

Julian Ashton, Lee Knifton and Neil Quinn

Mental health and nature

In the past few weeks, we are seeing two very different pictures of COVID-19 emerging. As high-income countries begin to emerge from lockdown, we see the virus sweeping through many low-income countries. The public mental health dimensions of this pandemic within this context are very striking. Against this backdrop, this issue of the journal highlights a range of important public mental health issues.

Mental Health Awareness Week is an annual event in May ([mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)); this year's theme is mental health and nature. This is particularly significant for two reasons. Firstly, environmental destruction (such as mental health) has become one of the biggest global concerns. Linking these two issues reflects their interconnectedness. Secondly, studies over the last year have shown that although the pandemic has worsened public mental health, the public have turned to nature as one way to tackle mental distress. This ranges from exercise in the local park to gardening. But we are also aware that we do not all have equal access to nature and that those on poorer areas have less access, and many groups do not feel safe ([Mental Health Foundation, 2021](#)). It is therefore a policy priority for governments to address this.

In the current issue, we have taken the opportunity to include a subsection of three articles examining mental health and the natural environment. There is nothing new about our connection with the natural world, but it has never been critically evaluated as much as in recent years. A scenic location has been highly desirable, at least since the days of Capability Brown, whose landscapes mirrored nature at enormous expense. However, the trees which he planted in the mid-18th century would not have matured until well into the next century. In the 20th century, the prevailing trend developed for quicker satisfaction of the need for a natural outlook. This may reflect a diminished awareness of nature. Of course, failure to notice a beautiful sunset, or a blackbird singing in the night, may result from a particular state of mind, including struggling with mental health.

Around the same period as John Keats (1819) wrote *To Autumn*, sea bathing became a very popular way of improving physical and emotional health, even in winter. There would have little evidence for its effects at the time, but the paper by Billie Oliver, from Bristol, presents a body of research into the benefits of cold water swimming, along with her own wide experience. There are clear and convincing results. Though some effects could also apply to other forms of vigorous exercise, there are particular mechanisms – for example, on the autonomic nervous system – mediated by cold immersion. This is summed up by the words of a presenter on *BBC's Countryfile*, Helen Skelton, when she emerged from the waters of a North Yorkshire gorge in snow *It makes you feel glad to be alive!* ([BBC, 2021](#)).

Gentler ways of interacting with the natural environment are the subject of the paper by Miles Richardson and Iain Hamlin from Derby. They gathered responses from over 4,000 adults, during the first months of the pandemic. Among the findings were: time spent in nature and long-term nature connectedness was associated with well-being. A short-term increase in noticing nature related to feeling life worthwhile, but also loneliness. At this time, a large number of people were not at liberty to go out, as they were shielding. There is well-known evidence that a view of natural surroundings from inside can also have benefits ([Ulrich,](#)

Julian Ashton is based at NIHR Oxford Health Biomedical Research Centre PPI Contributor Pool, Abingdon, UK. Lee Knifton and Neil Quinn are both based at University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK.

1984). Matched groups of cholecystectomy patients recovered in either a ward with a view of a park or one that looked out onto buildings. Those with a natural outlook had shorter postoperative hospital stays and took fewer potent analgesics.

Rebecca Reece, Issy Bray and colleagues, also at Bristol, have carried out a scoping review of literature on young people, covering the extent and type of interaction with nature and potential reduced risk of anxiety and depression. This study describes the available literature, for a future systematic review, and highlights gaps in the literature; e.g. most studies are carried out in high-income countries.

The other papers in this issue cover important public mental health issues from an international perspective. The issue of suicide is highly topical, and we have a longitudinal study on suicide rates in Kansas by Jason Lloyd and David Oakley, which makes an important contribution to the literature on this topic. There has been an increasing focus on the link between physical activity and mental health, and we are delighted to profile the paper by Johnathan Glazzard and colleagues on the role of peer mentoring in promoting physical activity and mental health among the student population. Mental health literacy has become a popular research area in recent years in high-income countries, but in this issue, we break new ground by publishing a paper by Rim Taleb and colleagues on the mental health literacy of the Lebanese population, which contains new insights on this area. Finally, there is a fascinating study from Thailand on the quality of life among people with common mental problems attending monk healers and primary care clinics. We hope you enjoy this stimulating and diverse issue.

References

BBC (2021), available at: www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000vlsh/countryfile-nidderdale (accessed 3 May 2021).

Keats, J. (1819), "To autumn", available at: www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44484/to-autumn (accessed 3 May 2021).

Mental Health Foundation (2021), "Coronavirus: mental health in the pandemic", available at: www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/coronavirus-mental-health-pandemic (accessed 3 May 2021).

Ulrich, R.S. (1984), "View through a window may influence recovery from surgery", *Science*, Vol. 224 No. 4647, pp. 420-442.