



If you garden, you know the psychological benefits of getting your hands in the dirt. As my farmer father used to say, “It just feels good to work the land.” And, research shows, most gardeners report a mood elevation after a stint of planting, tilling, weeding, and the like.

Well, a new study out of the University of Colorado may have discovered why this occurs. It turns out that soil contains a specific kind of bacterium that mitigates stress and anxiety through its anti-inflammatory properties. We have known for some time that inflammatory responses in the body undermine mental as well as physical well-being, exhibiting a close association with depression and anxiety in particular.

This discovery may point to new treatments for mood disorders. As the researchers indicated, there are likely many soil-based bacteria that positively influence emotional states, most still awaiting discovery.

However, there is also a broader implication to this study. The prevalence of anxiety and stress-related disorders has climbed dramatically in recent decades. Many mental health experts attribute this disturbing trend to over-work, technology-induced agitation and attention deficits, multi-tasking, and other corrosive influences from our modern, IT saturated world. No doubt these factors take their tolls, but the “dirt study” suggests another causative explanation.

At the beginning of the 20th century, over 50% of Americans worked in agriculture or other land-based jobs. Today, that number is under 2%, and falling. What’s more, through much of the 1900’s, Americans spent far more time outside than today. The percentage of us, particularly kids, engaged in outdoor activities has plummeted in recent years. Today, the average child spends less than 10 minutes a day in unstructured play in the natural world. In my youth, we measured that average in hours, not minutes.

A burgeoning body of research in eco-psychology has established the many and substantial mental health benefits of nature interaction. Yet, most Americans deprive themselves of these benefits by living most of their lives indoors. So, putting all these factors together, it's possible our epidemic of stress and anxiety (the number one mental health diagnosis) stems, in no small part, from a collective failure to get our hands in the dirt.

As we remove ourselves more and more from the natural world, we fail to benefit from the healing capacities it provides. Some of these positive effects are largely psychological, while others, such as those examined in the dirt study, emerge from physical and sensory interactions with nature and its mysterious restorative powers.

So, if stressed out and anxious, along with traditional remedies such as exercise, nutrition, sleep and contemplative practices, consider getting your hands in the soil.

As renowned naturalist John Muir stated, "Of all the paths you take in life, make sure a few of them are dirt."

Out of My Mind Melds: Read more of them on my website: philipchard.com