

Environmental wellness

By Megan Amaya, PhD, CHES; Bernadette Mazurek Melnyk, PhD, RN, APRN-CNP, FAANP, FNAP, FAAN; Susan Neale, MFA

Pay attention to your environment—it can affect your body, mind, and spirit.

This is the ninth installment in a series of articles on wellness. You can read the earlier articles at american.nursetoday.com/category/wellness101/.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO FAR to experience nature—it can be in your own backyard, a community park, or walking trail. You also can venture miles from home for hiking, waterskiing, camping, or canoeing. When you're outdoors, the rest of life seems to disappear. You become "one with nature"—spiritually, mentally, and physically—as you appreciate all the beauty this planet has to offer. Your senses heighten as you become more aware of your surroundings. And you may not realize it, but you're improving your health and well-being. Yes, outdoor activities, from a simple walk around the block to snow tubing down a wintry hill, enhance your overall health.

We may not give a lot of thought to how the environment fits into our wellness efforts, but the environment and how we take care of it can have a huge impact on our overall well-being.

The evidence is in

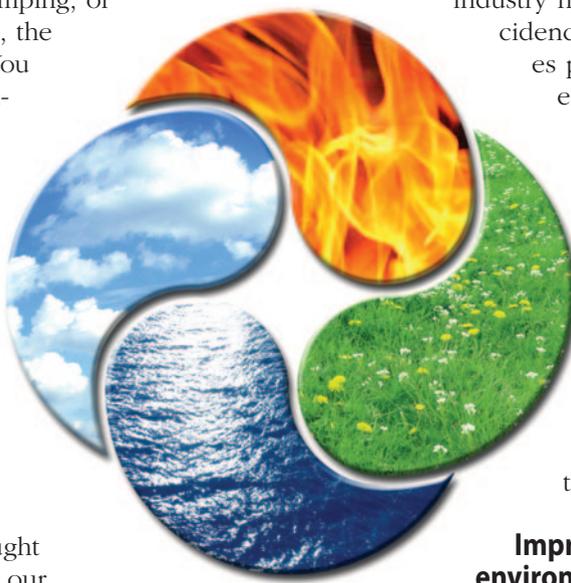
Research has demonstrated that green space, such as parks, forests, and river corridors, are good for our physical and mental health. In a study by Blumenthal and colleagues, 71% of people found a reduction in depression after going for a walk outdoors, versus a 45% reduction in those who took an indoor walk. In a 2013 study from Roe and colleagues, gardening demonstrated a significant reduction in subjects' levels of the stress hormone cortisol. And in 2016, the World Health Organization conducted a systematic review of 60 studies from the United States, Canada, Australia,

New Zealand, and Europe and concluded that green space is associated with reduced obesity.

More than nature

"Environment" doesn't mean only the great outdoors. Your environment is everything that surrounds you—your home, your car, your workplace, the food you eat, and the people you interact with. Nurses' work environments contain many hazards, so we need to pay extra attention to this component of our wellness. The U.S. Department of Labor rates hospitals as one of the most dangerous places to work. In 2017, the

Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that private-industry hospital workers face a higher incidence of injury and illness—six cases per 100 full-time workers—than employees working in other industries traditionally considered dangerous, such as manufacturing and construction. In 2015, the most common event leading to injuries in hospitals was overexertion and bodily reaction, including injuries from moving or lifting patients. In other words, those of us working with patients outside of a hospital setting are vulnerable, too.



Improve your workplace environment

The good news is that many injuries can be prevented with proper equipment and training. For instance, almost 50% of reported injuries and illnesses among nurses and other hospital workers were musculoskeletal, many (25% of all workers' compensation claims for the healthcare industry in 2011) caused by overexertion from lifting, transferring, and repositioning patients. Learning safe ways to handle patients can safeguard your well-being as well as your patients'. It may be time to review your workplace safety standards or form a committee to review patient-handling procedures and other safety measures.

Of course, the people we deal with every day aren't just risk factors for disease and injury. Everyone brings his or her personalities, attitudes, and behaviors, and we can't always avoid the stress they add to our envi-

6 ways you can improve your environment

When we take care of our environment, we take care of ourselves. Get started with these ideas:

- **Reuse it.** Drink from reusable water bottles and shop with reusable bags. Glass or stainless steel water bottles are the best options, but a plastic water bottle works well, too—as long as you reuse it. Reusable shopping bags cut down on plastic bag waste. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the United States goes through 100 billion plastic shopping bags annually. Evidence shows that they slowly release toxic chemicals once they get in the soil. If you use plastic bags, recycle them at your local grocery store.
- **Eat local.** Take advantage of farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, and restaurants that serve local foods. Most local foods are packed with more nutrients because they don't have to travel long distances to reach your plate. Locally grown food also means less energy (fuel) is used to transport it to your kitchen or grocery store.
- **Turn it off.** Whether it's a faucet you leave running while you brush your teeth or the TV that's on when you're not in the room, if you're not using something, turn it off. You'll save energy and, as a bonus, you may save money in cheaper utility bills.
- **Travel light.** If you can, find environmentally friendly ways to travel—walk, ride your bike, or take public transportation.
- **Clean green.** Using natural or homemade cleaning products is better for you, your home, your pets, and the environment. Some items to keep on hand include white vinegar, natural salt, baking soda, and lemons.
- **Recycle.** Most communities recycle, whether by a city-sponsored pickup route or at a drop-off location. Learn more about what you can recycle from your local solid waste authority.

ronment. We can, however, cushion ourselves against stress by modifying our own behavior.

Nurse.org offers these suggestions when dealing with a difficult patient:

- **Avoid defensive thoughts.** Remember, it's not about you, it's about the patient. Don't blow up at him or her because you're frustrated.
- **Set boundaries.** If someone behaves inappropriately toward you by swearing or yelling, set limits by saying, "There are certain things we allow here, and this behavior is not one of them. I'll step out of the room to give you time to calm down."
- **Let them tell their story.** Letting a patient tell you how he or she got to this point can help reduce distress and might give you insight into the behavior. Even if you don't agree with what the patient says, he or she will feel listened to, which may be calming.
- **Realign your body language.** Taking a few measured

breaths to refocus your thoughts can help you calm down. Tension can create defensive body language that patients may react to negatively.

Choosing to thrive

Studies show that we thrive better when surrounded by people who support our goals and want to help us succeed. We can't usually choose the people we work with, but we can consciously choose to spend more time with those friends and family members who support and uplift us.

And we can all contribute to making our physical surroundings healthier, from recycling to creating a culture of respect and gratitude. (See *6 ways you can improve your environment*.) Start with a small step today—at work, at home, at school, with your family, or by volunteering in the community—to improve your environmental wellness. ★

The authors work at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Megan Amaya is director of health promotion and wellness and assistant professor of clinical nursing practice at the College of Nursing and president of the National Consortium for Building Healthy Academic Communities. Bernadette Mazurek Melnyk is the vice president for health promotion, university chief wellness officer, dean and professor in the College of Nursing, professor of pediatrics and psychiatry in the College of Medicine, and executive director of the Helene Fuld Health Trust National Institute for Evidence-based Practice in Nursing and Healthcare. Susan Neale is senior writer/editor of marketing and communications in the College of Nursing.

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