**Stepping Outside, blog by Matt James, Mental Health First Aider**

As a self-confessed technophile, I have found a considerable amount of my time can be spent in front of a screen. Whether it's responding to the plethora of emails in my inbox, researching and reading on the internet or participating in a video call, it's all in front of a screen. Even taking time out to read for pleasure or catching up on the latest box set invariably involves me with eyes glued to a screen of some description.

[Ofcom carried out a study](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/features-and-news/lockdown-leads-to-surge-in-tv-screen-time-and-streaming) into the nation's media habits during lockdown and found there was a surge in screen time. People in the UK spent 40% of their day watching TV and online video services, as we all followed public health advice to stay at home. The study goes on to report that on average adults spend six hours and 25 minutes on their phones, TVs and laptops each day, resulting in 45 hours of screen time each week.

With so much of our working lives spent in front of some form of screen, it is perhaps not surprising to read of numerous studies indicating the adverse effects of this leading to strain on the eyes and disruption to sleep patterns. Our general mental health and mood are also affected because of a decrease in our levels of social interaction and physical activity.

Living in this world of screens and interconnectedness brings many benefits, but however useful it is we need to ensure that technology remains our servant and not our master. I find it intriguing that some of the best and brightest of Silicon Valley have started up the [Center for Humane Technology (CHUT)](https://www.humanetech.com/) in an attempt to radically reimagine the digital world and to trigger a shift towards more humane technology that supports well-being and democracy. It seems even the brains behind the devices we all have in our pockets are rather concerned about where we're heading!

Taking time to move away from our screens for a while seems such a simple thing to do but much harder in practice. Nevertheless, it can bring real benefits in terms of our mental health, particularly if we head outdoors. Here are just a handful of some of the mental health benefits we can all gain by getting outside.

1. **Improve your mood**

Getting out in the open air can be incredibly helpful in improving your mood ... in a way that even the best immersive, augmented reality computer simulation can’t! There is something about looking around you and taking in the beauty of a landscape which stimulates the senses and does us good. The smell of being out in the countryside, the scent of flowers and freshly mown grass and the sight of green leaves and wildlife, all of these things have been scientifically proven to reduce stress levels, according to Dr Nick Lavidis from the University of Queensland’s School of Biomedical Science. Check out [his TEDx talk here.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Jqq3iZUkxo&t=9s)

Many of us will be aware that Vitamin D is essential for healthy bones and a strong immune system and low levels of Vitamin D have been associated with low mood and worry. Getting outdoors and exposing arms, legs or face to sunlight helps to build up our store of Vit D. So next time it's sunny outside and it's lunchtime, don't forget that a walk in the sunshine is going to be as useful to your body as making time to have something to eat!

1. **Improve your concentration and focus**

We live in a world in which we're bombarded with so much information from so many different sources. This takes its toll on us in terms of our ability to focus for long stretches of time; something I'm sure we've all experienced over the last 12-months during lockdown. Research indicates that getting outdoors and taking time to look at the natural world improves our ability to restore concentration so that we can focus for longer.

Personally, I've found when I've been faced with an annoying and frustrating problem, taking time out to go on a short walk means I return with a better sense of perspective on the situation. Sometimes it even leads to a solution which I'm sure I'd never have come up with if I had remained staring at my computer screen!

1. **Reduce stress**

Similarly, going for a walk outdoors is probably one of the best stress busters. The rhythm of exercise brings with it a calming effect to our bodies. Physiologically, walking can help to reduce blood pressure, increase heart rate as well as help to reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

For all the reasons mentioned above, any outdoor walk is likely to do you good but walking beside water has also been shown to be particularly soothing and calming. One of the benefits of living close to the coast is that I can escape relatively easily from the busyness of live and enjoy a refreshing and restoring walk by the sea. Taking a walk by a local river, pond or in a local park with a water feature can yield similar benefits. As we return to campus, don’t forget St Mary’s is ideally situated close to the River Thames, providing a perfect opportunity for a walk by the river.

**Feel better about yourself**

Taking time to regularly get outdoors can also improve self-esteem and body image. Various studies have identified that exercising whilst looking at [pleasant nature scenes improved self-esteem more than looking at urban scenes](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09603120500155963?journalCode=cije20). This all points to the human relationship with nature and [the restorative effects that the natural environment can bring](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/19438150903378425%EF%BB%BF). I've found this to be true myself. Whilst any walk outside seems to have some positive effect, walking in a park or escaping into the local countryside seems to have a greater impact on my mental health, as I look around and take in the natural order of things as opposed to that which is man-made.

**Adding years to your life and life to your years?**

For all the benefits that walking outdoors can bring, don't forget that you can still be outdoors without walking. [Growing for Wellbeing Week](https://www.awarenessdays.com/awareness-days-calendar/national-growing-for-wellbeing-week-2021/) took place earlier this month, helping to champion the benefits of gardening and what growing your own produce can do for your wellbeing, both physically and mentally.

Someone once wrote 'Gardening adds years to your life and life to your years.’ I think they could be onto something. Whilst I'm no Alan Titchmarsh and my humble gardening skills are not likely to win me any prizes in the Chelsea Flower Show anytime soon, in recent years I have found that simply getting out in the garden, pottering (… does that make me sound old?!) and tending to nature brings with it another restorative quality.

Engaging in the garden seems to bring with it a form of creative satisfaction in a different way to anything that I might consider creative when I'm using a computer. There really is something to be said for gardening as a multi-sensory experience. You slow down and take notice of what's around you more through your different senses. Planting seeds and taking the time to care for and nurture them can be a richly rewarding experience, particularly in terms of giving a boost to your morale and self-belief. To date, I've managed to grow my own potatoes, tomatoes and courgettes and the satisfaction that you gain from growing as well as eating your own, home grown produce is really gratifying and rewarding. You can find some inspiring stories of how others have discovered [the benefits of gardening here](https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/health-and-wellbeing/real-life-stories).

Maybe developing some 'green fingers' might just be the tonic for you as a break from so much screen time?

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