

ANY QUESTIONS PODCAST
EPISODE 5: ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

(INTRO MUSIC)

Stephanie: Hi everyone, welcome to this week's episode of "Any Questions?". My name is Stephanie and I use she/her pronouns.

Hannah: And my name's Hannah and I use she/her pronouns too.

Stephanie: In this week's episode, we're going to be covering the topic of nature and how it relates to our wellness. So today we have a guest speaker with us.

Olivia: Hello everyone, my name is Olivia Mays, I use she/her pronouns and I am the mental health and stress management coordinator at the University Health Center.

Hannah: We're so excited to have you here today because you were kind of our inspiration for this episode so we can just talk a little bit about your story and what inspired us so much to dig deeper into this topic.

Olivia: Sure. Thank you so much for inviting me on today. I'm really excited to be here. Just a little history, I attended University of Maryland during my undergrad and in my senior year I had to complete a capstone and in my capstone we had to write a senior thesis. And I happened to choose a thesis topic that kind of talks about, or touches on, the physiological and psychological benefits of nature. I chose that topic because I, myself have some mental health struggles that really were impacting me and I couldn't quite figure out what the best approach was. Finally, I kind of came to the realization that I have this awesome tool called nature right outside my door and I decided that I was going to do a little bit of research, both for my class and outside of my class, to explore those physiological and psychological benefits. So I just started to really explore that and it was the results that I got just from spending time studying outside or spending time even just looking outside of my window. So all that to be said, I do think that a big reason I personally started to explore this is just because I was going through some difficult situations during schooling and my mental health took a big hit and as a result I knew I needed to respond in a way that I could and I've always loved the outdoors, so I thought let's try it out.

(MUSIC)

Hannah: I'm sure everyone can hear the passion in her voice.

Stephanie: Yeah!

Hannah: And this is why we really wanted to delve into this topic and talk a little bit about what's out there and also what's up in the UMD community.

(MUSIC)

Stephanie: So after we talked with Olivia, this conversation intrigued us, and the topic of nature and how it connects to your mental health. So then we started our personal adventure on looking more into nature and how it supports it.

Hannah: Yeah, there are so many aspects of your health and we definitely want to recognize that, and many of those are impacted by nature. But we really wanted to focus on mental health and how important it is, especially within the context of today, with COVID-19.

(PAUSE)

Stephanie: So what are some specific evidence supporting the impact of nature on mental health? Well, first off scientists have found that nature is associated with positive mood.

Hannah: And after doing some Googling, we found that public health researchers, Stamatakis and Mitchell, found that on top of nature reducing anger, fear, and stress, it also reduces mortality. Best of all, you don't even need to be in nature for this effect to work; you can just be viewing scenes of it.

Stephanie: How I heard this as I'm watching a Netflix documentary on earth at night and I'm already lowering my chances of dying.

Hannah: Exactly.

Stephanie: (Laughs) But so in the topic of COVID, we're kind of heavily relying on tech right now, which results in a lot of fatigue, which also then impacts your own mental health.

Hannah: So nature can give you a way to break up that tech time, and it can be super restorative. It's an intentional break from technology, you can refocus, improve your mood. It's a tool that's right outside of your door.

Stephanie: And then ultimately spending time in our natural world can significantly impact your mental health and that's pretty cool, because nature's kind of free, so it's always there.

Hannah: True that!

(BOTH LAUGH)

Hannah: We can all use some cheap health. So, nature can be a great support to our mental health and it sounds like it's great, but there are also a lot of barriers to accessing nature. So what exactly are those barriers?

Stephanie: So looking into non-COVID barriers, because we do want to acknowledge there are those two separate barriers, specifically for non-COVID, not enough time. We're very much in this society where we very much feel like we have to be busy and, especially being students, sometimes you just feel like your whole day is gone and then you can't physically get outside which is a very valid thing to consider.

Hannah: Some other non-COVID related barriers could be that you're new to accessing nature. You feel intimidated, what are you doing, you've never hiked before. You don't know what bouldering is. Very, very valid barriers. Also in terms of on our campus, safety, especially at night. Maybe you don't want to be outside in the woods all by yourself. Totally makes sense. And finally just a general lack of knowledge, you just didn't realize nature can help your mental and physical health, which is also perfectly valid and that's why we are here and talking today.

Stephanie: During COVID, what are some barriers that some of us might be accessing? One simple one is you can't go outside. Either you're in a location where there's not much nature available or you're having a fear of being close to someone, which is valid considering the spreading of COVID, and just physical and mental barriers.

Hannah: Yeah, so being in this pandemic has really affected people's physical and mental health and maybe that's affected your motivation to be able to go outside. Or maybe you're scared to go outside. All of those feelings are very common and understandable in this context. After we realized that there are so many barriers to accessing nature we wanted to turn to an expert in nature at UMD. Her name is Meg.

(MUSIC)

Meg: Hi, my name is Meg Smolinsky.

Hannah: She works with the arboretum.

Meg: I'm the outreach coordinator for our campus's arboretum and botanical gardens.

Hannah: And how long have you been doing that work?

Meg: I've been in this role for four years now.

Stephanie: And then for our audience, can you define what an arboretum is and explain exactly how UMD is one, in case people aren't familiar with the term?

Meg: Sure. An arboretum is not just a woods or, you know, if you have a bunch of trees at your house, you can't just call yourself an arboretum. An arboretum is a collection of woody plants, for education and enjoyment. And we also collaborate with other arboreta like the US National Arboretum. We are a germplasm repository for them, meaning we plant their plants on our land and then we see how they do in the landscape.

Hannah: Wow.

Stephanie: Yeah, that's amazing. What has the arboretum been doing now, post COVID?

Meg: Sure. So before the shutdowns we were doing regular tours. I lead "Walk with an Arborist" tours. I'm a certified arborist and so I would lead tours for staff, faculty, students, and members of the community around different areas of campus. We expanded it to include "Walk with an Arborist and your Baby", so this was specifically geared to parents who were at home on parental leave and perhaps feeling a little bit lonely, a little bit isolated. We also regularly are guest speakers for classes and that's something that we are continuing, even virtually now through COVID. And we also have a lot of service learning opportunities. We have about 6,000 volunteer hours donated to us every year through student groups on campus. So we're hoping to get back to that once we all return to campus.

Hannah: Wow well that's a lot and all amazing stuff! What you mentioned about loneliness and that human connection kind of circles back around to our main topic of this podcast, talking about how nature can help your mental health. So we had a few questions that we just wanted to ask you and see where it leads us. So what are some recommendations that you have for people who are new to accessing nature? Like how can people get involved whether it's with the arbory or on their own, especially if they haven't before or are intimidated by this prospect?

Meg: So one of the things that you can do now is follow our social media for the arboretum which is @umdabg on both Facebook and Instagram. We're posting a photo safari, so I take pictures of things on campus and post them with their name and a little bit of information. Hopefully it encourages people to take a walk and to, sort of, have a little scavenger hunt type thing on their walk to make it a little more interesting. If you feel that you don't want to leave your house because of the COVID, if you have some of those other underlying conditions that make it unsafe, things like watching nature shows or listening to nature sounds. And I know that the National Parks Service is offering virtual tours of a lot of their national park sites, so you can Google "virtual tours national parks" and it'll take you to that link. You know it doesn't have to be a wooded area where you're away from civilization and there's nothing around you. You can take joy in your neighbor's garden that you can see from your window or from just taking time to feel the breeze on your face, regardless of whether you're in the woods or in your apartment.

(LAUGHS)

Meg: Open up the window, try to tune into the sounds around you.

Hannah: I really like how you mentioned the window because for me I do a lot of work inside but I'm next to a window and that makes all the difference. To be able to see the sun and see the trees and be able to open it up and smell it. And even if I can't open the window, maybe having some aromatherapy, that kind of reminds me of the outdoors. I think there are a lot of ways to work around some barriers that exist right now for getting out in nature.

Meg: Yeah, it is hard though. You definitely want to manage getting outside while still following social distancing, wearing a mask, washing your hands once you return to your home, and things like that.

(MUSIC)

Hannah: Do you have a favorite spot on campus? Like when you're giving a tour, that's the one spot that you need people to see?

Meg: I have two favorite spots on campus. My two favorite gardens are, first the Community Learning Garden. I am the staff advisor and I have always grown vegetables, so that is very close to my heart. And my close second, or maybe tied with first, is the Garden of Reflection and Remembrance at the Chapel. That is an incredible space. It was designed with a lot of thoughtfulness. The water features, the labyrinth, the plants that are there. It is a very beautiful space and I would recommend people visit that once we're back on campus.

Stephanie: So I'm really curious, in regards to plants on our campus, what's a fun plant fact or something that students should look out for while being on our campus. Because sometimes I'll just look around and I'm like 'there's so much here', but I feel like there's probably something that's really cool.

Meg: Oh my gosh. I love our campus, it's hard to narrow it down. But I will say if you're walking around campus and you're seeing plants that you find really interesting, if you go to our campus web map, maps.umd.edu, there is an arboretum and botanical gardens layer that you can select. And also if you go to our website, arboretum.umd.edu, there is an arboretum explorer link on the right side of the page so you can find out, if there is a beautiful big tree by the Chapel that you just think is so wonderful, you can look on the map and find out 'oh that's a saw tooth oak' and you can at least know the name of it.

Stephanie: Oh! That is useful to know. That is definitely cool.

(MUSIC)

Stephanie: A question that we wanted to ask, and then Hannah and I can also throw in our own experiences with this, is how have you coped with mental health struggles and have you ever utilized nature as a tool to help?

Meg: Yeah, so one of the things that I mentioned before was the “Walk with an Arborist and your Baby” tours, that we unfortunately only got to do two before we were shut down to COVID, but I recently went on parental leave in the fall and my spouse returned to work after two weeks and then I was home with this baby, when I had been used to going into the office and seeing people every day. All of the sudden I was home all the time, and so I think one thing that new parents are not really prepared for is the isolation and the loneliness. And so I knew that I felt better when I went for a walk and it was extremely hard to motivate myself on my own to get out and go for that walk, even though I knew that I would feel better. So that’s one of the things that I wanted to do, was to create a day and time that people can put on their calendar and just that extra little motivation that not only are you going to be out in nature, you’re going to go do something, there’s going to be other parents there so you can talk to them about what’s going on if you want, but if you just want to follow along with the tour there’s no pressure to share and just make it a really welcoming space. And I think a lot of times if you need something other people need it too. So if you can create a solution then there will be other people who will thank you for that.

Hannah: That’s a big takeaway. I love it, we should make t-shirts. Thank you for sharing and thank you for taking that initiative to do that for other people, to spread that joy because that’s so important.

Stephanie: I really had never utilized nature as a tool throughout high school and then being back at my childhood home, I started utilizing it more being at school. When I found out the Chapel existed, definitely it’s my go to spot when I’m feeling down at school. And it’s something so refreshing about being able to sit on the grass and being covered by the trees, or being on the bench and when the windows are open and you feel the breeze of air, it just makes me feel so much more calm. I think it’s so interesting that we as humans crave nature at the end of the day. But yeah, that was my experience with using nature, I’ve used it mostly as a place to sit and reflect.

Hannah: I struggle with also motivating myself to get outside.

(LAUGHS)

Hannah: So it’s so nice being home. I’m with my family and whenever someone else is going out for a walk, they’ll invite everyone. Even just that small invitation sometimes can be enough to motivate me to go or to feel included and to feel like there’s a chance to be out there. And I think that’s a little thing that listeners can also do, if they’re at home or if they’re with roommates. Whenever you’re doing something outside or opening a window, pointing it out to the people you’re with and inviting them to come along with you.

Meg: I definitely hear you on the open window thing. I grew up in Minnesota and I was always so excited every spring when it was warm enough to open the windows again, and to get that fresh air in the house and just air everything out.

Hannah: Is there anything else that you would like to add to this conversation before-

Meg: Just feel free to follow us on social media. Our Facebook and Instagram handles are both @umdabg. And again, once we are back on campus, a cordial invitation for everyone to come and volunteer with us or to schedule a tour with us. Or, if you are taking a class and you think that having someone come talk about plant design, or the trees, or storm water management, we can definitely accommodate that. We love partnering with our academic partners.

(MUSIC)

Hannah: Ok so now that we've learned a lot from Meg, we just wanted to invite Olivia back to wrap things up and talk about some more practical applications of what we can do right now to be involved in nature and to help our mental health.

(MUSIC)

Olivia: Yeah, so I think one misconception about connecting with nature is that you have to be outside to do it. That's not true. It can be as simple as just opening your window, for instance. Right now I've got my window open and I can hear the birds chirping outside. It's so peaceful. It can be as simple as lighting a naturally scented candle and just sitting on that smell and thinking, 'wow what does this make me feel and why does it make me feel this way.' The next time you go outside or the next time you're looking out your window, or sitting and watching a nature documentary, just try to practice some mindfulness in that moment. What are you gaining from this situation? How are you feeling right now and what is that a result of? I think that it's the visual appeal of nature, it's the smell, it's the sound. I mean nature can bring us stimulation to all of our senses. We can taste it, we can smell it, we can feel it, we can hear it. That stimulation of our senses and all of that combined with the other healing properties of nature, it's incredible. It's incredible.

Hannah: Thank you everyone for tuning in to "Any Questions?".

(MUSIC)