



Healthy Aging Month

September is Healthy Aging Month. Almost 17% of our nation's population is aged [65 and older](#) which is expected to reach 22% by 2040. It is of utmost importance for us to improve the health of our seniors, while underscoring their environmental justice inequities.

Many studies have examined the health benefits of greenspace for the elderly. A large [research study](#) recently published demonstrated the association of natural environments with hospital admissions for Alzheimer disease and related dementias (ADRD), and Parkinson disease (PD). Researchers analyzed first hospitalizations with one of these diagnoses against zip code with regards to greenness, park cover and blue space cover. In evaluating over 61 million medicare beneficiaries (most women and white), they found that greater zip code greenness , but not park or blue space cover, was associated with fewer

hospitalizations for ADRD. All of the outdoor conditions, however, were associated with a decrease in PD.

Another study of interest was conducted by [Kim et al](#), who investigated the association between 20-year exposure to greenness and epigenetic aging in a large, biracial urban cohort. They found that greater greenness was associated with slower epigenetic aging. Black participants had less surrounding greenness than white participants and an attenuated association between greenness and epigenetic aging but those from disadvantaged neighborhoods had a stronger association. Black participants might have fewer opportunities for access to greenness that could result in less improvement in epigenetic aging. This implies that using an environmental justice and health equity lens to urban strategies for greenness expansion could positively impact racial health disparities.



[Dennis et al](#) evaluated associations between green infrastructure and chronic morbidity. They found that elderly who lived in areas with greater land-cover diversity, informal greenery and patch size in high income areas were healthier, compared to those who lived in proximity to public parks and recreation land in low-income areas.

A study conducted by [Khaledi et al](#) in those isolated in Iran during the pandemic found that personal green spaces (they measured # of indoor houseplants, window view, and balcony or garden with flowers or tree cover) reduced depression and anxiety levels of apartment residents. This would be a potentially important factor in the elderly who may be housebound or have limited ability to spend regular time outdoors.

Multiple other studies have found an association between greenness and physical and mental health, such as one conducted by [Liao and Du](#), who analyzed a longitudinal survey in multiple communities in China, and found that

those who lived in cities with greater and higher variety of vegetation had improved sense of self-rated health status, hospitalization, reporting symptoms of physical discomfort and being lost in a bad mood. This effect was more significant for the middle-aged, elderly and low-educated.



Spotlight of the Month: Jessica Laigle



Jessica Laigle

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When I began my graduate studies in social work and public health in 2015, the connection between nature and mental health was not emphasized in my coursework, and I did not consider myself to be a particularly "outdoorsy" person. But I took a crash course in healing through nature when I was diagnosed with cancer in the middle of my degree program. I found that spending time in nature during my treatment was critical for maintaining my mental health, and once I finished treatment I remained fascinated by how strongly I continued to be drawn to the natural world as I healed emotionally from the experience. So, when I learned in 2020 that Brookside Gardens' leadership was looking to start a healing-in-nature program called the Strolls for Well-Being, I jumped at the chance to join the team. We have now been running the program for two years.

The Strolls for Well-Being is an eight-week program wherein participants complete twelve walks individually in Brookside Gardens, on their own schedule and with the program's beautiful award-winning journal as their guide. Each stroll has its own theme, reflected in the journal with readings and writing prompts encouraging participants to slow down, be present, and look inward. Participants, mostly older adults, also meet with one another at the beginning, middle, and end of the program to reflect and share insights on the experience. Survey data shows that participants in the Strolls for Well-Being finish the program with more positive emotions, fewer negative emotions, and increased confidence in their ability to grow and change.

Registration for the fall sessions is now open via [ActiveMONTGOMERY.org](https://www.activemontgomery.org) and additional information is available in the [Health and Wellness section of Brookside Gardens' website](https://www.brooksidegardens.org/health-wellness).





Brookside Gardens Tea House

Nature Prescriptions for the Elderly

What are some prescriptions I can write for elderly and others who may not be able to go outside much to experience nature? Below are some things you can recommend - of course you will have to put it in prescription form based on what the individual wants!

1. If you have a balcony, spend a few minutes on it each day and look at any green spaces, birds or other aspects of nature. You might want to write down what you see, sketch the view or just enjoy looking for changing nature scenes. If you go outside in the summer, bring some water with you. If it is in the winter, bundle up.
2. If you have access to a window, make a point of opening the shade up each day and spend time exploring outside and searching for nature. Look at the same time every day or different times of the day to see how it differs. If you are able to open your window slightly and it's a nice day, get in some fresh air and smell the outdoors.
3. Draw or sketch something you see outdoors, such as a nature scene, bird or animal. Hang it up in your home.
4. If you have a computer and printer, print out a favorite nature photo or photos and hang them up - or ask someone else to do it for you.
5. Buy a desktop digital frame and include nature photos that rotate regularly.
6. Start an indoor garden - even a small one. Or grow a plant or two. You can

actually grow plants from vegetable scraps. You just need soil and a container (plastic cup or cup you aren't using).

7. If you live in a senior residence, ask the staff if they can start an outdoor garden that you and others can help tend to.



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Keeping in mind the secondary trauma of caring for others, please take the time you need to recover and consider a dose of nature for yourself.

Robert Zarr, MD, MPH
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