A Walk in the Park Improves Attention

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If you spend the majority of your time among stores, restaurants and skyscrapers, it may be time to trade in your stilettos for some hiking boots. A new study in *Psychological Science,* a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reveals that spending time in nature may be more beneficial for mental processes compared to being in urban environments.

Psychologists Marc G. Berman, John Jonides, and Stephen Kaplan from the University of Michigan designed two experiments to test how interactions with nature and urban environments would affect attention and memory processes. First, a group of volunteers completed a task designed to challenge memory and attention. The volunteers then took a walk in either a park or in downtown Ann Arbor. After the walk, volunteers returned to the lab and were retested on the task. In the second experiment, after volunteers completed the task, instead of going out for a walk, they simply viewed either nature photographs or photographs of urban environments and then repeated the task. In addition to the memory and attention task, these volunteers also participated in the Attention Network Test, which measures specific aspects of attention (alertness, orientation and directed attention). They completed this test, viewed the photographs and were then retested.

The results were very interesting. In the first experiment, performance on the memory and attention task greatly improved following the walk in the park, but did not improve for volunteers who walked downtown. And it is not just being outside that is beneficial for mental functions—the group who viewed the nature photographs performed much better on the retest than the group who looked at city scenes.

The authors suggest that urban environments provide a lot of stimulation that dramatically captures our attention (such as car horns blaring) and that a lot of directed, conscious attention (including avoiding traffic and ignoring billboards) is required to overcome that stimulation. Although nature teems with fascinating stimuli (such as sunsets and beautiful flowers), these stimuli are not startling to us, so spending time in nature does not require a lot of directed attention. Put in another way, being around nature replenishes our store of directed attention and the researchers conclude that, in this way, nature may have restorative effects on our mental abilities.