

The other National Health Service



Can we close the gap between humans and nature and recognise the important health service the environment provides?

Think about the people you see everyday, the people you pass in the street, colleagues and friends, old and new. How many of those – how many of us – are dealing with an illness? Mental illness is one of the leading causes of ill health and disability worldwide, with as many as 1 in 4 of us suffering it at some point in our lives¹. In the UK 90% of people live within cities⁹. So urban experiences dominate our lives while the gap between nature and us widens unnoticed¹⁰. Is it any surprise then, that the perception of being disconnected from each other, ourselves and our environment has resulted in poor mental and physical health⁸?

The environment provides an important health service. The benefits of a view of nature from a window have long been known and have been seen to help recovering surgery patients for example², but why is this? It can be explained from an evolutionary perspective³, known as the Biophilic (attraction to nature) hypothesis⁴.

Due to our evolution in natural environments³ we have an affinity with nature, not with built settings⁵. We respond positively to places that would have been favourable for the survival of our ancestors⁶. This positive emotion is not only an indicator of good mental health it actually produces it⁷.

So what can we do? For many of us our only contact with nature is through urban green spaces, such as parks⁹. These spaces provide benefits such as longer life expectancy and a decreased risk of mental illness^{2,11}. Nature is filled with stimuli that involuntarily and discretely grab our attention, which provides restoration from mental tiredness^{12,13}. Urban environments however are less restorative, because they are filled with stimuli that dramatically grab and require additional attention, like hazards such as moving vehicles¹². Think about how different it feels strolling along a path in a park to negotiating a busy street.

Exercise in the presence of nature, or *green exercise*, is unsurprisingly more beneficial than exercise in built settings⁷. Green exercise has been shown to improve self-esteem and mood (indicators of mental health and protectors against long-term physical health threats)¹⁴. You will feel the greatest benefits from 5 minutes of light activity, such as walking around your local park¹⁴.

A flagship organisation for green exercise is a website called *Climb Out – of depression*¹⁵. Climb Out's founder Jake McManus aims at raising awareness and destigmatising mental illness by sharing how his relationship with the outdoors helps his own battle with depression.

“Anyone can enjoy the great outdoors... most people can climb something... but only one person can make the decision to do so... and that is you!”¹⁵

Along with a growing population, the economic burdens of mental health are increasing^{10,16}. These may be worsened by the reorganisation of the NHS happening under the current Health and Social Care Act¹⁷. Only as many of 55% of people suffering with depression are currently receiving treatment, with only 32% of those responsive to it¹⁸. This combined with the



“A very important factor for me will be raising awareness for people with mental health issues through Climb Out. Hopefully we may inspire a few people along the way to get outdoors and go for a walk, a bike ride or dare I say it? Get out and climb a mountain!”

Jake McManus is a testament to what interacting with nature can do for the individual. Jake is a manic-depressive. He's also an electrician from Manchester, is married with kids and has a black Labrador named Neil. Jake is any one of the people you see everyday. For 40 years he searched for answers to his mental illness and on his 40th birthday he first tasted rock climbing. This has by no means been a 'miracle cure' for Jake, but spending time outdoors has changed his life in more ways than one. He has enjoyed social situations he would normally shy away from. He has set himself goals. He has gained the confidence to look forward, to plan, to dare to dream, to achieve (and to fail) and amazingly, to share his journey.

“Failure actually is an option outside of Hollywood films, recognising our failings and re-adjusting is a positive and essential learning process.”

Since befriending nature, Jake has told his story on his blog *Climb Out – of depression*. Like many of us, Jake couldn't relate to celebrities' detailing their demons in the latest newspaper spread and felt isolated. Here he provides an accessible narrative of the constant battle of depression because as Jake puts it “people who are low need other people who they can relate to”. If climbing isn't for you, then don't worry. Jake describes himself as “about as natural a climber as a drunken dairy cow with 3 legs” and promotes all personal achievements being relative to you, no one else. Early in 2013, Jake was dreaming of escaping his bedroom. In July 2013 he and a friend achieved what seemed impossible, they climbed 50 routes in 24 hours. Whether it be climbing a mountain or out of bed, that achievement is yours. Take it.

Read more about Jake's journey here: climbout.co.uk

many side effects of antidepressants¹⁸ highlights the need for treatment options that are safe, accessible and effective¹¹. It has been recommended that GPs should consider green exercise as a treatment option for anyone suffering mental distress¹⁹.

Interacting with nature is a therapy that is readily available to us, has no unpleasant side effects and can improve our mental and physical wellbeing at zero cost¹². Looking out over nature from your window or a 5-minute walk in the park (or even conquering that mountain!) can make your day better, increase your confidence and lift your mood.

Try it?



Whether it be climbing a mountain or out of bed, your personal achievements are yours.

Find information on your local urban green spaces at:

[gov.uk/find-your-local-park](https://www.gov.uk/find-your-local-park) (England and Wales)

greenspacescotland.org.uk/1scotlands-greenspace-map.aspx (Scotland)

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Images

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