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De-stress digitally

Watching nature videos has the potential to improve mental health.

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SCIENTISTS are unanimous: nature plays a significant role in our wellbeing. But not everyone is lucky enough to live near a forest or by the sea, which means that where you live has the potential to influence your mental health.



Fortunately, this is not irreparable. A new study even suggests that virtual immersion in nature could be enough to help people reduce stress and relax, especially teenagers.

the transition from adolescence to adulthood is not always easy, and this period can represent one of the most difficult in terms of mental health.

And the covid-19 pandemic has done nothing to help. in 2021, in the midst of the pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 14% of young people aged 10 to 19 experience mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety and behavioural problems.

this alarming figure has prompted health authorities to call for strategies to prevent these disorders and meet the needs of this young population.

So it's hardly surprising that scientists are now looking into possible solutions specifically for this group. A team of researchers from the Department of Psychology at the United Kingdom's University of Exeter investigated the influence of nature on the mental health of a group of 76 teenagers and young adults aged 18 to 25.

the aim was to determine whether a virtual immersion in nature, compared to a virtual immersion in an urban environment, could have a positive effect on their well-being – on a par or almost on a par – with a real walk in the woods.

it's a surprising concept at first glance, but it's one that could prove helpful to those who live in cities with little or no access to blue and green spaces.

Reducing stress

For the purposes of this research, participants were divided into two groups.

the first was invited to watch a short, six-minute nature video with immersive visual and sound features of blue and green spaces, akin to a walk in a forest by a river.

the second group was invited to watch a video depicting an urban environment, following a journey on a London Underground train, under equivalent conditions (including duration, sounds, and other factors).

According to their findings, published in the journal *Nature: Scientific Reports*, the scientists observed numerous positive changes in the group subjected to virtual immersion in nature on several levels.

not only did the nature video generate a “significant reduction” in stress in the participants, it also increased levels of relaxation and positive mood.

this stands in contrast to immersion in an urban environment.

note, however, that the video evoking a walk in a forest had no impact on the depressive state, nor did the one immersing participants in the London Underground.

“Our findings support both of the general hypotheses that brief exposure to an immersive nature video, relative to an urban comparison condition, would reduce stress, improve indices of mental well-being in adolescents, and increase nature connection,” the researchers explain.

this research could contribute to the development of new strategies to support adolescents with mental health disorders who do not have access to green and blue spaces.

this is necessary, if not indispensable, considering that 50% of mental disorders emerge during adolescence, as the study’s authors reveal and 75% occur before the age of 24.

But the researchers also point out certain limitations, notably that these virtual immersions are no substitute for the real thing.

Virtual exposure could be used as a self-help intervention, an adjunct to therapy, or reserved for those for whom accessing nature is challenging, whether due to individual factors or systemic inequities. Researchers, University of Exeter

Not a substitute

“We recognise that virtual exposure to natural environments may have value in improving mental well-being and even preventing mental illness and may be appropriate for those struggling to get outside or who are agoraphobic, socially phobic or have depression-related low motivation.

“However, ... we do not suggest that virtual nature exposure should typically be a replacement for the real-world experience.

“instead, virtual exposure could be used as a self-help intervention, an adjunct to therapy, or reserved for those for whom accessing nature is challenging, whether due to individual factors or systemic inequities,” they conclude. – AFP Relaxnews