

WHY MAKE IT COMPLICATED WHEN YOU CAN MAKE IT SIMPLE?

## **Even a 10-minute break outdoors can reduce stress**

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Whether it's meditation, breathing techniques or yoga, individual approaches to stress management are increasingly popular in organizations. Enjoying the outdoor environment to take breaks at work would be especially beneficial in reducing stress. What are the effects and how can you introduce them in your organization?

To answer this question, we interpreted the research of Largo-Wight and colleagues, published in 2017, which aimed to **evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of an outdoor break in proximity to nature on employees' stress reduction.**

### **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY:**

#### Proximity to nature

Proximity to nature is **drawing closer to** and **being aware** of elements of the natural environment. This **drawing closer** to the natural environment can happen through

- contemplating trees or mountains through an office window;
- listening to music that evokes nature (e.g.: birdsong);
- placing plants indoors;
- taking a break or eating a meal in an outdoor courtyard.

Proximity to nature in particular showed benefits for employee well-being, job satisfaction and reduced absenteeism.

#### Stress

There are many definitions of human stress, but in a work context, we speak of stress when **demands exceed resources** available to the employee. Prolonged exposure to stress can result in various health problems – both psychological (e.g.: depression) and physical (e.g.: cardiovascular problems). Employees who experience high stress are more likely to have difficulties at work (e.g.: a drop in productivity), such as being absent from work because of illness.

## WHAT DO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY TELL US?

### Taking a break outdoors is beneficial!

A daily 10-minute break outdoors during which the employee focuses their attention on elements of nature would be sufficient to reduce their stress level.

	Method
<p><b>Feasibility study (study aiming to determine whether participants found it realistic to take a daily 10-minute outdoor break)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 119 office employees (including 117 women)</li> <li>• Average age: 48 years</li> <li>• Southeastern United States</li> </ul> <p><b>Efficacy study (study aiming to evaluate the effects of taking a 10-minute outdoor break on participants' stress level)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 37 office employees (including 34 women)</li> <li>• Average age: 49 years</li> <li>• Southeastern United States</li> </ul>	<p>For four weeks, employees were invited to take a daily break for 10 to 15 minutes on their own. They were divided into two groups. The first group had to take the break indoors; the second group had to take the break outdoors and <b>focus their attention on elements of nature</b> (e.g.: sky, tree, birds). Each participant in the two groups was asked to evaluate their stress level before and after the four weeks of the study.</p>

#### 1) Feasibility of taking a break outdoors

- Employees reported being in **the habit of taking a daily break, even before the study, and feeling better afterwards.**
- Taking an **individual daily break outdoors is achievable, practical and meaningful** for a majority of employees.

#### Interpretation

- The break allows the employee to recover, to restore their physical and cognitive resources in order to be able to maintain a constant level of engagement at work throughout the day.
- Going outdoors can allow the employee to find some distance and detach more easily from work stresses.

#### 2) Effectiveness of taking a break outdoors

- **Employees reported feeling a lower level of stress** after the four weeks when they took a daily individual break, whether indoors or outdoors.
- **Employees who took a break outdoors in proximity to nature reported a stress level that was found to be lower** than that of participants who took their break indoors.

- In general, taking a daily break allows employees to reduce stress.
- Proximity to nature outdoors adds to the break's positive effect on employees' stress level. Theories on the benefits of nature suggest that proximity to nature has a calming effect, while improving cognitive and adaptive abilities.\*

\*Kaplan, S. (1995). The restorative benefits of nature: Toward an integrative framework. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 15(3), 169-182. doi:10.1016/0272-4944(95)90001-2

### Because studies must always be interpreted with caution

Participants in the two studies were mostly women; the conclusions need to be confirmed with male employees. Furthermore, the effectiveness of an outdoor break in proximity to nature consists solely of stress perceived by employees. The authors suggest continuing the research to measure the effect on other organizational indicators, such as productivity or absenteeism.

## ACTIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

**Simple and practical actions** can be **put in place** for your employees to offer them opportunities to adopt healthy life habits. Here are a few concrete actions to promote taking an outdoor break close to nature to employees.

Action step	Specific ideas	Example
• <b>Arrange</b> the physical environment.	→ Think about how to arrange the elements to make the outdoor environment attractive for employees.	→ Ensure that employees see the outdoor amenities from indoors. They will then be motivated to use them. → Position tables and benches so they face pleasant natural elements such as trees, mountains or water. Showcase nature!
	→ Maintain the environment.	→ Make sure you maintain outdoor amenities so employees feel comfortable and find it pleasant to use them.
	→ If it's not possible to use the outdoor environment, think about landscaping the indoor environment!	→ If your workplace does not allow you to arrange outdoor spaces showcasing nature, think about incorporating nature in the interior rest areas, whether by adding plants, putting up wallpaper showing a landscape, or installing a fountain.
• Adopt a <b>culture</b> that promotes taking breaks outdoors.	→ Send a clear message to employees.	→ Encourage employees to use spaces that give them contact with nature; promote it through posters or emails.
	→ Set an example.	→ As a manager, you too can spend time in these places every day. This will only bring benefits for you as well!

## RECOMMENDATION FROM OUR EXPERT

An environmental intervention promoting **proximity to nature** is **simple** and requires **little effort** on the part of the organization or the employee. Knowing that such an intervention offers health benefits, there is no reason to overlook it! Still, it is important to understand that individual approaches to stress management remain secondary ways of controlling employees' stress levels. You must first put in place organizational measures to reduce sources of stress at work and therefore to promote employees' health.

## FULL REFERENCE

[Largo-Wight, E., Wlyudka, P. S., Merten, J. W., & Cuvelier, E. A. \(2017\). Effectiveness and feasibility of a 10-minute employee stress intervention: Outdoor Booster Break. \*Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health\*, 32\(3\), 1-13.](#)

