



BeWell

The magazine for holistic wellness.

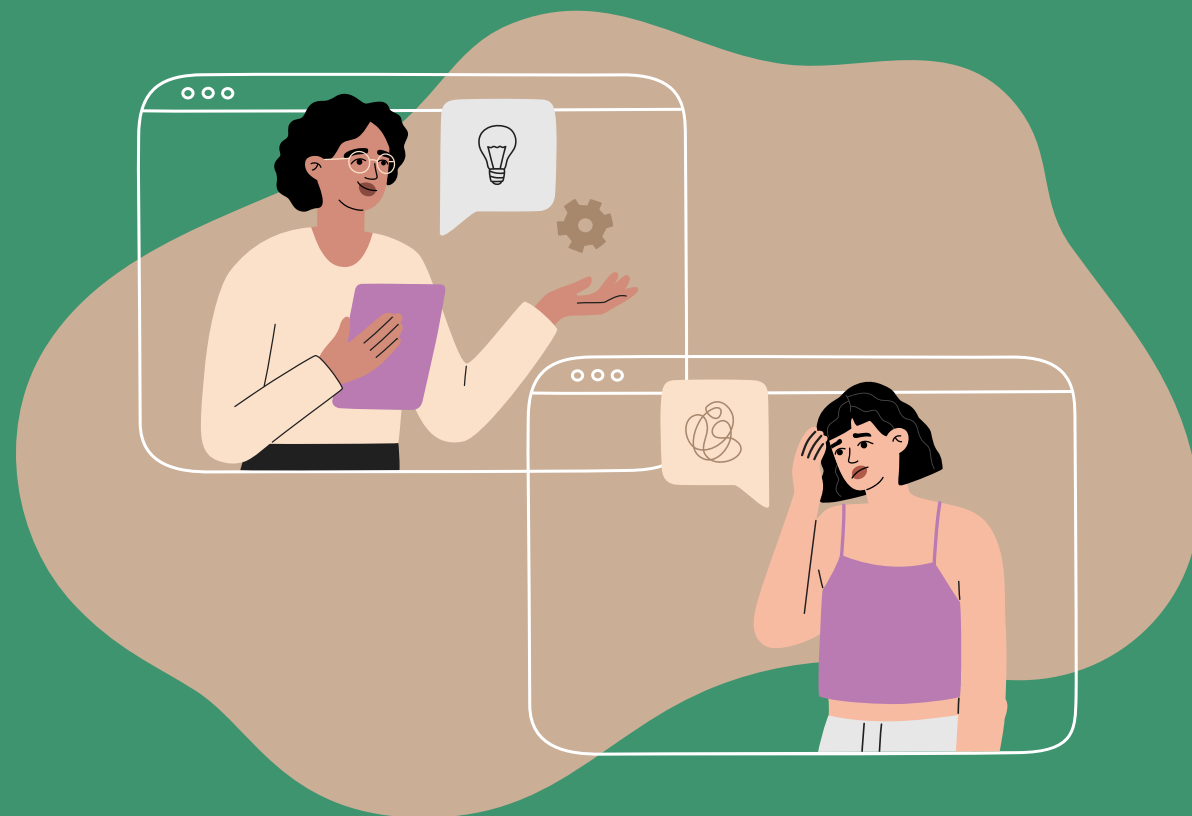
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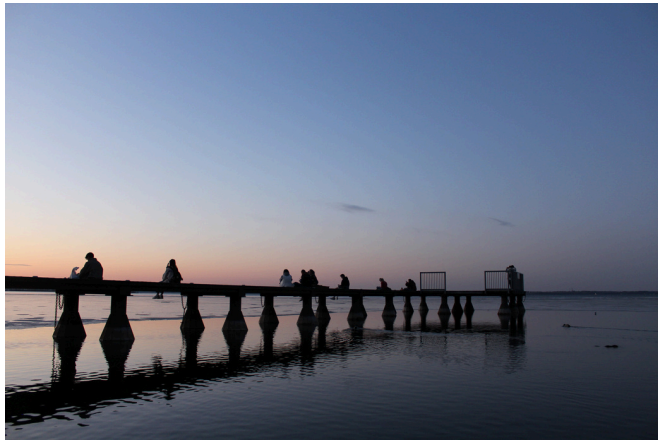
Biodiversity and our brains:

How ecology and mental health go together in our cities

Article by Zoe Meyers

Mental health in our cities is an increasingly urgent issue. Rates of disorders such as anxiety and depression are high. Urban design and planning can promote mental health by refocusing on spaces we use in our everyday lives in light of what research tells us about the benefits of exposure to nature and biodiversity.

Mental health issues have many causes. However, the changing and unpredictable elements of our physical and sensory environments have a profound impact on risk, experiences and recovery.



Sunset on Lake Mendota. Photo: Anna Krawczyk

Physical activity is still the mainstay of urban planning efforts to enable healthy behaviours. Mental well-being is then a hoped-for byproduct of opportunities for exercise and social interaction. Neuroscientific research and tools now allow us to examine more deeply some of the ways in which

individuals experience spaces and natural elements. This knowledge can greatly add to, and shift, the priorities and direction of urban design and planning.



Sunny day at the Memorial Union terrace. Photo: Anna Krawczyk

What do we mean by ‘nature’?

A large body of research has compellingly shown that “nature” in its many forms and contexts can have direct benefits on mental health. Unfortunately, the extent and diversity of natural habitats in our cities are decreasing rapidly.

Too often “nature” – by way of green space and “POS” (Public Open Space) – is still seen as something separate from other parts of our urban neighbourhoods. Regeneration efforts often focus on large green corridors.

But even small patches of genuinely biodiverse nature can re-invite and sustain multitudes of plant and animal species, as urban ecologists have



Natural foliage in the Monroe St. Neighborhood.. Photo: Anna Krawczyk

shown. It has also been widely demonstrated that nature does not affect us in uniform or universal ways. Sometimes it can be confronting or dangerous. That is particularly true if nature is isolated or uninviting, or has unwritten rules around who should be there or what activities are appropriate.

These factors complicate the desire for a “nature pill” to treat urban ills. We need to be far more specific about what “nature” we are talking about in design and planning to assist with mental health.

Why does biodiversity matter?

The exponential accessibility and affordability of lab and mobile technology

gies, such as fMRI and EEG measuring brain activity, have vastly widened the scope of studies of mental health and nature. Researchers are able, for example, to analyse responses to images of urban streetscapes versus forests. They can also track people’s perceptions “on the move”.

Research shows us biodiverse nature has particular positive benefit for mental well-being. Multi-sensory elements such as bird or frog sounds or wildflower smells have well-documented beneficial effects on mental restoration, calm and creativity.

Other senses – such as our sense of ourselves in space, our balance and equilibrium and... (continued on page 6)