



*“He who has health has hope, and he who has hope has everything.”*

Arabian proverb

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# Mental Health Awareness Week 2021

Mental Health Awareness Week 2021 takes place from 10th – 16th May and it's becoming an increasingly spoken about topic. We've seen the likes of the #BeKind movement on social media as well as people generally starting to become a lot more open about their mental wellbeing. It's one thing being more aware and regularly checking in with your friends, but do you do the same for yourselves?

The theme of this year's Mental Health Awareness Week is nature, so in this blog post we are going to be looking at the ways nature benefits us and how you can use this to improve your own wellbeing.



# How does nature benefit mental wellbeing?

Looking after our mental health and wellbeing is important for everyone, and there are things that we can all do in our day-to-day lives that can help to support good mental health. This includes connecting to, and spending time in nature.

Many of us are living a fast-paced urban life (unless you're fortunate enough to live in a remote farmhouse in the middle of the countryside!) that feature long working days and often crowded commutes. These environments can trigger pressures that affect our mental health.

Taking the time to step back, slow down and spend time in nature is important, in whatever way works for you.

A recent study, which examined associations between recreational nature contact in the last seven days and self-reported health and wellbeing, found that when compared with no nature contact in the last week, the likelihood of reporting good health or high wellbeing became significantly greater when individuals were spending  $\geq 120$  mins per week in green spaces. The study found that it did not matter how 120 minutes of contact a week was achieved (e.g. one long vs. several shorter visits/week).

Mind state on their website that spending time in green space can benefit both your mental and physical wellbeing and carrying out activities such as growing food or flowers, exercising outdoors or being around animals can have lots of positive effects such as:

- **Improving your mood**
- **Reducing feelings of stress or anger**
- **Helps you to feel more relaxed**
- **Improves your physical health**
- **Improves your confidence and self-esteem**
- **Helps you to be more active**
- **Helps you to make new connections**

They also recommend that when taking care of your wellbeing, you might find it helpful to:

- **Only try what feels comfortable**
- **Give yourself time to figure out what works for you, going at your own pace**
- **Take small steps - pick one or two things that feel achievable at first before moving on to try other ideas**



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**VITAMIN D**

## The sunshine vitamin (Vitamin D)

**Vitamin D** is one of the most important vitamins for our bodies and allows us to absorb calcium and phosphate from the foods we eat to keep our teeth, bones and muscles healthy. However, if we don't get enough sunlight or eat enough vitamin D-rich foods, it is all too easy to develop a deficiency in this vital vitamin.

You can find out more about why Vitamin D is so important here: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vitamins-and-minerals/vitamin-d/>

According to Holland and Barrett, around 50-60% of the British population is insufficient in vitamin D. From October to March in the UK, sunlight does not reach the earth at the correct angle, so, in turn, not enough UVB rays reach us in order to produce vitamin D.

90% of the vitamin D our bodies need comes from getting out in the sunlight while the remaining 10% of from our diets. Symptoms of low vitamin D vary from person to person but if your lifestyle, or personal choices keep you away from sunlight, low mood may be one of the symptoms that you experience. This is because serotonin (the happy hormone) falls with lack of sun exposure and our bodies need vitamin D to activate to effectively make serotonin in the brain.



# So, how can you spend more time outdoors?

When you think of trying to spend more time in the great outdoors, you may imagine high-energy, time-consuming activities like hiking and mountain climbing and while these may be enjoyable for some, you don't have to push yourself to the limit in order to get outside.

Here are some simple ideas to spend less time indoors:

- **Spend your lunch break outside:** whether you go for a walk or dine al fresco, there's nothing stopping you from getting outdoors during your lunch break!
- **Take your workout out of the gym:** instead of running on a treadmill, try running in a park or plan a route near where you live. Alternatively, set up a yoga mat or dumbbells in your back garden! You'll awaken your senses by exercising outdoors and come away more relaxed and exhilarated than if you'd worked out in a sweaty gym or studio
- **Do a little landscaping:** you don't have to be a professional to make your garden look pretty. Shift your mindset and think of mowing the lawn as a chance to get outside rather than being a chore. Visit a garden centre and find some hardy shrubs to plant. Not only will you be spending time outside in beautifying the space, but once complete, it'll be sure to entice you out more often.
- **Work outdoors:** if you work remotely, you can work almost anywhere outdoors as long as you can connect to a Wi-Fi network. If this isn't possible, suggest having meetings with clients or co-workers outside instead of your usual conference room. A different setting can be energising and often leads to new ideas and solutions.
- **Host outdoor social gatherings:** now this one may have to wait a few more weeks in line with Covid-19 guidelines (however, you are now allowed to meet with one other household (max. 6 people) in a private garden), but instead of scheduling the usual meet-ups with friends and family at a restaurant or bar, host a spring bbq or picnic in your garden. If your social circle is a little more adventurous, plan a camping trip or day of water sports!

Everything mentioned above is definitely easier to do during the summer months, with us Brits ready in our shorts and t-shirts as soon as the temperature reaches 15 degrees. However, if you're struggling to find motivation to get out during the winter, we also have some tips:

- **Find a reason to be outside:** if you know someone with a dog, it requires being walked daily. Why not see if you can accompany that friend or family member on their walk?
- **Wake up earlier:** darker evenings are a big contributing factor to why people spend less time outside in autumn and winter, so why not counterbalance your levels of sunlight by waking up a little earlier and embracing the beautiful winter sunrises?
- **Set yourself a challenge:** last month we published an article on the benefits and importance of moving more. The default number of steps that should be taken daily, as recommended by various health charities is around 8,000-10,000. So, why not test yourself against that? Not only will you be spending more time outdoors, but you will also be improving your physical and mental wellbeing in doing so.



## Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

**SAD** is a type of depression that comes and goes in a seasonal pattern, with the symptoms being more apparent and more severe during the winter, and follows on from our points about the importance of getting enough vitamin D.

A few symptoms of SAD can include:

- **A persistent low mood**
- **A loss of pleasure or interest in normal everyday activities**
- **Irritability**
- **Feeling lethargic**

The exact cause of this disorder is not fully understood, but it's often linked to reduced exposure to sunlight during the shorter autumn and winter days. According to the NHS website, the main theory is that a lack of sunlight may stop a part of the brain called the hypothalamus working properly, which may affect the:

- **Production of melatonin** – this is the hormone that makes you feel sleepy; in people with SAD, the body may produce it in higher-than-normal levels
- **Production of serotonin** – as we mentioned in the section on vitamin D, this is the hormone that effects your mood but also your appetite and sleep; a lack of sunlight may lead to lower serotonin levels
- **Circadian rhythm** – this is your body's internal clock. Your body uses sunlight to time various important functions, such as when you wake up, so lower light levels in the winter may disrupt your body clock and lead to symptoms of SAD

**The main treatment for SAD?**  
Getting as much natural sunlight as possible, exercising regularly and managing your stress levels.

*The Office for National Statistics found that between 28th March and 26th April 2020 (first month of lockdown), the UK saw a substantial increase of 147% in the time which adults spent gardening and doing DIY - an average of 39 minutes daily.*



## Fact of the month

Sufficient sleep, exercise, healthy food, friendship, and peace of mind are necessities, not luxuries.

# As an employer, how can you encourage your team to spend more time outdoors?


Ambius conducted a study of 1,000 office workers in the United States and the United Kingdom and quite concerningly, though not surprisingly, found that office workers only spend an average of 47 minutes outside during a typical working day.

The wellbeing of employees goes a long way to promote engagement and productivity but how can this lack of sunlight exposure negatively impact your business?

A lack of fresh air and sunlight harms the immune system, leaving us more susceptible to cold and flu as consistently breathing stale air doesn't supply our body's with enough oxygen to keep white blood cells functioning correctly. And as we have probably all experienced, an increased level of illness amongst staff often leads to a decrease in attendance.

However, you should also consider that even if attendance levels aren't too badly affected, mental health is at greater risk as decreased exposure to sunlight is associated with a drop in serotonin levels as we spoke about earlier in this article. Poor mental health at any end of the spectrum will no doubt have a significant impact on your staff's performance at work.

While many workplaces aren't located in converted countryside barns, there are still ways that as employers, you can encourage your employees to get a little more fresh air.

- **Create a greener workplace:** placing plants around the office can have a positive effect on wellbeing. They reduce stress levels and also keep your blood pressure lower. Researchers also found that houseplants actually increase productivity by up to 15%. 
- **Host outdoor meetings:** for those less formal meetings, why not take a short stroll around your office car park? Or, if you're lucky enough to have a bit of green space you can host your meeting on a nearby bench. Where possible, you should make this outdoor space inviting and encourage your staff to take both meetings and lunch breaks there.
- **Encourage lunchtime walks:** spending time away from our screens, even for a short period is important. Changing our environment stimulates the brain but also allows us to 'switch off' which in turn, helps us to switch back on again. You could encourage your team to install a pedometer app on their phones, or use their fitness tracker if they have one, and promote a company wide initiative to see who can accumulate the most steps each week. Who doesn't love a bit of friendly competition?
- **Team sports days:** staff love being rewarded for their hard work and while a day full of exercise may not seem like a 'reward' to some, why not arrange a company wide sports day? Similarly to the above suggestion, this encourages a bit of friendly competition while spending time in the great outdoors and getting to socialise and have fun on a less 'corporate' basis.
- **Position desks near windows and open the blinds:** allowing as much natural light into your office as possible allows for employees to soak up some vitamin D, even while inside. A study by The World Green Building Council found that workers felt more engaged when working in natural light. Being engaged means that they're more likely to stay focussed on their tasks and are also more likely to collaborate with other team members.

For some, having their desk face the wall is their preferred direction as it limits distractions the most by helping to avoid gazing out the window. That said, it can also give the feeling of being closed off from the rest of the room.

Positioning desks with a window at the side of the individual allows for a sufficient source of natural light, while reducing the likelihood of staring into the distance.

## Tip of the month

**Walking can improve our mental health** - reducing anxiety, depression, and a negative mood. It can also boost self-esteem and reduce symptoms of social withdrawal. Take just 10 minutes a day to get some fresh air and reap the benefits!

