

# The Power of Nature for Mental Health and Well-Being

From the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects'  
Human Health and Wellbeing Committee

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Mental health is a major concern for healthcare professionals, as nearly half of Canadians will experience mental health issues by the age of 40 (1). Growing evidence supports the benefits of nature on mental health, highlighting the need for landscape architects' involvement. The diversity in the practice enables landscape architects to actively contribute to improving the health and well-being of Canadians by making natural spaces more accessible.

## Highlights

Nearly 3 in 4 Canadians live in a large urban centre (3), and urbanites are more likely to experience anxiety and depression (4).

This phenomenon cost the healthcare system an estimated \$79.9 billion (1).

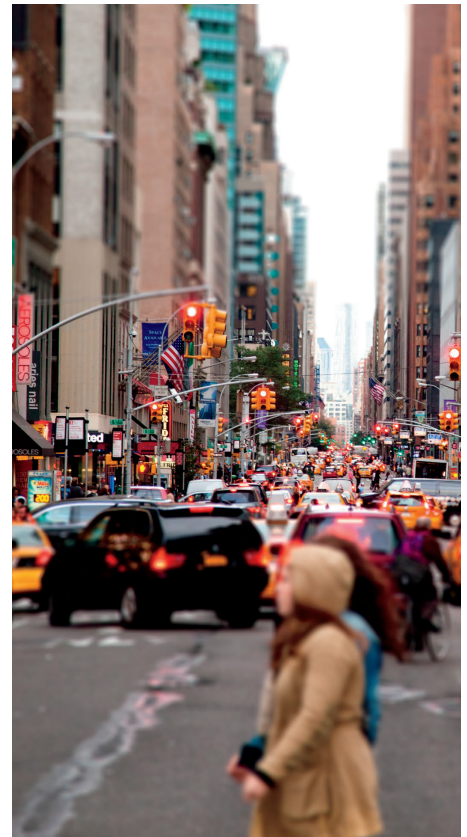
Even in the city, nature has significant positive impacts on mental health: 90 minutes spent in a natural environment can reduce activity in a brain region linked to mental illness risks (5).

## Urbanization and its impacts on mental health

Nearly three in four Canadians live in a large urban centre (3). Unfortunately, urbanites are more susceptible to anxiety and depression (4). These effects can be life-long: children living in less-green neighbourhoods are at higher risk of developing mental health issues in adulthood (6).

The rapid growth of large cities and increasing urban sprawl (3) have negatively impacted the availability of natural spaces (2), depriving residents of beneficial contact with nature. However, even in urban areas, nature offers substantial mental health benefits, such as:

- children who play in recently greened schoolyards demonstrate improved cooperation, communication, and reduced aggression, which are indicators of better future mental health (7)
- people who spend time in green space instead of busy streets have fewer repetitive or intrusive thoughts, both known as risk factors for mental health problems (5).



*“We don’t experience natural environments enough to realize how restored they can make us feel, nor are we aware that studies also show they make us healthier, more creative, more empathetic, and more apt to engage with the world and with each other. Nature, it turns out, is good for civilization.”*

— Florence Williams, *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative*

## Mental health issues: the 21st century epidemic

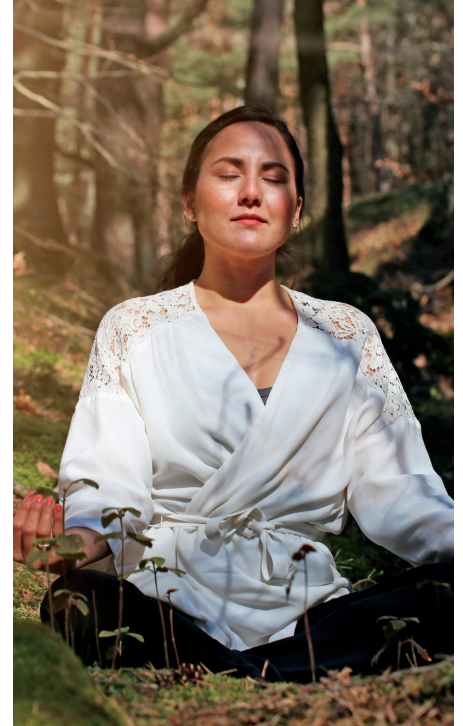
More and more scientific studies have shown that spending time in nature can protect and restore mental health (2). In fact, some research suggests that forest walks can be used as a medical treatment for conditions like depression and anxiety (8, 9).

## Nature: a proven remedy

Japan has been using Shirin-Yoku (forest baths) as an official medical treatment since the 1980s, in response to an epidemic of burnout (4). This remedy has since been extensively documented to show that:

- fifteen minutes spent in a forest can reduce stress levels (5, 9)
- green spaces promote psychological restoration by encouraging exercise, improving social connections, boosting the immune system, and reducing exposure to noise and air pollution, which affect cognition and brain development (2, 8, 10)
- 90 minutes spent in a natural environment can reduce mental health risks by reducing activity in a specific part of the brain (5).

In Canada, programs like PaRx (11) and Prescri-Nature (12) enable healthcare professionals to prescribe spending time in nature. But access to nature in some areas is a challenge due to accelerating urbanization (3). Landscape architects are equipped to address it.

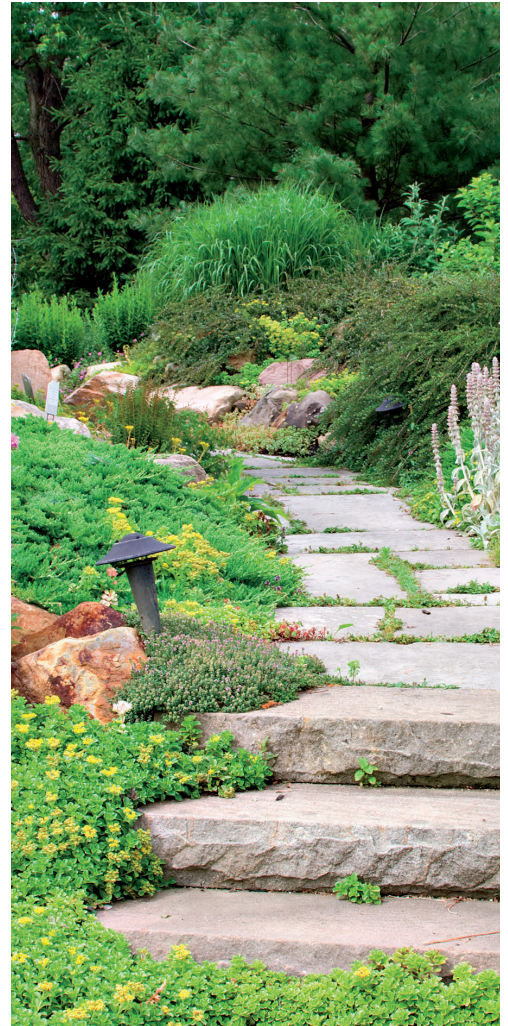


## Landscape architects and mental health providers

Studies have shown that small greening actions matter and have a positive impact on mental health. And landscape architects, thanks to their multiple practice areas, can intervene on several fronts. Researchers, clients and designers can all work together to improve access to green spaces.

- Follow the 3-33-300 rule. This rule states that each resident must be able to see at least three trees from their home, live within 300 m a park or green space, and each neighbourhood must have a canopy index of 30% (13). Landscape architects working for municipalities can implement this rule and increase access to nature, support urban forests, and promote the health and wellbeing of residents (13).
- Care for the trees so they care for us! Planting trees and plants is important, but their maintenance is just as crucial. In urban settings, only 50% of trees survive beyond 4 years. (14). If we want to enjoy their benefits, we need to provide the right conditions for them to thrive by eliminating the requirement for no-maintenance designs. Landscape architects in the private sector are well positioned to educate clients on the importance of tree maintenance by drawing inspiration from approaches, such as the Canadian Urban Forest Strategy (15).

- Develop new research partnerships. Despite an abundance of studies on nature and mental health, there are still gaps in our knowledge. For example, we know little about the relationship between the ecological integrity of a space and its effects on mental health (2). Cross-disciplinary partnerships are therefore desirable as a way to advance knowledge in this area. The Centre for Excellence in Urban Health at the Université de Montréal, which brings together planning and public health researchers, is a promising partnership.
- Advocate for better access to green space. Access to green space is an essential condition for unlocking the benefits for mental health. In the current urban context (3), all greening opportunities should be seized or encouraged. Advocacy work directed at political authorities can be an opportunity to demonstrate that certain projects, often deemed too bold, have successful analogues elsewhere in the world. For example, the conversion of urban freeways into large linear parks such as the Rose F. Kennedy Greenway in Boston. National and provincial professional associations of landscape architects are key players in the preparation of such advocacy efforts and in publicizing exemplary projects.



### **About the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects (CSLA)**

The CSLA is the voice of the profession and an advocate for its members on issues such as urban revitalization, cultural heritage, sustainable development, and climate adaptation. Landscape architects promote multidisciplinary and collaborative approaches to the creation of meaningful, enjoyable human environments, and to the sustainability of natural ecosystems and special places. Combining science with art, the profession provides insight and creative design to development and planning processes, responds to the needs of society, promotes respect for the values of the broader landscape and the environment, and minimizes impacts to natural systems.

The CSLA is a professional organization with landscape architect members, associate (or intern) members and landscape architecture student members. As the voice of the profession in Canada, the CSLA is an advocate for its members on issues such as urban design, urban renewal, sustainable development, climate change and cultural heritage. Since it was founded in 1934, the CSLA has increased awareness and appreciation of landscape architecture and the vitality of the profession in Canada and throughout the world. The CSLA is dedicated to advancing the art, the science and the practice of landscape architecture.



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