

Walking the dog can relieve holiday stress

 [Garden Wise](https://icl.coop/category/garden-wise/)  [December 2022](https://icl.coop/issues/december-2022/)



[Chris Enroth](https://icl.coop/icl-author/chris-enroth/)

The day was cold and cloudy, and a thick mist hung in the air that coated me immediately upon emerging from my home. Before plodding outside to face the dreary day, my wife and I were discussing holiday plans, gifts, meals and all the other details that come with this time of year. More than an hour of shopping online left me in a state of exasperation and stress. I looked over at our 10-year-old dog, Murphy, who gazed longingly out the front window. It was time for a walk.

Being outdoors is good mental and physical medicine, and there is mounting research to back this statement up. University of Illinois Professor of Landscape Architecture William Sullivan has examined two pathways to connect with nature and enhance wellbeing: Stress Reduction Theory (SRT) and Attention Restoration Theory (ART).

SRT builds on the notion that before modern-day living, humans spent their lives on a lifelong camping trip. We lived tremendously close with nature, and as a result, our brains are wired to give us positive emotions and decrease negative feelings or stress when we occupy natural spaces. Multiple studies ranging from health-care

facilities to classrooms show that exposure to higher levels of vegetation or green space yields greater stress reduction.

ART claims that contact with nature helps individuals recover from mental fatigue, an all-too-familiar state during the holidays. Mental fatigue usually occurs after periods of focused attention, leaving someone feeling depleted and sometimes irritable or distracted. Research has shown that being exposed to trees, flowers, water, etc., can restore our capacity to focus.

Further studies have shown that children diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) benefit from exposure to natural areas and green spaces. Many of these studies go as far as indicating a 20 percent improvement in one's capacity to focus, which is on the order of a clinical dosage of prescribed medication like Adderall, Ritalin or Dexedrine.

Sliding on my coat, hat and gloves, I stepped out with Murphy into the cold winter air. Instantly, he was a puppy again, a yellow lab/hound mix, his nose stuck to the ground like a vacuum, searching for scents new and different from our home. It is amazing the sheer joy a liberated dog can have.

As our walk continued, Murphy ran ahead and then returned to check on me to ensure I was having as much fun as he. I shook my head and smiled with the realization that my dog was reminding me to live in the moment.

The stresses of the day began to melt away as my lungs felt the crisp air, and my brain settled into a state that allowed me to subconsciously process the decisions that had to be made for the upcoming holiday gatherings.

When Murphy and I tromped back through the patio door, we were refreshed. During the end of the walk a plan emerged in my mind, which I then proposed to my wife. She found it agreeable, and we devised our final list of Christmas gifts and to-dos.

As we celebrate the holidays, most of us will encounter stress of some kind, but you don't have to be a gardener, farmer or landscaper to enjoy some of the best stress relief this world has to offer. Getting outside helps bring perspective to our lives as we encounter positive and stressful life events.

This Christmas, I plan on having the leash nearby, should I need to escape the throng of family and friends and consult the wagging tail of an old dog who has a nasty habit of rolling in smelly things. After all, it is the simple joys of life. Happy holidays!

PRE... (<https://icl.coop/overwinter-your-plants-indoors/>)for-gold-black-eyed-susan-earns-top-honors-in-2023/)

Other December 2022 articles

