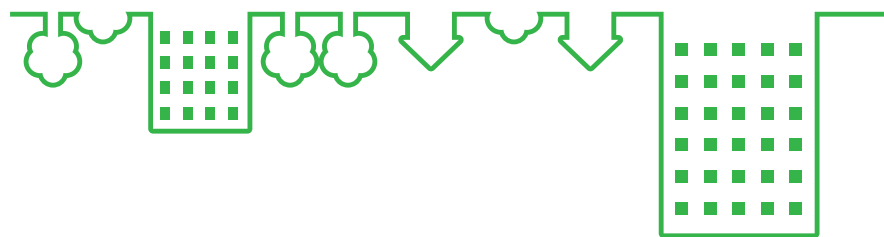




SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH – HOW URBAN NATURE CAN HELP



A city's green spaces and everyday nature are rarely considered as assets for young people's mental health. We found that urban nature makes a difference and could be used more – for prevention, recovery and flourishing.

OUR RESEARCH¹

Nature is a mental health life line for many young people. Young people gain respite and pleasure from urban green spaces and everyday nature such as trees, wildlife, water and views around a city. Nature in a city helps young people feel 'relief', 'free', 'unjudged' & 'calm'.

"That was a time you know when my friends and everyone around me weren't there for me so I kind of felt lonely, so I think that's when nature really helped me out because I could sit there and I could forget everything and I could forget everyone. I could just admire nature and get peace and everything."

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE TOLD US – 5 KEY IDEAS

1

FEELING NATURE'S WELLBEING BENEFITS

There is no one wellbeing benefit from nature. Young people talked about a wide range of wellbeing benefits: adventure; familiarity; time with family; freedom; play; fresh air; exercise; being away from phones and devices; relief from study and exam stress; nature being free of charge; calm; gratitude; rest; experience of beauty; remembering loved ones abroad; connection with life's cycles; headspace.

2

DOING THINGS – WHAT HELPS

There is no one activity that works best to help young people feel better in nature. Activities young people talked about included: taking photos, having freedom to be in favourite places, walking, socialising, alone time; being at outdoor festivals; being away from phones and computers; playing and experiencing adventure; resting, reading and eating outdoors.

3

FINDING NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS AND NATURE EXPERIENCES

The most often mentioned places and experiences of urban nature were 'everyday', not often special or spectacular: trees in parks and on streets; well-kept parks; green pathways; views across the city; skies, sunrises and sunsets; animals (city farms, dog walking) and wildlife; water (natural and designed water features); the wilder edges of the city; open spaces to be active; seats and benches outdoors.

4

NORMALISING NATURE FOR WELLBEING

When adults demonstrate and share positive experiences of nature with young people, urban nature is more readily accessed. Yet a sense of risk and fear, associated with some natural and outdoor city spaces is also created through negative stories from adults, family, peers, social media and national media. Adults' modelling of greenspace use and provision of positive stories helps young people build confidence and cultural access to nature.

5

BEGINNING – WHEN YOU AREN'T A NATURE ENTHUSIAST

Many young people don't identify as 'outdoor types' or 'nature enthusiasts' even when they told us about nature memories, care for nature and the value of nature for their own wellbeing today. Unfamiliar outdoor experiences, traditional nature conservation, physical activity and exposure to extreme weather may not be good starting points. Stepping stone activities, starting indoors, in safe spaces are fine and can help young people appreciate what works for them already.

"You don't have to have like a mask on or anything, I feel like nature encourages wonder & just thinking about like the rest of the universe rather than the immediate universe of your little social bubble."

Mina, 25

"Green space is really helpful as a mood management tool... nature's really important and being able to go out, especially with friends, you are away metaphorically and literally from your problems."

Jacob, 17

WHAT YOU CAN DO – 4 STARTING POINTS

1

Listen to young people's own experiences of nature as starting points; explore, revisit and build upon young people's nature memories which then help them choose both familiar and new experiences in nature. These are likely to offer the most accessible and achievable ways of using nature for wellbeing.

2

Schools, colleges, work places or young people's organisations must make time and space for young people's nature contact as respite. Young people told us that beautiful spaces and time to be outside are more important than structured outdoor exercise or nature knowledge.

3

Provide easy everyday opportunities for caring actions such as feeding birds and tending to plants, which offer wider sense of wellbeing, gratitude and self-worth. This is different from asking young people to take responsibility for environmental activism, which may be fulfilling but can add to stress.

4

Do what you can to help young people to notice any kind of nature in their local patch and in their everyday routines. When young people don't think there's any nature where they live or in the city centre, their access of nature as a wellbeing resource is limited. Start with what's there – be encouraged that any of your improvements and maintenance of everyday greenspaces make a difference.

¹ IWUN, (Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature) was a large 3-year research project exploring if and how urban nature helps people with their mental health and wellbeing. As part of the project, we listened to 25 young people aged 17-27 in Sheffield UK; half were of Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic origin; 5 were first generation migrants; 8 had mental health difficulties and more than half the group lived in areas classified as urban deprived. Our research was with young people who did not identify as 'outdoor' or 'nature' enthusiasts. They weren't part of environmental, outdoor, gardening or nature groups.

ABOUT IWUN

Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature (IWUN) brings together five strands of research:

- An epidemiological analysis of links between greenspace and health
- In-depth interviews and workshops to explore people's connectedness with nature
- Using a smartphone app to find out whether people feel better when noticing good things in their environment
- Interviews with professionals and community groups to identify interventions to increase wellbeing
- A cost-utility analysis of selected interventions

An accompanying document, Five Principles for Policymaking, is available at www.iwun.uk/publications

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