

# Green Spaces and Wellness

by Jeanne Faulkner, Contributor

When we think of improving our health, we naturally think of diet, exercise and regular checkups. But what we need as well is a big dose of nature. Studies show that the more green space people have access to, the healthier they are. Yes, better health could be as simple as a trip to the park, but depending on where you live, that trip might not be so simple.

Green spaces are gardens, parks, forests and open spaces that have an abundance of trees, flowers, waterways and other natural elements. If you live in the city, your ability to access green spaces might depend on your tax bracket.

Studies show that neighborhoods with high property values have more trees, parks and other green spaces than low-income neighborhoods. It's often harder for people in low-income neighborhoods to find transportation to get to green spaces. And local options are often poorly maintained parks. Children of color disproportionately live in communities of concentrated poverty—areas where parks are rare.

## What makes green spaces so powerful?

Green spaces offer gateways to active living, which means traffic-free spaces to run, bike, engage with friends and have fun. People who live near parks exercise more and have better health. Children who exercise and play outdoors are healthier, perform better academically, behave better and have a higher self-esteem than those who do not.

Researchers have determined that annual rates of up to 15 different major diseases were significantly lower among those living near green spaces. In contrast, low-income neighborhoods without green spaces report higher rates of obesity, cancer, asthma, diabetes, depression, anxiety and crime.

Chris Dennet, of Regence Blue Cross Blue Shield in Portland, Oregon, says, "A complete definition of health and wellness includes social, physical, financial, environmental, spiritual, mental, medical, emotional, intellectual and occupational elements. Green spaces address all those elements."

## How do green spaces do all that? It's a combination of factors:

- Social interactions: We gather with other people, have picnics and play.
- Physical fitness: We go for walks, breathe fresh air, play sports and exercise.
- Financial aid: Green spaces offer free or inexpensive ways to reduce stress, have fun and improve health.
- Environmental action: Green spaces reduce our carbon footprint and improve air, soil and water quality.
- Spiritual guidance: Communing with nature provides opportunities to connect with your spirituality.
- Mental health: Engaging in outdoor activities can be both mentally and intellectually stimulating and relaxing.
- Emotional connections: Whether it's stress reduction, pure fun, nostalgia or gratitude, being in nature opens doors to our inner lives.
- Overall wellness: Exercise, stress reduction, interaction and playtime are always beneficial to our wellbeing and contribute to our health.
- Occupational therapy: Vacations and visits to green spaces relieve work tensions and provide physical space for rest and recreation.

"Entire communities are stronger and healthier when they include green spaces," says Dennet. "In fact, studies show that rates of volunteerism are higher because people are happier and better functioning."

A study conducted in the Netherlands determined that the biggest impact green spaces had was on mental health. Compared to people living in areas with the least green spaces, those living in areas with the most were a third less likely to have anxiety disorders requiring treatment, and roughly one-fifth less likely to receive treatment for depression. Other studies show that hospital patients with rooms overlooking green spaces heal faster, and that prisoners with access to green spaces are less violent.

## Good for Cities

Many cities make green spaces a priority, but some cities fail to plan for this basic human need. For example, there are virtually no parks or community gardens in large areas of Southern California. "Portland was designed to have smaller

lots, but plenty of parks to gather in to encourage community engagement," says Dennet. "We've conserved trees and made gardening an important part of our culture. In other cities, homeowners have big yards and fences but few community green spaces. People tend to be more isolated. They trust their neighbors less, and crime rates are higher."

### **Good for Business**

Ashley Koehler, Sustainability Coordinator in Summit County, Utah, inventories and promotes utilization of open spaces. She says there's a mutually dependent relationship between citizens and city officials that impacts green-space preservation and development. "The more people use green spaces, the more attention cities give them. It's a selling point for cities to include them in development goals."

### **Greening Up**

When it comes to green spaces, says Koehler, "Even states rich with natural settings need to make it easy for citizens to get to trails, parks, gardens and green spaces and to connect one open space to another. It's also good for business. Having green spaces boosts a community's economic development. Businesses are attracted to developing in areas where healthy employees can ride their bikes at lunch or hike the trails after work." And, she adds, "There's a lot of peer pressure in areas with easy access to outdoor activities. All your neighbors are out exercising and you feel guilty if you don't do it too."

### **How to Get Green**

If your community is lacking in green spaces, learn more about what you can do about it. And check out these quick tips:

- Join or start a community garden (<http://www.communitygarden.org/>)
- Take a garden tour in your neighborhood
- Vote and lobby for green space initiatives (<http://www.urbangreenspaces.org/contact>)
- Visit the National Audubon Society (<http://www.audubon.org/>) and find out about local nature events
- Create green spaces in your yard
- Plan vacations and day trips to natural settings

Make it a priority to spend time soaking in the green, and get your share of all the benefits nature intended for you.

### ***Jeanne Faulkner***

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