

Gardens as Places of Inspiration and Rejuvenation

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Launching this year's Healing Garden theme, the author of this article, Dr. Kurt Beil, is one of five health care professionals who are participating in the Garden's Open Pavilion program this month. On Thursday, February 9, at 2 p.m. Dr. Beil will speak informally with visitors about the subject of nature and healing. Drop in for a cup of tea and meet him. (See pages 2-3 for the Open Pavilion calendar of events.)

Gardens have been recognized as healing spaces since the beginning of civilization. Immersion in the lushness of nature provides people with an opportunity to celebrate the beauty of life while finding a place for contemplation. This type of experience is increasingly beneficial in the modern urban and post-industrial era, and can be used for a variety of healing situations.

A sense of separation from the outside world is one of the first noticeable features of many gardens. By acting as a refuge, a well-constructed garden offers a place away from the troubles of daily life. This provides opportunity to explore gardens as a "sacred space" in which a sense of peace and safety permit people to mentally process their concerns without interruption. The security of such a space provides a feeling of "being away" that is important for most types of healing work.

Inside the protective sphere of a garden, its most noticeable aspect is the ambience of nature that it provides. Exposure to the vegetation, water features and/or earthen forms reminds us of a timeless, natural attraction to beauty that feels instinctive



and primal. This automatic reaction has been extensively studied and is referenced under the term "biophilia," or "love of living/natural things."

One of the greatest benefits of biophilia is its ability to reduce stress. Multiple research studies have shown how contact with nature automatically decreases a person's heart rate, blood pressure, and levels of the "stress hormone" cortisol. At

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the same time, contact with nature has stress-relieving effects on the mind. Negative mood states (e.g. depression, anxiety) are reduced while positive moods (e.g. joy, gratitude) are increased. Studies have even shown that contact with nature helps people become more altruistic and generous toward others.

Spending time in a garden has other mental benefits. It helps clear the mind of distractions and unconscious

thoughts so that one's

attention can be sharp and focused. Research indicates that even limited contact with nature improves concentration and mental performance in both workplace and classroom settings. A growing body of evidence shows that gardens and other types of outdoor nature settings also reduce symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and other cognitive/behavioral conditions.

Lastly, gardens are places for contemplation and reflection. Viewing the beauty and variety of nature helps us understand the interconnection of the great web of life. Similarly, by observing the changing of the garden landscape over time (especially if the same place is visited on a recurring basis) the cycles of the seasons help people identify with their own growth and healing, as well as their eventual mortality. Many people use this latter experience to achieve acceptance of the inevitable, find gratitude for the current moment and adopt hope that rebirth is possible.

Gardens are rich places of safety, relaxation, rejuvenation and inspiration. They embody the fertility of the land and enhance the therapeutic powers of nature that lead to greater health. Any time spent in a garden is an opportunity to experience true healing, and such opportunities are best treasured, nurtured and cherished.

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