



The Natured Mind

by Kenda Riggs

“Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.” ~ Albert Einstein

As you begin the new school year, I hope you had some time to relax, pause, reflect, and most importantly restore some of your energy this past summer. Some of you may be feeling excited and energized to embrace a new learning year, and others may still feel tired, uncertain what this year may bring. It is important to acknowledge where you are at this time, recognizing that there is no right or wrong in how you may be feeling.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the weather was incredible this summer. We are entering into a beautiful Fall season as well. I truly hope that many of you have gotten to enjoy some nature-time this past summer, as nature can help our brains and bodies to stay healthy. However, just because summer is over, does not mean that time in nature should end! During times of busyness, it is more important than ever to focus on ensuring we incorporate nature into our routines. These can be small unstructured moments to bigger planned activities. It is my hope this year that you will try to have a ‘natured mind’ on your beginning or continued journey to health and wellness.

What Does Nature Mean to You?

Our connection to nature runs deep in our DNA, yet in the modern world, humans spend almost 93% of the day indoors. We all have different experiences of nature and may have different reasons for wanting to connect to it more. Studies have shown that there are physical and mental benefits of connecting with nature. Nature can help reduce stress and anxiety, while increasing our focus and creativity. As teachers, you should try to immerse yourself in nature in any way you can, even a little bit each day.

Vitamin N

Sunshine helps strengthen our immune system and helps protect against illness, and there are direct benefits of enjoying the fresh air and the great outdoors. Time in nature can have a healing force on our bodies and minds, often referred to as Vitamin N. In 2019,

a study looked at the effects of 20 minutes of nature exposure three times per week, and participants showed lower levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, after nature exposure. An earlier study completed in 2016 concluded that only thirty minutes or more in nature per week can improve blood pressure and mood.

Vitamin N helps to:

- Strengthen immunity, as the sun provides Vitamin D for bone and muscle health.
- Promote regular quality sleep, which is then linked to better concentration, and reduced risk of heart disease and stroke.
- Boost mood as physical and mental health are directly linked, and nature improves both. Time outdoors, especially in the winter months where there is less daylight, can also improve mood.
- Lessen anxiety and fear by reducing stress.
- Increase general feelings of happiness and well-being, positive emotions, and improved interpersonal skills. People who spend time in nature tend to feel better about themselves.
- Generate feelings of calm, by relaxing the nervous system helping to deactivate the fight or flight response.
- Lower cortisol levels (the stress hormone) by suppressing the sympathetic nervous system.
- Improve ability to pay attention and concentrate. Taking a break in nature enhances cognitive abilities such as memory and problem-solving.
- Activate the brain and helps self-awareness.
- Reduce chronic illness. Time in nature reduces risk of heart disease, diabetes, lowers blood pressure, and other chronic conditions.

Nature Deficit Disorder

Richard Louv describes the concept Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD), which is not a medical diagnosis, but “...the human cost of alienation from nature, diminished use of senses, attention difficulties, high rates of physical and emotional illnesses including Vitamin D

deficiency”. He explains that spending less time outdoors is taking its toll on the overall physical and mental health and well-being of adults and children. With the digital world in which we live, adults are spending increased amounts of energy blocking out many of the human senses to focus on electronic screens, which is ultimately leaving people feeling less alive.

People do better overall physically and emotionally when experiencing time outdoors, benefiting from the positive feelings, stress reduction, and energy restoration from being in nature. Being outside in nature is fundamental to our development and well-being as adults.

“We tend to block off many of our senses when we’re staring at the screen. Nature time can literally bring us to our senses.”
~ Richard Louv

Ways to Get a Dose of Nature

- Take a stroll, a walk, a hike, or a bike ride. Notice the beauty around you – the plants, trees, and animals. Pay attention to sounds, sights, and smells
- Play with your children or pets outside
- Clean up your yard, do some gardening, or sweep your driveway
- Plant some fresh vegetables, flowers, or trees
- Eat a meal outside and enjoy the outdoor space around you
- Study or read a book outside, in your backyard or at a park
- Visit a river or ocean and listen to the calm water or ocean waves. You may even want to put your feet in the water.
- Sit back and relax in a quiet place outside, with a blanket or pillow or in a hammock. Sometimes the best thing to do is absolutely nothing at all. Soak up the nature around you
- Be a visitor in your own community – explore different local places that you may take for granted

Most importantly, at the beginning of each week, block out time in your calendar to schedule in your nature time, whether it be sitting on your front porch or exploring a new hiking trail.

Bring Nature Inside

There may be times when you may not be able to get outside to enjoy nature. You can also enjoy nature from inside, by looking out a window observing wildlife like birds, the weather changes, the clouds drifting by, a snowfall or rainfall, or the sun rising or

setting. You can also bring nature inside by having plants, flowers, beach rocks, sand, and tree leaves. You can open the window to allow the fresh air to fill your rooms, or to listen to the wind or rain. You can also put a bird feeder outside your window. Finally, you can add plants and outdoor photography or pictures to your workspace or home. These all provide opportunities to experience nature, which will help you feel more fulfilled.

Try a Nature Prescription

The research does suggest that most people will feel the greatest benefit of nature by spending at least two hours a week in intervals of at least 20 minutes. However, it is important to remember that you may have to try several different nature environments to find the one that is right for you. Living in Newfoundland and Labrador is unique, as we not only have our beautiful woods and nature trails, but we also have ocean environments to explore as well. The most important part when exploring nature is to feel some sort of connection to the environment, which is a feeling like you belong and are at peace with your surroundings. Remember to always take a moment to check in with what is going on inside of you. Notice your breathing. Feel your heart beating. Truly experience the sensations of being alive. These will all help you to enjoy the upcoming school year with a natured mind.

To learn more about prescriptions for nature visit www.parkprescriptions.ca.

If you are interested, you can do a short nature quiz on the Nature Conservancy Canada website <https://naturequiz.ca/en/> to obtain your own personal nature score, with some personalized weekly nature tips to help you experience nature in new ways!

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