

'It helps make the fuzzy go away': Autistic adults' reflections upon nature and wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic and across the life course

Dr Samantha Friedman, SWECW



<p>Background and aims</p> <p>There is substantial research evidence on the value of access and engagement to nature in adulthood and childhood. However, evidence regarding autistic individuals' experiences of nature is largely anecdotal (e.g., James, 2018; McAnulty, 2021; Packham, 2016; Thunberg, 2019). While there are reasonable assumptions that can be made to explain this link between autism and nature, no published research yet addresses why natural spaces or time outside may be beneficial for some autistic people or, similarly, why some autistic people seem to have different sensory tolerances when outside.</p> <p>It seems sensible to begin with the broadest question concerning autism and nature - what are the experiences of autistic people in nature? This has important implications given what is known about the benefits of time in nature to wellbeing and mental health (e.g., Richardson & McEwan, 2018; Ulrich et al., 1991) and the well-documented mental health crisis occurring amongst the autistic population (Lever & Geurts, 2016; Vasa et al., 2019).</p> <p>The survey focused upon general information regarding the individual's nature engagement and sensory needs, childhood experiences in nature, adult experiences in nature, including during the Covid-19 pandemic, and focused interests.</p>		
<p>METHODOLOGY</p> <p>The Qualtrics survey was distributed via social media and through autistic organisations' newsletters. The survey remained open for one month in autumn 2021; in that time, it was completed by 127 autistic adults living in the UK. I used Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019; 2021) reflexive thematic analysis to analyse these data and separated the findings into Covid-specific findings and findings which were relevant across the life course.</p>	<p>OPEN RESEARCH</p> <p>I completed this analysis as part of my recent PhD at the Centre for Family Research in the Department of Psychology at the University of Cambridge. The survey was created alongside three autistic community members, and I pre-registered the survey on the OSF (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/7X9JD).</p>	<p>RESULTS</p> <p>Life course themes were...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nature to escape• Nature to connect• Nature doesn't judge (but other people do) <p>Covid-specific themes were...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Respite in nature• Connecting amidst widespread disconnection

<p>LIFE COURSE FINDINGS</p> <p>I am prone to anxiety and depression and find that taking my dog for a walk in nature calms my brain. Maybe it's the colour green, or the big sky? Everything seems to be too fast for me in the 21st century; people even seem to be talking faster on the television, like everyone's in some kind of frenzy. I reluctantly have a mobile phone (not a "smart" phone), and like nothing better than going outside and leaving it switched off at home - freedom! The less I have to interact with people the better. I can spend ages staring at a fungus or a flower and everything else just fades away. (non-binary person, 55-64 years old, Wales; Theme 1)</p> <p>Over time I observed the main activity of the mountaineering club was trad climbing so owning my own gear allowed me to go outdoors to organised meets and participate in the activities with my club on my own terms...It's also a good way of getting social contact, I find with climbing I can adjust my pace to be more or less chatty with other participants, and it is helpful always to have climbing as a topic of interest in common. (non-binary person, 35-44 years old, England; Theme 2)</p> <p>I feel at home in nature and connected. When you feel connected you understand you are part of the planet and that everything is connected, no matter how big or small. Being autistic isn't an issue when I'm in nature because I fit in just the way I am, nature doesn't judge or try to make you change. Nature is accepting and that feels very calming and peaceful. (woman, 45-54 years old, England; Theme 3)</p>	<p>COVID-SPECIFIC FINDINGS</p> <p>I was able to spend much more time outside during the first lockdown due to a complete lack of people, roadworks noise, traffic noise, venue noise etc. Thanks to this, I was able to start doing much more exercise, which in turn helped me almost eradicate the severe chronic back pain I had been suffering for a decade. I was also able to achieve the best state for my mental health I have ever had in my life due to the massive reduction in sensory overstimulations and the therapeutic nature of walking in nature. (unknown gender, 25-34 years old, Scotland; Theme 1)</p> <p>'I never used to be able to name so many butterflies... It makes me feel productive because, when I place myself in nature, I feel like I'm relating to the animals, insects, flowers etc. I'm gaining an understanding of them and they're gaining an understanding of me too...if you stand near a buddleia bush for long enough then a butterfly will eventually land on you. And if you keep feeding the birds and the mice then they will grow comfortable with your presence - it's so magic!' (woman, 18-24 years old, England; Theme 2)</p>
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CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings that I developed in this study of 127 autistic adults living in the UK suggest that for many, nature is a space that promotes wellbeing, even during times of acute psychological distress like the Covid-19 pandemic. However, nature did not have the same positive relationship for everyone, suggesting that nature is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Rather, nature should be considered amongst other tools as one possible method of supporting wellbeing in autistic people. Further, autistic peoples' perspectives should guide the development of outdoor spaces to ensure they are accessible and inclusive.

References:

