bird songs](#) and the [smell of wildflowers](#) improve **mental restoration, calm, creativity, and focus**. Try streaming a playlist of nature sounds or take a few minutes cleaning and touching the leaves of a house plant.
- Whatever you're doing, consider **taking it outside**. Napping, studying, listening to a lecture, reading, exercising, eating, drawing, calling your parents, procrastinating on that assignment, and socializing are just a few "portable" activities that could be moved outdoors.
- **Cooking** can be an incredible opportunity to meditate, practice mindfulness, and appreciate nature's ability to sustain us. Try [this mindful cooking exercise](#) to turn a chore into a **nourishing experience** for body, mind, and soul.

Some [research](#) points out that "dominant stereotypes and ableist narratives tend to overlook the **richly textured ways** in which people may experience nature." Recognize that [all ways](#) of appreciating and interacting with nature are equally authentic!



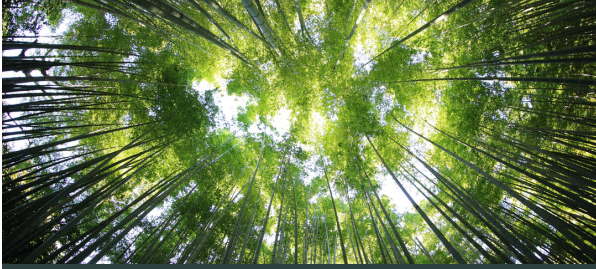
ECO-ANXIETY

The term [eco-anxiety](#) describes the persistent **worried thoughts and tension** some people feel about the human-nature relationship. It often refers to a fear of ecological disasters, environmental damage, and a sense of impending doom.

Some folks may also feel **grief** or overwhelming **guilt** about the impact our actions are having on people living in areas that are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, marginalized communities, and future generations.

While eco-anxiety makes some people feel numb, others may feel motivated to educate themselves and participate in addressing the problems. Activist Polly Barks points out that we can choose to face our eco-anxiety by engaging ["all the tools in our medical, mental, and activist toolboxes."](#) By boiling our overwhelming dread down into smaller, digestible pieces that are within our control, we can **convert our fears into action items**.

However you find yourself responding to life's difficulties, recognize and honor your feelings as valid. Practicing mindfulness and taking care of your own mental well-being is important for building **resilience**: the psychological ability to recover quickly from an emotional difficulty.



A NEW STORY

Storytelling is central to human existence. Every culture uses stories to help people make sense of themselves and the world around them. What stories have we been told about humans' relationship to nature? Western culture tells a story of [separation](#) wherein humans understand themselves to be completely **separate from each other and their environment**. It's possible that "othering" nature in this way has led us to think of the environment as competitive and threatening, or perhaps as something wild that humans should master and control in order to survive. The underlying idea that nature only exists to serve us leads us to value the earth solely for what can be gained from its' resources. Today we can see the damage this mindset causes for people and the planet.

What might change if we collectively decided to **tell a new story** about the human-nature relationship? Drawing from that intuitive feeling of connectedness we get from being "one" with nature, we might begin to know ourselves as **part of** the earth and of each other instead of continuing to take a view of separation. **Love**, after all, is [the expansion of the self](#) to include someone (or something) else.

VOLUNTEER ON THE CAMPUS FARM

Join the Office of Sustainability and the Farm Fellows as they begin to prepare for the spring farm season on **March 31st** at **1PM-3PM**. [Click here](#) to learn more and register for the event!



SLEEP HYGEINE & CIRCADIAN RHYTHM

Circadian rhythms are internal processes that regulate important functions of the body and repeat on each rotation of the earth. Our sleep-wake cycle, or "**sleep clock**" is one circadian rhythm that has a huge affect on our mental health and overall well-being. We can feel the negative effects of disruption to our natural sleep cycle when we stay up late and feel tired the next day, or travel and suffer from jet lag. **Poor sleep habits** over long periods of time have been linked to a number of chronic diseases and conditions, including type 2 diabetes, depression, and cardiovascular disease.

HAVING TROUBLE SLEEPING?

Practice these habits to help **restore your natural circadian rhythm** to fix sleep patterns and improve your rest:

- Practice waking up and going to bed at the same time every day--even on weekends! Try to get 7-9 hours of sleep each night.
- Lighting is a key focus of sleep research since darkness is a natural cue to your body that it's time to go to bed. Expose yourself to bright light during the day and dim your lights in the evening as the sun goes down. Sleep in complete darkness.
- Avoid using laptops, cellphones, and other screens at night. These devices emit blue light, which delays melatonin production.
- Limit caffeine after lunch.
- Since natural light schedules help aid our sleep clock, spending a lot of time outdoors can help restore this natural cycle. Camping is great for this!