



## Go Take a Hike

Next time someone tells you to go take a hike you may want to interpret it as a recommendation, or at very least a concern for your mental well-being. In 2015 Stanford researchers found quantifiable evidence that taking a walk in nature vs. in a busy urban area

significantly improved moods and lowered stress

A study published in Proceedings for the National Academy of Science found that people who walked for 90 minutes surrounded by nature vs. in a busy urban setting had less brain activity in an area of the brain associated with depression.

In fact there is a growing field in science called "ecotherapy." Cambridge Health Alliance's Dr. Jason Strauss, Director of Geriatric Psychiatry, observes, regarding aging men who experience mood disorders, "They may not want to turn to medication or therapy for help, and for many, interacting with nature is one of the best self-improvement tools they can use." Time spent in natural settings can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, and Dr. Strauss prescribed 20-30 minutes three days a week, or regular three-day weekends in the woods, to obtain these results (Harvard Medical School, Health Publishing 2018).

According to the Harvard journal, a 2014 study found that either walking with a group or walking solo was equally effective in "lowering depression and stress and improving overall mental outlook." Other studies

indicated that exposure to green spaces reduced salivary cortisol - a biological marker in reaction to stress. There is a large body of empirical research showing that the great out-of-doors is really good for you!

I'm not suggesting that those with clinical depression ignore professional help, but rather that a regular walk in the woods can be a significant mood-lifter for all of us.

Unfortunately this is not easy for many people. Beginning in 2008, for the first time in human history more people live in urban settings than in rural areas. Well-designed cities need to have green space. Here in Southern NJ we ought to be jumping for joy because of our abundance of outdoor opportunities, but the problem is that we are often overly connected to our devices instead of being aware of the world around us.

Older folks are not the only ones suffering from excessive time indoors or on concrete outside; children are disconnected from nature too. Prior to becoming plugged in, many of us can remember a childhood with nature playing a prominent role. Even at the age of six, after school I used to play in the woods, a block or two from home, until my mother rang a bell signaling that I needed to head home for supper.

Today I don't think children even know what a dinner bell is. Many parents simply peel their children off an LCD screen at suppertime, if they even eat together at all.

Sadly, today author Richard Louv, in his 2005 book *Last Child in the Woods*, contends that the current generation of children will be the first to have shorter lifespans than their parents. He argues that children who don't spend enough time in nature are more prone to anxiety, depression, and attention deficit problems. They spend copious amounts of time using electronic communications and are far more sedentary. He has even called this condition "nature-deficit disorder."

And parents are frightened of allowing their children to be unattended. I get that: guilty as charged. However, these fears are misplaced; in 2012 the Christian Science Monitor reported, "The last time the crime rate for serious crime – murder, rape, robbery, assault – fell to these levels, gasoline cost 29 cents a gallon and the average income for a working American was \$5,807."

I'm not sure of current statistics, nor am I a proponent of dropping your child off at the park alone. I'm not that naïve; there are clearly areas that have clusters of criminal activity in our

region. But children need to learn some independence; they need to have some self-exploration time. So basically parents should go outside with them and keep an eye on them at distances suitable to their personality and age, so that kids can experience what their world is like.

Parents need to explore with them too. In 2016 Louv proposed a solution of sorts in "*Vitamin N* ." a prescription for reconnecting adults and children with the natural world. His book contains 500 activities to do just that.

This week CU Maurice River and the Bayshore Center in Bivalve will offer many local fourth graders a dose of "Vitamin N." We will take about 400 students into the great out-of-doors. They will be supervised by skilled adults, and for many it will be their first time in the woods! And, weather permitting, they will love it. We have been doing this with fourth graders since 2006 and many students tell us, "This is my best day ever!"

Spring has just begun and my suggestion is "Go take a hike... in the woods." You'll be happy you did.

*Check out CU-led hikes on our calendar of events at [cumauriceriver.org](http://cumauriceriver.org).*