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The impact of Nature on Health and Well-being by Dr Sarita Robinson

So the answer to better mental and physical health would appear to be – to be less stressed! But how do we do that? Well, health practitioners regularly note a number of ways to reduce our stress levels. You may well have come across the idea that if we make simple changes to our lifestyle to ensure that we exercise regularly, get eight hours of sleep, eat healthily and generally do relaxing things we can enjoy better physical health. What is interesting is that we can also improve our mental health by undertaking these simple lifestyle changes. However, I believe that Bushcraft can help us to achieve these lifestyle changes more easily than some interventions such as joining the gym and in fact undertaking Bushcraft activities can actually give us some additional health benefits.

We all know that doing a reasonable amount of exercise each week is really important but in the UK nearly one third of adults are physically inactive. The NHS guidelines suggest that we should all be doing 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity, such as cycling, each week as well as two sessions of strengthening exercises, such as weight lifting. Exercise is essential for maintaining a healthy body but it is also really important for maintaining a healthy brain. Research shows that exercise can change the chemicals which are released in the brain, improve cerebral blood flow and can even cause new brain cells to be created. One of the great things about Bushcraft is that Bushcraft activities such as gathering materials to build a shelter or chopping up firewood are physically demanding but somehow don't seem as daunting as a gym session. It is so much easier to engage children in physical Bushcraft activities. If you say to a kid let's go on a 5 mile walk you can be met with a very negative response. If you suggest that you go out to practice your natural navigation skills you can be met with much less resistance. In fact, they might not even notice that they have walked 5 miles! Personally, walking out in the countryside practising my natural navigation or foraging for food is so much more interesting than running on the treadmill at the gym. As a consequence I am much more likely to exercise for longer when I am outdoors undertaking a Bushcraft activity. Psychologists have also found that there are additional benefits to exercising outdoors. A number of recent studies have shown that people who have access to a green space near their home tend to live longer and have better mental health. Researchers have also found that exercising outdoors can reduce our anxiety levels and reduce mental fatigue more than exercising in a gym. Therefore, undertaking Bushcraft activities, such as shelter building, allows you to undertake an enjoyable physical exercise in a green space and this will be more beneficial to your physical and mental health than just using the exercise bike in the front room.

Another key factor which supports good physical and mental health is maintaining a good sleep pattern. Sleep is the brain's only form of rest, however, ever since the light bulb we have had more control over when we sleep. Unfortunately, some of us are not very good at winding down at the end of a busy day and the temptation is to keep on rushing around until late at night. In addition, over the last ten years or so there has been an increase in the use of mobile devices, such as phones and tablets, which mean that we can be online from our bedrooms 24/7. New mobile technologies are also seriously impacting on sleep patterns as we know that the blue light from some devices can suppress the hormone melatonin which is needed for a good night's sleep. The beauty of camping out in the wilds is that we can allow our sleep to be governed by the fall of dusk and we can be awoken naturally by the dawn and early morning bird song. The benefits of camping out for a few nights are further enhanced if we can manage to leave our mobile devices at home!

Healthy eating by having a diet rich in fruit and vegetables has long been suggested as a good way to maintain a good level of physical health. However, we now know that a healthy diet is also important for our mental health. Research has found that people who eat a diet rich in fruit and vegetables have lower levels of depression and anxiety. On the other hand, people who tend to eat a diet high in processed, sugary foods are more likely to have poorer mental well-being. More recently research has suggested that the food we eat can change the types of bacteria that are found within our intestines. Interestingly, researchers now think that some of the bacteria found in our gut might actually have a profound effect on how the brain works via a mechanism known as the gut-brain axis. For example, some studies have shown that when various types of probiotics are given to people it can change their gut flora and improve their physical health, for example by reducing people's allergies. In addition, certain probiotics have been found to improve the symptoms of anxiety and depression. In one study, when the bacteria *Bifidobacterium longum 1714* was given to participants it was found to reduce anxiety levels and boost memory function. Now I am not suggesting that you can cure depression or anxiety via yogurt alone but these recent findings do give us one explanation as to how diet might impact on our mental health. The problem is that being outside and handling bits of dead wood and plants is not as common as it once was and scientists now think this could be damaging as we are not exposed to the same levels as bacteria as previous generations. The great thing about Bushcraft is that we can re-introduce some bacteria from the nature world they we might be missing from living in our modern hygienic houses. In addition, food which is foraged and then turned into pickles can be a good source of the good bacteria that the modern diet can miss out on. So the next time you make a bowl of nettle soup or make some sea

spinach sauerkraut there is a chance that you are improving your gut bacteria and enhancing your mental well-being.

The last thing on the list is to *“do something relaxing”*. However, it is really hard to pin down exactly what *“something relaxing”* is. If you talk to different people they are all likely to name different things which relax them, such as going for a walk, doing some DIY or reading a book. As a psychologist I think that the main thing is that for something to be relaxing you have to be able to give the activity your full focus and take your time to complete it. For example, cooking a meal can be very relaxing but it can also be a great source of stress if you are cooking for a dinner party at the same times as having to entertain your guests and do half a dozen other activities. Today we do live in a world where we are continually expected to multi-task. However, the constant interruptions that occur when we are trying to get one task finished can lead to errors and leave us feeling mentally drained. Some psychologists have suggested that we should take up monotasking. This is the idea that we should focus on one task at a time and finish that task before we move on to the next task. Therefore, any task has the potential to be relaxing as long as it is something you enjoy and you are left alone to focus on just that one task. The great thing is that when we are taking part in Bushcraft activities it is much easier to monotask. As we are normally outside we do not have as many different activities competing for our time. In fact, if you are trying to create fire using a bow drill then if you are not 100% focused on that activity you are unlikely to succeed. Bushcraft activities can, therefore help us to feel less mentally drained by helping us to focus on just one task. Slowing down and taking the time to carve a spoon or track an animal in the countryside can help us to regain balance and allow us to feel less frazzled by daily life.