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Horticultural therapy enriched senior's life

Studies support living near green spaces improves long term well-being, and that spending as little as 20 minutes daily outside in fresh air boosts vitality, increasing physical and mental energy

Written by
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The benefits of nature are indeed undeniable and the evidence based research to support exists. Studies support living near green spaces like parks improves long term well-being, and that spending as little as 20 minutes daily outside in fresh air boosts vitality, increasing physical and mental energy.

In May 2013, I received a call from a home-care agency which services seniors living at home in Somerset and Hunterdon counties. The agency, Right at Home, was seeking my help with one of their senior patients, a then 86-year-old who resides at home. She was disconnected, disengaged, clinically diagnosed with depression, lethargic, genuinely uninterested, restricted to her home and wheelchair and reliant on live-in caregiver (provided by the agency), for all of her daily needs. All of her family members are deceased except for one niece, who is retired from the Chicago Tribune resides in the mid-west. Socially isolated, the client had not been outside in months because she was afraid to leave her home. The agency called upon my services, on behalf of the legal guardian, an attorney working with the client's niece, who could not get her to take interest in, or engage her in any activities.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Studies support living near green spaces like parks improves long term well-being
- 86-year-old woman was disconnected, disengaged, clinically diagnosed with depression
- After 200 horticultural therapy sessions together and she has purpose in her days

This month we achieved 200 horticultural therapy sessions together and she has purpose in her days. We have three sessions weekly with session time running anywhere from 90 minutes to two and a half hours in duration each time. We have spent more than 600 hours together. Our activities take place in her indoor “garden” she grew with plants at every stage of development. She is getting nature inside. She has created countless flower arrangements, propagated plants by cuttings, and division, started plants of vegetables, herbs and annuals from seed, drying flowers, caring for indoor house plants, both flowering and nonflowering, enjoying and responding to blooms, colors, fragrances, anticipating things to come. She is nurturing dozens of plants. Every session is customized with goals, a planned activity, or activities, activities completed, documented objectives and outcomes and recommended activities for the next session. Every session now begins with a sensory stimulating “warm up” to engage her mind, her muscles, her expression and communication, and her senses. She feels safe. She is empowered every step in the customized program process. She is successful. She is proud.

Research by Dr. Garuth Chalfont on “The Power of Nature and Outdoors: Architecture, Nature and People” was presented at the 42nd Annual Conference of the American Horticultural Therapy Association in Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania in October. Chalfont shared that through science and research, as well as anecdote, we now understand much more fully the importance of connection to nature for people with dementia. Establishing and maintaining a connection is vitally important. Plenty of evidence exists about the benefits for older people and those with dementia. For instance, nature and being outdoors provides sensory stimulation, improves orientation to time and space, helps regulate circadian rhythms, lowers blood pressure, improves attention and focus, and also stimulates communication by enhancing and facilitating social interaction.

Research also shows that contact with nature and being outdoors helps to reduce agitation and aggression. Exercise and movement outdoors has been shown to improve sleep patterns, mood, memory, appetite, strength, agility and balance. We now also know that nature contact and being outdoors contributes to emotional and spiritual well-being, and provides cognitive stimulation. These are some of the reasons why a lifestyle that includes nature and outdoors delays the onset of dementia for people living at home. What was once intuitive is increasingly evidence-based.

Like Chalfont my approach with individuals and groups with dementia and dementia-related and non-related illness is to engage and stimulate the senses in ways that interest the client.

“Gardening has been a part of my aunt’s life for years,” her niece said. “In June, 2011 my aunt had a stroke. Hurricane Sandy hit New Jersey on October 29, 2012 and on the 30th my aunt was removed to a shelter. For 14 days and she was away from her home. All of her plants died. She didn’t speak, she was depressed. She was anxious. She was despondent. She was not going to leave her home again.”



Client, 88, demonstrating planning in gathering rose petals for sachet, while flower arranging. The petals will dry in a champagne glass, as a “toast to flowers”, as shared by the client, created a new use for the glass to celebrate fun in arranging and drying. (PHOTO COURTESY OF LAURA DEPRADO)

Through Supportive Architecture, as referred by Chalfont, windows and doors have a role to play in moderating sunlight and daylight for my client and making possible a horticultural area for growing plants and growing nature inside. Our sessions take place in the parlor (which at one time was used for gatherings and entertaining guests). Her bay windows deliver light in, and I have set up “stations”, where we conduct our activities: The first station is in front of the large bay windows where many plants of herbs, geraniums, orchids and cacti are getting plenty of full sun. The second station is at the Activities table, where we engage in Supportive Nature, connecting in seasonally-related planting, transplanting, seed starting, flower arranging, pressing and arranging flowers, and problem solving when nature isn’t growing the way you like.

“I am amazed to see what my aunt can accomplish in the horticultural therapy sessions,” her niece said. “I know it makes her happy and alive again, and the act of creating something is hers.”

The agency working with the client also is pleased with her progress.

“When I speak to her about her recent accomplishments, she literally glows as we look at her work,” said Carl Kuebler, owner of Right at Home. “As our business is dedicated to keeping people at home and improving their lives, it is amazing when we are able to work with partners who can bring that something special that allows our clients to live a richer life.”

The client looks forward to the sessions. Horticultural therapy allows her make decisions, as she has no decisions to make at this stage of her life. Someone is paying the bills, bringing her meals, changing the channels for her. The sessions allow her to decide what she wants to grow or make during the season, nurture, water, and prune. In September my client’s niece visited her aunt, and had planned on watching a session with her aunt and I. Instead, I planned a session where my client and her niece reconnected and participated in flower arranging. “My aunt showed me what flowers to use, what stems to cut, how long or short to cut the stems, and where to place, and how much water to put inside the jar,” her niece said. The parlor supports horticulture activities. Nature provides sensory stimulation and the client communicates, expresses and interacts using plants.

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