

Pause Breathe Smile Enrichment / Follow-On Lesson

Renewing Our Attention with Nature

Content:

After you spend time out in the bush or at the beach or in a park, you might notice that you're in your green zone a bit more.

Why might that be? Well, scientists who study wellbeing and psychology have some ideas about why being in nature is good for us.

One idea is that spending time in nature triggers a nervous system response that lowers stress levels (taking us into our green zone). Nature is like a counterbalance for when we get scared or upset about something stressful; the sights and sounds of the natural world activate the calming part of our nervous system.

Another reason scientists think nature is good for us is called **attention restoration theory**, and this view argues that nature replenishes one's cognitive resources, restoring the ability to concentrate and pay attention.

So, looking at or spending time in the natural world literally resets our brains' chemistry and activity in ways that help us to feel better! Looking at a plant, tree, or natural landscape can even help us to learn and perform tasks better.

For example, one study trying to understand how nature helps to "reset" our brains tested students who were doing a dull task: pressing a computer key when certain numbers flashed up on the screen. The students were given a short 40 second break midway through the challenge. Half the students looked out at a rooftop garden and the other half of students looked at a concrete rooftop.

Which group of students do you think performed better on the test?

That's right! Those students who had settled their eyes on green plants made significantly fewer mistakes than the students who had looked at concrete.¹

Isn't that cool?

Even the sounds of nature may restore our wellbeing. One study found that people who listened to nature sounds like crickets, bird song, or waves crashing performed better on challenging brain tests than those who listened to city sounds or sounds of people talking in a cafe.²

Classroom activity: Throughout today, there are going to be random nature sounds that you'll hear playing in our classroom. When you notice the nature sounds playing, can you pause whatever you're doing and take three mindful breaths? Then notice how you feel afterward. What did you notice in the different domains of hauora?

Experiential practice: "Air Inside, Air Outside "

Note for Teachers:

This enrichment activity can be delivered as one complete lesson or you could break it down into chunks across a series of days. Feel free to use it in a way that makes sense with your learners in your context.

1. Lee, K.E., et al., Journal of Environmental Psychology, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2015.

2. Van Hedger, S.C., et. al., Psychonomic Bulletin & Review, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2019.