

Feeling Good

Natural Healing

*Studies prescribe a dose of the great outdoors
as part of the cure for several maladies.*

By Bob Condor
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

STEVENS POINT, Wis. — He regretted the indoor setting for his educational seminar at the recent National Wellness Conference, but Charles R. Needle is wise enough to know the audio-visual portion of his “Healing Power of Nature” presentation wouldn’t work too well without the lights dimmed.

Needle showed a short video that coupled his own photographs of trees, flowers, landscapes and rainbows with soothing music. He called it “visual meditation,” and it was indeed calming and relaxing for about 20 health care professionals who attended the late-afternoon session after a full day of meetings and lectures.

“Emory Hospital [in his hometown of Atlanta] used the tape as a pilot program,” said Needle, a professional photographer who turned to nature photography as a healing art during his own five-year struggle with a parasite infection. “Patient response was so favorable, the hospital plans to use the tape on its television system.”

Needle arrived in Stevens Point armed with scientific research to support his perspective that nature can counteract illnesses and improve general health and well-being. He rattled off several studies:

- A 1982 experiment conducted at a prison, which revealed inmates whose cellblock windows looked out to a garden were considered in a better state of mind than prisoners with views of only brick walls. The positive effect had carried over to overall health.
- A 1984 study by a Texas A&M researcher who found hospital patients with courtyard rooms with views of plants and other greenery healed faster than people with less pleasant perspectives from the window. Besides shorter hospital stays, the courtyard patients received fewer negative notes on nurse reports and requested fewer pain-control drugs.
- A 1990 report from a NASA environmental psychologist, Yvonne Clearwater, who showed that even simulated views of nature in a room without windows can reduce stress and relieve boredom for people in confined settings (including astronauts).
- A 1993 paper by Rachel Kaplan, a professor at the University of Michigan’s School of Natural Resources and Environment, covered two experiments that recorded increased productivity by office workers who



Photo by Charles R. Needle

Researchers are investigating nature's role in our physical and mental health and whether outdoor photos can speed recovery from illnesses.

were afforded more scenic views from their windows. It concluded that simply having a window is not enough: “If all that can be seen are built elements, even if they do not obstruct the natural light or reduce access to the world beyond, the psychological benefits are not fostered. But the elements of nature that seem to make a strong difference need not be any more than a few trees, some landscaping or some signs of vegetation.”

For his part, Needle is trying to fill an apparent need. His photos have been displayed in numerous hospitals and health care facilities since he first marketed his business in 1994. His video is a new product, which he plans to follow with additional tapes covering guided imagery meditations.

“A recent U.S. government study showed the typical American spends 84 percent of his or her time indoors,” said Needle. “More than one-third of all our waking hours are spent at an indoor workplace facility. There is no doubt we need more contact with nature, especially in today’s workplaces that include computers, controlled air systems, permanently locked windows and fluorescent lighting.”

Needle wasn’t facing much skepticism in the audience. One hospital administrator reported how her institution’s new “Wellness Walks” program in Cincinnati motivated patients to take strolls through a scenic park on the premises. Doctors were raving about the more positive attitudes of patients and a study was under way to determine whether shorter hospital stays or medication requests were also evident.

A community wellness official mentioned an academic study showing the relaxation benefit of aquariums in physicians’ waiting rooms, while another administrator said her medical center recently constructed a “garden of hope” that is now regularly used by patient support groups.

Needle suggested more than 25 ways to discover the healing power of nature, even if you live in a “severely urban” setting. Some examples: walk barefoot in the soil, dance in the rain, sit on the ground each day, garden without gloves, swim in a natural body of water, hold a rock, hug a tree (“more powerful than you would ever dream”), write a poem or sing outdoors, keep a nature diary, create a “nature” table of natural objects at home, surround your office with five plants or nature objects, notice some new element of nature each day, study the movements of an animal or pet, and listen to the sounds of nature (in person or on tape).

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