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Press Release

Walk the Dog: Getting outside relieves holiday stress

**Macomb, IL November 1, 2022** The day was cold, 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. Over an hour of shopping online, left me in a state of exasperation and stress. I looked over at our ten-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, examines 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 our modern-day living, humans and our ancestors spent their lives on a “lifelong” camping trip. We lived tremendously close with nature, and our brains are wired to give us positive emotions and decrease negative feelings or stress when we occupy natural spaces. Multiple studies ranging from healthcare 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% 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, Murphy and I stepped out into the cold winter air. Murphy’s age melted away almost 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 would run ahead and then return to check on me to ensure I too was having as much fun as he. I shook my head and smiled with the realization that my dog is 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 unconsciously process the decisions that had to be made for the upcoming holiday gatherings.

When Murphy and I tromped 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, with a nasty habit of rolling in smelly things. After all, it is the simple joys of life. Happy holidays!

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