Impact of Nature on Women's Spiritual Health and Well-Being: Nature as Resistance for Women in Fostering Spiritual Health and Well-being

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"I believe that there is a subtle magnetism in nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright."

-Henry David Thoreau

Historically, spiritual health is often linked to religiosity. However, in this article, we have chosen to distinguish spiritual health from religion, making the case that spirituality is about being at peace with the internal self rather than being compelled by external influences. Michaelson et al (2019) contended spiritual health is comprised of four domains: 1) connections to self; 2) others; 3) nature; and 4) a transcendent or larger meaning of life.[1] We would add that 'meaning of life' includes having a sense of purpose and self-worth and that spiritual health also embodies having inner peace and resilience, and presence of mind.[2] Holistically, spiritual health is a balance of the body, mind, and spirit and a sense of connection with other people, things, and the natural world.[3] Because of the holistic nature of spiritual health, it underlies many other of the dimensions of health and well-being. Research has found links between spiritual health and mental, emotional, and psychological health,[4] suggest that spiritual health is foundational to other dimensions of wellbeing.

Because of the breadth of spiritual health, this could be an exceptionally long chapter. But in the interest of keeping things concise, we focus our discussion to the impact of nature on spiritual health. A growing body of research suggests that time spent in nature can significantly impact mental wellbeing and spiritual

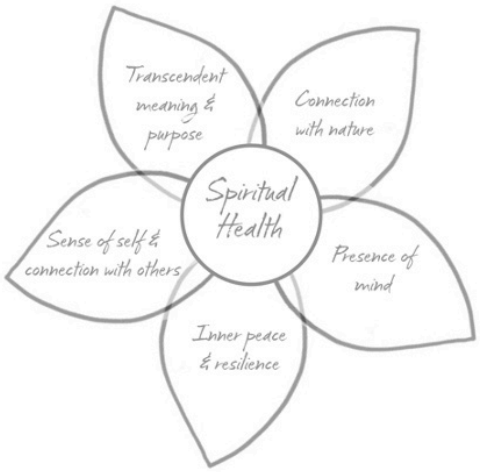

Figure 1. Composition of spiritual health

health.[5,6] Results consistently show that time spent in nature improves mood, increases energy and attention, and reduces feelings of anger, sadness, anxiety, and stress.[6–8] In a review of the role of nature exposure in wellbeing, Naor and Mayseless (2020) found that time spent in nature facilitates self-reflection, thus illuminating our understanding of our internal and external environments and enriching our individual self-concepts.[9] Furthermore, improved sense of self that results from being in nature is associated with a greater connection to the world around us and affords greater connectedness with others.[9]

Louv (2005, 2012) contended that natural settings foster contemplation of a greater purpose and meaning in life.[10,11] When we are in nature, we slowdown from our otherwise busy lives, and disconnect from devices and external pressures that drain us and lead to cognitive and attentional fatigue. With the restoration of mental faculties, we become more cognitively creative, inspired, and engaged.[12,13]

Recent reviews of nature interventions for health and wellbeing suggest that restoration from time spent in nature does not require long-term, immersive experiences consisting of having to hike into the backcountry for days on end. While immersive experiences do yield positive outcomes, there are also data that support owning a houseplant improves affect and that having a view of nature outside of a window reduces post-operative recovery time, and academic performance.[14-16] On average however, going on a walk anywhere from 30-120 minutes per week has been shown to yield significant benefits on health and wellbeing.[17-19] Despite the benefits nature has the potential to yield, not everyone has equitably access to it.

Women in Nature

In his review of wilderness in American culture, Nash (2014) described how time spent in nature (specifically wilderness) was suited to the development and demonstration of "true" [white] masculinity.[20] Early American conceptions of nature were that it was to be conquered, tamed, and civilized. Success in a primitive environment required that one "must be sound of body and firm mind, and must possess energy, resolution, manliness, self-reliance, and a capacity for self-help" so that they could be turned from "a weakling into a man."[20] The benefits gained by white men in the narrative of their mastery of wilderness are plentiful, whereas women are mostly absent.

The erasure of women's relationship with wilderness and nature in early American culture has a greater implication than simply situating women indoors in both reality and the American psyche; it also neglects to include the diverse perceptions that women of color, indigenous women, and those who identify as women may have of nature and wild places. Positioning nature as a well from which all women can draw spiritual well-being must first begin with acknowledging that all women may not have a favorable view of nature. Black women enslaved to tame the land have been glossed over as "resident workers," and the violent and barbaric accounts of the lynching of Black women in the forests of the antebellum south cannot go unmentioned in the framing of nature as a place of refuge.[21,22] We must also recognize how violence against Native women has been leveraged to dispossess them of their land—land that could then be "tamed" by white colonial men, land that still comprises the places that many Americans flock to for their spiritual benefits.[23]

Acknowledging these dark historical roots allows us to understand the complex relationships that women, and those who identify as women, have with nature. While nature can provide a way for women to connect to their spirituality, it may also pose threats of violence and vulnerability. Fear of objectivation, harassment, and violence are all factors that women must navigate while recreating outdoors.[24,25] These fears are informed by the patriarchal and white supremacist ideals that have contributed not only to the historic violence against women but also the race and class stereotyping women should fear.[25] These incremental and often concealed forms of power, referred to as "slow violence," shape the experiences of all women, especially women of color. The insidiousness of this kind of discrimination makes it practically invisible, and infiltrates almost any space women occupy, thus limiting the potential spiritual and health benefits of nature spaces for women.[26] However, (re)claiming a space can be an act of resistance, and a powerful exercise in the development of all the dimensions comprising spiritual health.

Nature as Resistence

This positioning of the outdoors in American psyche has greater implications. The outdoors is not simply a space that is off limits to women, but women and nature are conceptually linked within Western society as subordinate, inferior individuals and spaces to be conquered by dominant actors in society. As previously discussed, nature has been historically viewed as the realm of men, a space in which they can demonstrate their masculinity through the conquering and domination of nature. Moreover, nature and women have been conceptualized of similarly; both being inferiorized.

Take for example the feminized terminology used in describing women and nature. Women are often described in animal terms (e.g., cow, fox, chick, old bat, etc.) while nature itself is described in the same terms as we discuss the treatment of women in society, often connecting to sexual references (e.g., nature is conquered, controlled, land is raped, we cut virgin timber, and till fertile soil).[27] This language that feminizes nature inextricably links women to nature in a pattern of domination and subordination.

As such, by engaging with nature, especially in ways that do not align with the narrative of domination (e.g., engaging in the "enjoyment" of nature, in immersive, or contemplative experiences, or simply going for a walk in nature) women resist not only their own standing in society, but the relationship between society and nature itself. Following Foucault's notions of power and resistance, power is created, recreated, and legitimated through individual interactions in society and maintained through self-surveillance and individual adherence to social norms. Thus, social norms and macro-structures that are meant to control the behavior of members of society can be deconstructed at the individual level through micro-level actions of and interactions between individuals.[28] By engaging with nature in ways that embrace it by immersing within versus seeking mastery over nature, women are able to produce counter-narratives that rewrite the societal discourse established by the dominant normative behavior Nash (2014) described.[20] Importantly, these acts of transgression disrupt, but do not overwrite existing ways of being.[28] In doing so, women open the door for more individuals to engage with nature in new ways, rather than limiting the experiences of nature as the dominant discourse historically has. This resistance thus expands access for all rather than reappropriating the space for a different limited few.

Key to this resistance and, ultimately, to fostering spiritual well-being, is reexamining the ways in which we can interact with nature. Centering less dominant, but existing counter-narratives that move away from the white, masculine focus of exploitation and domination of nature gives voice to a new narrative that can more fully embrace nature's unique ability to support and enhance spiritual well-being. For example, examining the range of perspectives native people have of nature uncovers a balanced view whereby nature and humans are equal in status.[29] This view endorses a protection and respect for the natural world that has demonstrated a reciprocal benefit supporting the health of the natural world while also fostering individuals' spiritual, and overall, well-being.[30] Likewise, varied religious and spiritual groups have endorsed the importance nature plays in spiritual growth and well-being calling for a respect and reverence for nature that defies normative viewpoints.[31] Further, embracing nature in our built settings (Ulrich, 1984) rather than viewing it as separate from and inferior to humans allows nature to transcend built boundaries and enables any setting to embrace the varied benefits of nature.[32] Maybe no example of this resistance encompasses these ideas more thoroughly than the expedition of Mina Hubbard.[15] In 1905, Hubbard undertook an expedition to map unknown territory in Labrador. This act alone, a woman engaging in a mapping expedition, flew in the face of normative behavior. When she succeeded, and outperformed a rival all-male expedition, she succeeded in being the first non-indigenous individual to traverse the route, but also shifted the narrative on how to partake in such an expedition. Her engagement of indigenous guides and a focus on immersion into and enjoyment of nature rather than the conquest of what was rarely traversed land set her apart from contemporary views of the inferiority of nature and the superiority of (white, heterosexual) men.[33]

Summary

In this chapter, we suggest that spiritual health is comprised of five primary domains: 1) connection with self and others, 2) meaning and purpose for life, 3) presence of mind, 4) inner peace and resilience, and 5) connection to nature. Exposure to and time spent in nature can positively impact all of these dimensions. However, nature has historically been characterized as a domain reserved primarily for (white) men; where masculinity is developed, honed, and practiced. Women have subsequently been taught to take caution in nature, if not avoid it altogether to avoid putting themselves at risk. By intentionally seeking nature however, women, and people of color, resist cultural norms, and can reap the benefits that nature has to offer spiritual health, and the other dimensions of health that spiritual health supports. Each time women and diverse groups enter nature, their simple act of resistance rewrites the discourse on what society deigns as appropriate ways to engage with and reap the spiritual benefits of the natural world.

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