THE CONVERSATION

Parks and green spaces are important for our mental health – but we need to make sure that everyone can benefit

How does walking through a forest make you feel? Peaceful? Blissful? Reflective? For many people, lockdown brought a new appreciation of nature and what it means for our well-being. The health benefits of immersing ourselves in "greenspace" are now widely accepted. Living in areas with grass and trees has been linked to lower risk of various health conditions such as high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. As well as physical health, greenspace is associated with positive mental health.

A recent study found that people who spent at least two hours in nature per week were consistently more likely to report higher levels of health and well-being compared to people who spent less time in nature.

Our work seeks to understand exactly how greenspace programmes can improve mental health. A greenspace programme, or nature-based intervention, is a health project typically run outside in parks, woodland, forests and other greenspace areas.

These programmes can be designed for anyone, but have been shown to be particularly beneficial for those with poorer mental health. Projects can range from structured therapy programmes such as adventure, wilderness and horticultural therapies, to less formal activities such as community gardening, guided walks and the Japanese notion of "forest bathing" or *shinrin-yoku*.

We are currently working on developing a framework for those wishing to start up such initiatives. This is an important area of research, because while there is an increasing number of greenspace programmes for mental health, there is still limited understanding of the key components that make these projects successful. This makes it difficult to develop and implement new programmes and evaluate them successfully.

Mental health and nature

In our recent review we showed that greenspace programmes are successful in improving mental health due to seven interacting factors: the feeling of escape and getting away; having space to reflect; physical activity; learning to deal with things; having a purpose; relationships with programme leaders; and shared social experiences. Using these components we created a new framework for greenspace programmes for mental health that showed exactly how positive outcomes can be best achieved.

We believe this framework could provide a working model for future programme development. However, our findings also show that greenspace programmes do not work for everybody equally and seem to be more successful in improving mental health for some people than others.

For example, mobility issues may limit a person's ability to take part in physically demanding programmes. Wilderness projects might not be appropriate for people who may suffer from conditions such as psychosis. And overnight programmes or early starts may not be suitable for those on daily pick-up prescriptions such as methadone.

Greenspace programmes have been successful in supporting people who have been involved in offending – but these individuals might be limited to where they can go. These inequalities in programme suitability are important to highlight, since the people who are not able to access these initiatives might be the ones who benefit the most.

Greenspace and inequality

Recently, COVID-19 has revealed the inequalities that exist when it comes to access to green spaces. There have been many petitions to keep parks and gardens open for public use, with green spaces described as crucial for our well-being.

But the availability of greenspace differs depending on where you live. Affluence allows people to buy homes in areas that have more green spaces and access to nature, less air pollution and more space for physical activity. If someone has less access to local parks, gardens and playing fields, they are far less likely to gain the benefits that those spaces can provide.

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These inequalities clearly existed before COVID-19, but the pandemic brought a wider awareness that easy access to existing green spaces was not an opportunity available to everyone. Using London as an example, the wealthiest areas have around 10% more public space compared to the most deprived areas. Approximately half of the residents in the most deprived areas of London are from minority backgrounds.

Some evidence shows that those living in the most deprived areas will actually benefit more from local green spaces, compared to those in more affluent areas – and that greenspace can help reduce the health inequality between high and low income groups. This could be due to poorer communities spending more time in their local areas, and affluence allowing people to travel further from their homes more regularly.

High-quality green spaces and access to nature should be available and easily accessible for everyone, but it is clear that this is currently not the case. With further funding cuts to the quantity and quality of green spaces, it is likely that the poorest communities will suffer the most.

What should be done?

Funding for public services is now going to be stretched even further. But it is more important than ever that continued government funding for parks and green spaces is kept as a high priority, particularly when mental health is reported to have deteriorated during lockdown.



Public parks are crucial for access to nature for all citizens. Shutterstock

This funding must not be limited to popular beauty spots or tourist areas, but be prioritised to areas where people who are commonly overlooked may benefit the most. Not only are parks and green spaces crucial for our mental health and important for reducing inequalities, but quality spaces and green development are essential in the ongoing fight against climate change – it's good for people and it's good for the planet.

What we could all see was solace: it was clear that nature at its loveliest and most inspiring, in springtime's wondrous transformations, could offer people comfort at a moment of tragedy and great stress.

Michael McCarthy, nature writer

For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a damaging impact on their psychological health, but the chance to get out into nature provided some much needed respite and escape during a difficult year.

Following restrictions in March 2020 that saw the UK closing non-essential retail and hospitality, and limiting people to leaving the house once a day for essential reasons, it's no surprise that some discovered a heightened appreciation of their local green spaces. Whether it was a park, a nature reserve or a canalside walk, stories of people finding comfort and consolation in nature at this distressing time have been well documented.

This was emphasised by the UK housing, communities and local government minister, Robert Jenrick, who stated that parks and other public green spaces must be kept open for "the health of the nation".

However, our research during this period found that the majority of the UK population (63%) were spending less time in green spaces than before lockdown. This was likely linked to feelings of anxiety when venturing out of the house, especially for those over 70 or anyone advised to shield for health reasons.

We conducted an online survey through YouGov to investigate how the UK population had altered the amount of time spent in parks during the first lockdown, and whether their experiences of these places had changed. The survey was answered by 2,252 adults from across the UK, drawn from a representative panel of over 800,000 participants. In this research, we defined green spaces as any place outside of the home where people can experience nature, plants and trees.



Immersing ourselves in nature can help relieve anxiety. Mark Caunt/Shutterstock

Widening gap

Inequalities in the use of green space, and changes in the way it is being used, are likely to be associated with occupation, especially during lockdown, when certain workers were advised to work from home. One report stated that less than 10% of manual workers worked from home during the initial lockdown, compared to 75% of managerial and professional workers.

This data highlights that those in the professional group had more opportunity to visit green spaces during lockdown and so were more able to benefit. Manual workers unable to do their jobs at home may have had less time and opportunity to visit green spaces – such as walking in the local park.

We found that the initial lockdown increased existing inequalities in the use of green spaces. Before the pandemic, manual workers like shop assistants and labourers were a third less likely to visit green spaces than those who worked in managerial occupations, such as business owners and senior executives. This difference could be partly explained by a lack of access to decent parks for more disadvantaged groups, or the fact that these groups are less interested in using green spaces.

This pattern of inequality actually worsened during lockdown, with the difference in use increasing between the two social groups. We found that manual workers were two-thirds less likely to visit a park after lockdown restrictions were enforced. This is despite ONS research finding that parks are most accessible in the poorest areas of the UK.

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However, other research shows that poorer areas are more likely to have low-quality green spaces. This could mean that even if someone lived close to a park, they might not want to use it due to a lack of amenities such as seating and toilets, or high crime levels or too much litter.

Older adults (aged 65+) and women spent less time in green spaces during lockdown, compared to younger age groups and men. These will likely lead to widening health inequalities if no action is taken, and compound the devastating impact of the pandemic for older people, who experienced more social isolation. This is because they were less likely to be online and more likely to live alone and be shielding. Meanwhile, the inequality in use between the sexes could be explained by the fact that women spent more time on childcare than men during the first lockdown. They also make up 77% of the NHS workforce and 89% of nursing staff in the UK.

Benefits of green space in lockdown

Green space has positive effects on physical and mental health, especially through things like "forest bathing" – a mindful, immersive walk in the woods, and green prescribing, where doctors advocate a dose of nature rather than medication. Both are currently being researched and implemented across the UK.

But how did green spaces affect the population's mental health during the first lockdown? We know that suicidal thoughts increased during lockdown and antidepressant use is now "soaring".

Our research found that around two-thirds (65%) of individuals reported that spending time in green spaces benefited their mental health more during the lockdown than before. This would suggest that green spaces have the capacity to counteract the impact of the pandemic on the population's mental health.

Previous research has shown that the positive effects of being immersed in green space can help reduce health inequalities by benefiting less advantaged people more. Other studies have found that

inequalities in mental wellbeing are smaller among those who have better access to green space compared to those who do not have access to a local park. More recently, a report by Public Health Scotland found that nine in ten people said that being in green open spaces improved their mental health.

These findings emphasise the importance of parks and nature reserves remaining open during any future lockdowns. We believe our research highlights green spaces as an essential resource for mental health and wellbeing, and they must be protected and prioritised in any future fiscal squeeze.