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UW study reaffirms nature's stress relieving powers

By Kyung M. Song
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In a study that reaffirms the restorative powers of nature, researchers at the University of Washington report that for stress relief, looking outside trumps toiling away in a windowless room or viewing a digital version of that outdoor scene.

UW researchers found that plasma screens displaying an outdoor scene were about as effective as a blank wall in reducing test subjects' tension, as measured by a drop in heart rates.

The study appears in the June issue of the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*.

The experiment was designed, in part, to explore the limits of technology as a stand-in for nature — the proliferation of plasma screens in hospitals displaying soothing images, for example.

That nature is potent medicine has been well documented. One previous study showed that surgical patients with a view of trees required fewer painkillers than those looking at a brick wall. Other studies have suggested that even static pictures or videos of nature scenes might confer health benefits.

"The thinking is that when you digitize nature, you get all the benefits of nature," said Peter Kahn, associate professor of psychology at UW and the paper's first author. "But they are not substitutions for nature."

Kahn and his colleagues recruited 90 UW undergraduates and measured their stress after they'd been given various tasks, such as proofreading.

The students who had a window view of Drumheller fountain on the UW campus showed the biggest overall drop in heart rate. And the longer they looked out the window, the faster their heart rates dropped to normal.

The stress levels of those provided with a real-time digital image of Drumheller fountain on a plasma screen were the same as for students who had no view whatsoever.

Though the difference in heart rate was only about three beats per minute, the health benefits of an unadulterated view of nature should accrue over a lifetime, said Rachel Severson, a UW psychology doctoral student and a co-author of the paper.

"I don't think you have to be a cardiologist to recognize the impact," Severson said.

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