



Doors to Wellbeing Quarterly

Newsletter

TAKE A HIKE

Article written by: Tracy A. Carney

A Nature Prescription

Imagine discovering something that radically improves your overall mental health and physical wellness. Like many others, I had spent years receiving mental health treatment: inpatient hospitalization, day treatment programs, and medication regimens. While I made some progress with these treatments, in 2009 I discovered something that radically improved my health and wellness. A friend invited me to hike on the Appalachian Trail. She was going to hike 171 miles from Fontana Dam, N.C. to Springer Mountain, Georgia. Now you must understand, I had just turned 50 and had never walked 10 miles on a road, let alone in the mountains. So, with no hiking experience, I said yes. Together my friend, her golden retriever and I hiked for 21 days and completed a 171-mile section of the Appalachian trail.

To tell you this hike was life-changing would be an understatement. Everything in my life changed after this experience. It was not just a walk in the woods--climbing 5,000 ft mountains was the most physical exertion I had ever experienced. Hiking 10 miles a day, every day, caused my depression to lift unlike any medication.

Living away from the lights and noise of civilization, living among the trees, rising with the sun, hiking all day, and getting into my tent at dark allowed me to experience restful sleep. Getting adequate sleep had been a constant battle for me but I now knew what a circadian rhythm was! Another benefit of hiking was losing weight, the weight I had gained from years of inpatient hospitalizations and medications.

Standing on a mountain top, it had just taken me three hours to climb and seeing the vast beauty of the wilderness is still one of the most spiritual experiences of my life. These are the times I feel most connected to God, with nature as the grand cathedral.

Out on the trail, I found myself again. I was not a consumer, a psych patient, or a person in need of care. I was a strong woman, and I was a hiker, just like everyone else. I found freedom from the stigma that comes with mental illness.



Pictured is Tracy and her granddaughter! ¹



A Wellness Path

After this experience, I knew I had found an important wellness path, long distance hiking in nature. That was 14 years ago and to this day, at age 64, I still hike, a lot. I have hiked the entire 2,190-mile Appalachian Trail and many other long-distance trails. This type of exercise has allowed me to manage depressive symptoms, kept me physically fit and ended my need for medication. Let me be clear, I believe in medication, but for me, if disciplined exercise outdoors works just as well or better, I will choose exercise over the use of medication. I began to wonder, am I the only one who has experienced this? Is there any research that proves or shows that exercising outdoors makes you feel better? I went on a quest to find out

Show Me the Research

I began to look at research studies on this topic and I was shocked at what I found. There was not one or two studies, but hundreds of studies on the mental and physical benefits of exercising and spending time in nature. This baffled me because in all my mental health treatment, I never had a doctor or healthcare provider encourage me to spend time outside. The mental health treatment I received was always provided indoors or on locked wards. The only time patients were allowed outdoors was to smoke. I want to share with you what I learned on this search. Research shows that people who spend just 20 minutes a day in a nature setting experience:

- Increased productivity
- Decrease in depressive symptoms/exercise as effective as antidepressants.
- Improved mood and elevated self-esteem
- Lower blood pressure & cortisol levels
- Improved sleep and concentration
- Increased social interaction/ a sense of community.

The healing power of nature has been recognized for a long time. In the mid-19th century, people like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, wrote about the benefits of spending time in nature. They advocated to preserve wilderness areas for the public good. There are over four hundred studies on the health benefits of spending time in nature.

Park Rx

These positive research outcomes have caused the health and nature movement to grow in the U.S. There is now a focus on programs and interventions that include a healthcare provider who encourages the people they serve to spend time in nature to improve their health and wellness. Park Prescription or "Park Rx" programs are gaining in popularity. These programs encourage physicians to "prescribe" physical activity in park settings. Physicians educate people on the health benefits of spending time in nature, connect them to near-by parks, and together set goals with information including: the activity, day/days of the week and for how long. The physician then includes this written goal/prescription in the person's overall treatment plan. I hope that one day, soon, we hear our doctors and therapist say things to us like: "Get Out" "Take a Hike" "Get Lost" and "Be an Outsider" and we would become 100% compliant and do just that!

REFLECTIONS ON PRIDE MONTH

A personal statement from Matthew Federici, CEO of The Copeland Center

Pride month is important to me because I value diversity and inclusion and recognize the harmful impacts of the discriminatory, hateful, and restrictive worldviews that have existed and been rooted in the worlds I grew up in. I support the conscious raising and welcoming practices of thinking about how pronouns are used. From this practice, I have learned from the 2SLGBTQQIPA+ community that our historical use of pronouns has limited and disconnected assumptions about gender identity. These assumptions not only have a limiting and disconnecting impact on my relationship with others but also with myself.

I have never felt misgendered by the pronouns used growing up, but I also never felt supported to question or consciously think about my gender as an important aspect of my identity. In doing my own work to heal from early trauma, I found that questioning gender identity and associations with binary gender was very important to my healing. The associations and assumptions of binary gender pronouns have many limiting and negative impacts when the space between male and female gender identity is so much more nuanced and complex.



This is why over the past decade of listening to and learning from the 2SLGBTQQIPA+ community, I have discovered "they and them" support my wellness. I can admit it is a work in progress for me, and I make mistakes and get caught up in traditional mindsets that I am trying to change for myself and in connection with others. It is "OK" to make those mistakes; what's not "OK" for me is to stop working on getting to better know and respect myself and the vast diversity of people in my life because that intersection is where I connect with wellness, learn, and grow the most. I like to consider myself as an ally to this community but hugely a person who benefits from the diversity this community provides in my world.

PEER SUPPORT IN COLLEGE

Mental Health America National, Doors to Wellbeing, and Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities have partnered together to create a report around peer support in college campuses.

You can view our report titled "**Peer Support in College Mental Health Initiatives: Learning From The Peer Support Movement**" by clicking [here](#).



If you know of any peer run programs happening on college campuses, please contact us at d2winfo@copelandcenter.com and let us know!

NATIONAL MODEL STANDARDS

SAMHSA has collaborated with federal, state, tribal, territorial, and local partners including peer specialists to develop the National Model Standards for Peer Support Certification, inclusive of substance use, mental health, and family peer certifications.

The National Model Standards are designed to accelerate universal adoption, recognition, and integration of the peer workforce, and strengthen the foundation set by the peer workforce, reinforced by the Core Competencies, and implemented by our state, local, and tribal partners.

To view the National Model Standards, click [here](#).

Check out our upcoming webinar:

"SAMHSA's National Model Standards for Peer Support Certification," presented by: Paolo del Vecchio and David Awadalla

Tuesday, August 29, 2023 @ 2pm ET

Click here to register

N.A.P.S. UPCOMING CONFERENCE



The National Association of Peer Supporters is announcing their 2023 national conference titled "Pathways."

The conference will be held in Norfolk, Virginia on October 25th and 26th, 2023.

If you want to explore pathways of peer support with other peer supporters across the nation, you can register, [here!](#)

N.A.P.S. is also still accepting workshop proposal, **which must be submitted by July 7, 2023.** To submit your proposal, click [here](#).

Peer Specialist Webinar Series

"Everything You Need To Know About Estate Planning, But Are Afraid to Ask," presented by: LaVerne Miller

Tuesday, July 25, 2023 @2pm ET

Click here to register

**LOOK FORWARD
TO OUR NEXT
NEWSLETTER!
...OCTOBER 2023**

*Doors to To Wellbeing is a Program of
the Copeland Center*



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FOR WELLNESS AND RECOVERY

This newsletter was developed under grant number 1H79SM082653-01 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The views, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.