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Nature and Student Wellness at Grand Valley State University

Emma Cubitt
Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI
April 3, 2022

Preface:

It is important to note that the following document discusses mental health topics including depression, anxiety, and stress. If you are a GVSU student, the following are available to you:

University Counseling Center

Phone: (616) 331-3266

Location: 206 Student Services Center, Allendale Campus

In an emergency call 911 or the Dept. of Public Safety at (616) 331-3255.

Introduction:

For many, college is a period of developmental exploration and newfound independence. During a traditional college experience, many students are exposed to high levels of academic and social pressure that pushes them to mature in their personal lives and career development. It is a high-pressure environment complemented by academic stress, social isolation, financial debt, and, more recently, Covid-19 pandemic complications. The result is a generation of university students experiencing unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, and other psychologically debilitating conditions (Meredith, et al., 2020). Beneficial stress management practices vary based upon the individual, but one of the most accessible and universally recognized is exposure to nature. Spending time in a safe outdoor environment has been proven to decrease negative emotions such as fear, anger, and stress, while having a positive effect on mental and physical health (Bratman et al., 2012).

Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan is no exception to the college mental health crisis. Long Michigan winters and academic pressure combined with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic means accessible stress relief techniques are crucial for the wellness of GVSU students. While many college campuses are not located in an area with a wide array of natural settings, Grand Valley State University is surrounded by multiple ecosystem types including rivers, floodplains, forests, and prairies. Additionally, accessible nature trails and scenic outlooks are made available to students through the university, local government, and private nature centers. The promotion of GVSU's outdoor recreation opportunities is an effective way of educating students on the importance of healthy stress reducing behaviors.

Stress in Students:

Residential college students are one of the few demographics of people that live in the same area they work. On a property such as GVSU's Allendale campus, it can be difficult to escape the feeling of being at school, especially when the student doesn't have access to a personal vehicle. Although GVSU has beautiful facilities and countless ways to stay busy, it's often helpful to take a break from high stress environments to help prevent burn-out. Students who remain in a constant state of stress not only risk a decline in mental health, but physical health as well. Symptoms of anxiety act as the intervening variable between stress and physical health, while symptoms of depression accompany individuals in extremes states of stress and anxiety

(Rawson et al., 1994). The correlation between mental and physical health creates the need for students to take breaks from academic and social pressures to fuel a healthy mind and body.

In terms of the Covid-19 pandemic, students are experiencing a higher frequency of disruptions in routine due to self-isolation, quarantine, and changing protocols. These students are more likely to experience loneliness, anxiety, depression, insomnia, alcohol and drug use, and harmful behavior (Kumar & Nayar, 2021). The addition of pandemic related stressors to the routine college experience leads to a further need for healthy outlets of stress relief.

College students turn to a variety of healthy and unhealthy coping strategies to self-regulate stress. Maladaptive coping mechanisms are often harmful outlets of escaping stress and are used by individuals to reduce the effects of stressful stimuli (Mahmoud et al., 2012). These behaviors can range from mild habits like daydreaming or emotional numbing to extreme health risks such as substance abuse, binge eating, or self-harm. These behaviors allow the individual to emotionally withdraw from stressful situations while avoiding a long-term solution.

Maladaptive coping strategies have a high association with symptoms of anxiety and depression. Replacing unhealthy behaviors with positive coping mechanisms has a helpful impact on reducing short term symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (Mahmoud et al., 2012). For example, many people use social media or virtual content to escape negative emotions associated with reality. A replacement behavior for this maladaptive coping strategy would be to substitute time spend online with a healthy stress reducing practice, such as meditation, exposure to nature, or exercise. This encourages the individual to spend time reconnecting their body and mind.

Benefits of Nature Exposure:

In a high stress environment such as a university, student wellness depends heavily on accessibility to healthy stress reducing activities. Spending time in nature is linked to both cognitive benefits and improvements in mood, mental health, and emotional well-being (American Psychological Association, 2020). For example, one study suggests that people who spend a minimum of 120 minutes in nature weekly are more likely to see significant benefits to health (White et al., 2019). It is important to note that this strategy is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Health conditions including anxiety, severe stress, and depression should be worked through with a professional. However, exposure to nature has been used as a tool to improve attention span, impulse control, and mood (Bratman et al., 2012). Within a university setting, improvements in mood and contentment would lead to healthier and more motivated student body.

The relationship between health and nature stems from evolutionary roots that provide humans with psychological benefits through interactions with the environment (Bratman et al., 2012). Although it may never be understood fully, science has repeatedly supported this theory. Multiple studies have found that participants would rather view natural scenes with vegetation than urban landscapes after undergoing a series of stress inducing activities (Bratman et al., 2012). The instinct to interact with a natural environment should be incorporated into routines to encourage feelings of peace, happiness, and belonging.

Nature at GVSU:

Grand Valley State University has multiple opportunities for nature exposure and outdoor recreation within walking distance. The Allendale Campus is bordered to the east by forested ravines and the Grand River. Within the upland and floodplain ravine forest lies over 7.5 miles of hiking trails with views of the Grand River and campus. Entrances to the Ravines trails are located at the back of parking lot D, at the end of parking lot O near Calder Center, and at the end of the Grand Valley Apartments. In the campus's southwest corner lies the GVSU Tower trail, containing walking paths around the storm retention area and soccer fields. Entry points of the trail are located behind parking lot J and behind the soccer fields. In the middle of campus, the arboretum contains around 7 acres of trees and vegetation along with a network of marked trails for students to enjoy in between classes, as well as many spots to hammock or sit if students need a break without leaving campus.

There are multiple off campus nature areas that are still within walking distance for residential students. Grand Ravines Park is located directly south of campus along the Grand River. This park is managed by Ottawa County Parks and Recreation and contains 202 acres of publicly accessible land. Hiking trails, fishing access, kayak launches, scenic areas, picnic tables, and an enclosed dog park are the main features of the park. Even further south of campus and to the east is of Grand Ravines Park is Grand River Park. This park, also managed by Ottawa County Parks and Recreation, is only 3.5 miles from the GVSU Allendale campus. It is known for its hiking and mountain bike trails and has a Grand River access point for recreational boating and fishing.

Conclusion:

The promotion of GVSU's outdoor recreation is an effective way to encourage students to replace negative stress management activities with positive alternatives. In a high stress environment such as a university, student wellness depends heavily on accessibility to stress reducing activities. Spending time in nature is linked to physical health benefits and improvements in emotional well-being.

A healthy campus community at Grand Valley State University supports the mission statement of empowering learners in their pursuits, professions, and purpose, while overall enriching society through excellent teaching, active scholarship, advancement of equity, and public service. Many issues that diverge attention from the university goals are a result of negative behaviors and harmful activities. Educating the student body on healthy stress management techniques, while promoting emotional and physical well-being, encourages healthy behaviors as a replacement for harmful habits. At GVSU, students have access to public nature areas on and near campus that can aid healthy stress management. Encouraging utilization of outdoor recreation areas at GVSU stimulates a happier and healthier student body and supports the university's mission of enriching society through empowering learners.

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NATURE AND WELLNESS

“LOOK DEEP INTO NATURE, AND THEN YOU WILL UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING BETTER.”

– ALBERT EINSTEIN

COLLEGE IS STRESSFUL

STUDENTS COPE WITH STRESS IN DIFFERENT WAYS

NEGATIVE STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES:

PROCRASTINATION

BINGE DRINKING

SCROLLING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

POSITIVE STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES:

MEDITATION

NATURE WALKS

EXERCISE

BE YOUR BEST SELF

CHOOSE A HEALTHY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

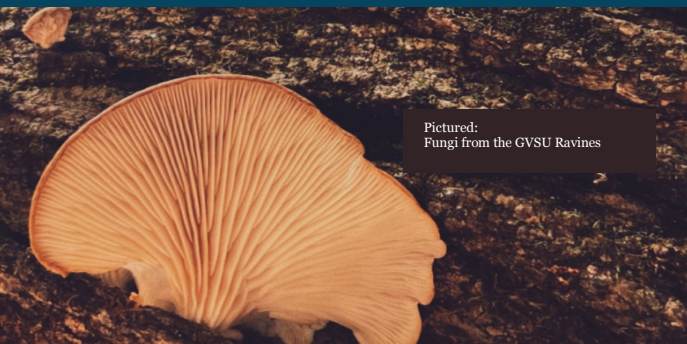
How?

STUDIES SUGGEST THAT SPENDING A MINIMUM OF 120 MINUTES IN NATURE PER WEEK CAN SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASE YOUR CHANCES OF GOOD HEALTH.

WHERE?

GRAND VALLEY HAS OVER 10 MILES OF NATURE TRAILS ON OR CLOSE TO CAMPUS.

NATURE TRAILS ALLOW THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXERCISE IN A SAFE OUTDOORS ENVIRONMENT OR SIMPLY SIT AND TAKE A BREAK FROM COLLEGE LIFE



Pictured:
Fungi from the GVSU Ravines

STUDENT VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES:

SPEND TIME IN WEST MICHIGAN NATURE WHILE SUPPORTING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY!

GVSU SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE PROJECT

4539 Luce St
Jenison, MI 49428

Contact: SAPmanager@gvsu.edu

OTTAWA COUNTY PARKS AND RECREATION

8115 West Olive Road
West Olive, MI 49460

Contact: parkvolunteers@miottawa.org

KENT COUNTY PARKS AND TRAILS

1700 Butterworth Dr SW
Grand Rapids, MI 49534

Contact: 616-632-7275

BLANDFORD NATURE CENTER

1715 Hillburn Ave NW
Grand Rapids, MI 49504

Contact: 616-735-6240

WEST MICHIGAN LAND CONSERVANCY

400 Ann St. NW, Suite 102
Grand Rapids, MI 49504

Contact: 616-451-9476

WEST MICHIGAN ENV. ACTION COUNCIL

1007 Lake Drive SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49506

Contact: 616-451-3051

ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECTS ARE A FUN WAY TO SPEND TIME OUTDOORS WHILE LEARNING NEW SKILLS, MEETING NEW PEOPLE, AND WORKING TOWARDS A COMMON GOAL

A GUIDE TO NATURE AND WELLNESS AT GVSU

BY: EMMA CUBITT



Pictured:
Tomatoes from the GVSU Sustainable Agriculture Project

NATURE TRAILS NEAR GVSU'S ALLENDALE CAMPUS

LEGEND:

ON CAMPUS TRAILS:

1 RIVER TRAIL - 1.6 MI

STARTING POINT AT GVSU BOAT HOUSE

2 FRESHMAN TRAIL - 0.8 MI

STARTING POINTS BEHIND PICKARD LIVING CENTER AND LOT D

3 CALDER TRAIL - 1.5 MI

STARTING POINT BEHIND CALDER ARTS CENTER

4 ARBORETUM TRAIL - 0.25 MI

STARTING POINT BETWEEN LITTLE MAC BRIDGE AND AU SABLE HALL

5 TOWER TRAIL - 1.1 MI

STARTING POINTS AT LOT J AND OUTDOOR SOCCER FIELDS

6 SOUTH TRAIL - 2.5 MI

STARTING POINT AT SOUTH APARTMENTS

OFF CAMPUS TRAILS:

7 GRAND RAVINES - 2.8 MI

LOCATED IN GRAND RAVINES COUNTY PARK, THIS TRAIL CREATES ACCESS TO KAYAK LAUNCHES, FISHING POINTS, AN ENCLOSED DOG PARK, AND SCENIC OUTLOOKS.

8 GRAND RIVER PARK - 3.3 MI

THIS TRAIL IS A POPULAR SPOT FOR HIKING, CROSS COUNTRY SKIING, AND MOUNTAIN BIKING. THERE IS A GRAND RIVER KAYAK LAUNCH AND AREAS TO FISH.



Feet

0 1,000 2,000

Mapping by: Emma Cubitt
April 2, 2022