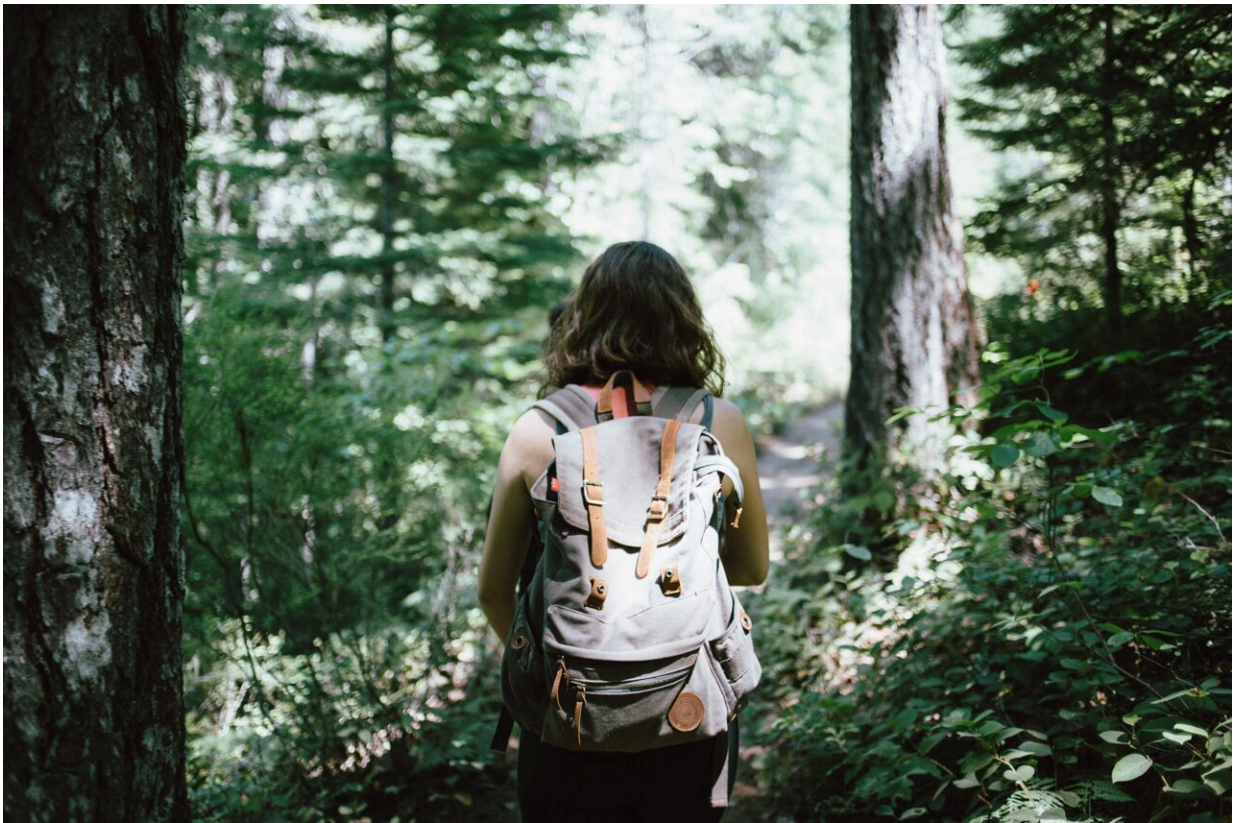


Mindfulness techniques could help improve health of environment

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Techniques to improve mental health and well-being, such as mindfulness and meditation, may also encourage people to look after the environment, researchers have found.

The study, published in *The Lancet Planetary Health* and from researchers at the Universities of York, Reading and Surrey, examined the link between ego and how people look after their surroundings.

After collating studies across a large range of research fields, the researchers were able to test the expectation that self-identity and the health of the environment are linked in a dynamic cycle.

They found that people who are highly individualistic—meaning they have a strong sense of ego—see themselves as more isolated from the [natural world](#). This means they might carry out fewer behaviors to improve the environment, such as recycling or reducing their carbon footprint.

Ego-driven

This behavior at larger scales leads to plants and wildlife disappearing from towns and cities, further reducing people's connection to nature.

The study showed, however, that activities traditionally associated with improving [mental health](#) and well-being, such as walking and bird watching, improved connectedness to the environment, encouraging people to look after it.

The increased connection to an individual's surroundings made people less individualistic and ego-driven, and more likely to choose behaviors such as planting trees, picking up litter and traveling sustainably.

International cooperation

Professor Bob Doherty, from the University of York's School for Business and Society, said, "At a time when world leaders are meeting

for COP27, our research shows the crucial need for international cooperation between governments, business and [civil society](#) to develop new pro-environmental interventions to promote new behavior and action.

"This kind of cross-collaboration should see more investment in urban green initiatives, for example, and new approaches to food and the environment within the school system, to harness the powers of young people to create long-term sustainable change."

Government level

As people enjoy their surroundings more due to the enhanced environment, the cycle is repeated, creating what is known as a "virtuous circle" that links self-identity and the [environment](#), the researchers say.

On the other hand, people who are more individualistic develop a "dog-eat-dog" attitude and can get stuck in a "vicious circle" of decline, they say.

The phenomenon can be observed at government-wide level, the researchers found, citing U.S. policies to cut environmental protection laws leading to greater isolation and increased [environmental damage](#).

'America first'

Pointing to ex-President Donald Trump's "America First" policy, the researchers found that changes to self-identity in national leaders might explain the damaging removal of environmental protection and reduced international cooperation, which is essential to solve problems such as climate change.

Professor Tom Oliver, Research Dean for Environment at the University of Reading, said, "Expanding our sense of self-identity to include others and the natural world creates an attitude of care and responsibility.

"The actions that follow lead to nature improvement, for example restoring plants and wildlife in our towns and cities, which then gives us further opportunity to engage and connect with nature."

More information: Tom H Oliver et al, A safe and just operating space for human identity: a systems perspective, *The Lancet Planetary Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/S2542-5196\(22\)00217-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(22)00217-0)

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