USE NATURE TO TREAT ANXIETY & DEPRESSION

Yearly American spent more than $16 billion on antipsychotics, $11 billion on antidepressants, and $7 billion on drugs to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHS). In fact, primary care doctors write four out of five prescriptions for psychotropic drugs. Unfortunately, recent research has revealed the relapse rate for these medicines (SSRIs) is 25 percent at six months, 50 percent at 12 months and 75 percent after three years. (Psychiatry Res 2015 Feb; 225(3): 680-6). As a mental health provider I see a huge benefit in these medicines, and in no way want to discourage their usage or encourage any of my patients to stop their prescriptions. I do however, want to address the issue of “Mindfulness Practice”.

Mindfulness is defined as “paying deliberate attention to one’s present experience as it unfolds in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, without judgement or the usual commentary.” Unfortunately, most of us don’t focus on the present. Rather, we ruminate on the past or anticipate the future. We worry about what happened or what’s going to happen without taking time to stop and smell the roses.

We can achieve mindfulness by simply interacting with nature, but that’s not what we are choosing to do. A recent Nature Conservatory poll reports that only 10 percent of American teens spend time outdoors every day. It’s even worse for adults. The average American adults spends 93 percent of his or her time indoors, 87 percent in building, and 6 percent in vehicles. According to the Harvard School of Public Health, adults spend less than 5 percent of their day outside!

Nature is an effective antidote for anxiety, depression and ADHD. One study revealed that a 15-minute walk in the woods resulted in a 16 percent decrease in the stress hormone cortisol, a 2 percent drop in blood pressure, and 4 percent drop in heart rate. (Environ Health Prev Med 2010 Jan; 15(1):18-26). Researchers in Finland, a country with very high rates of depression, alcoholism, and suicide, now recommend a minimum “nature dose” of five hours a month to fight depression. Their data shows that a 40-50-minute walk in a natural environment is enough to produce significant psychological and mood changes. (J Environ Psychol 2014; 38:1-9)

Right outside our door, most of us have a convenient, inexpensive and effective antidote to help deal with depression and anxiety. In addition to all the health benefits that exercise brings, walking promotes mindfulness. Nature allows the brain to reflect, rest and recover from the excess stimuli we encounter each day. Let’s take advantage of it!

Gina Guddat

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