The Nature of Things

There’s nothing like fresh air, even when the weather isn’t great.

March 1, 2013 By Kate Ferguson

Want to boost your brain and brighten your mood? Then go outside and let the sun warm your face and a breeze ruffle your hair. You’ll reap mucho mental health benefits—even if skies are gray. What’s more, study findings also show that just drinking in some nature scenes with your eyes can help improve memory and attention.

When researchers at the University of Michigan wanted to test their theory that people suffering from mental fatigue would benefit from being outdoors, regardless of the weather, they divided participants into two groups and sent one on a stroll down Ann Arbor’s concrete and asphalt city streets; the other group went on a walk through the university’s botanical gardens and arboretum.

Scientists found that the people who walked among the trees and nature improved their short-term memory by 20 percent. The other group showed no such benefits after slapping shoe leather on the concrete pavement of city streets.

“Interacting with nature can have similar effects as meditating,” says Marc Berman, PhD, a post-doctoral fellow at the university.

Even more interesting is that when Berman and his research team had participants look at nature scenes, their memory and attention scores got a 20 percent boost again. When the group looked at city scenes, nothing happened.

Want to step outside?

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