

Healing Through Place and Mental Health: Exploring How Environments Reflect and Influence Mental Health Across the Lifespan

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ABSTRACT

Human is a product of both nature and nurture. Environmental contexts play an important role in shaping our mental well-being. This process continues across different stages of human life. Research from environmental psychology, public health, and developmental science shows that both natural and man-made environments shape emotional conditions, cognitive functioning, resilience, and overall well-being. This review paper brings together the findings from different fields to understand how environmental factors, such as urban crowding, pollution, climate-related pressure, limited access to green places, and environmental inequalities, affect mental health across the lifespan and what necessary measures need to be adopted to promote mental health through the environment.

Evidence from different studies suggests that exposure to an unhealthy and poor-quality environment causes mental health problems. Whereas long-term exposure to adverse environmental conditions increases the risk of chronic mental illness, such as anxiety, depression, trauma-related experiences, and intellectual decline. These effects are especially seen among adolescents, older adults, and the socially underprivileged population. Recent discussions on climate anxiety and ecological grief further show how environmental changes degrade psychological well-being. This review paper highlights the importance of combining trauma-informed approaches with environmental justice to ensure fair access to supportive and restorative environments for people in general.

The paper also discusses growing evidence on nature-based therapies, nature-added urban design, restorative environments, and community-based resilience strategies. Addressing environmental impact on mental health requires public awareness and collaboration among psychologists, educators, urban planners, public health professionals, and policymakers. Understanding mental health from an environmental point of view can help society develop preventive strategies and create places that support resilience, well-being, and sustainable development across generations.

Keywords: environment, mental health, lifespan development, Child-friendly cities, environmental stressors, urbanization, green spaces, climate change, socio-environmental inequities, vulnerable populations, restorative environments, ecological psychology, resilience, trauma-informed approach, environmental justice, public policy

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health is shaped not only by individual psychological factors but also by our surroundings (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory reflects that human development occurs within interconnected environmental systems where each one continuously influences the other (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Recent research increasingly supports the idea that physical environments, both natural and man-made, play a significant role in psychological well-being. Mental health conditions contribute significantly to the global burden of disease. It is estimated that they

account for 32.4% of years lived with disability (YLDs) and 13.0% of disability-adjusted life-years

(DALYs). Depression and anxiety are the leading contributors to this burden (Daniel Vigo et al., 2016). Studies suggest that environmental stressors act as ongoing psychosocial pressures that affect emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, and stress responses. At the same time, “supportive environments such as green spaces, water bodies, and nature-based designs help individuals recover from stress and build resilience” (Bratman et al., 2019). The above studies bring evidence of how environments influence mental health from childhood to old age. It also discusses policy implications and emphasizes the importance of integrating environmental justice and trauma-informed approaches into mental health frameworks.

Objectives

The prime objectives of this research are

- To review existing literature studies on the relationship between the environment and mental health
- To analyse how environmental conditions influence psychological well-being across the lifespan
- To find out environmental inequalities and climate-related psychological distress
- To identify and develop scopes for policies and interventions to support mental health

Methodology

This study has taken a narrative review approach, integrating research from psychology, environmental health, psychiatry, and public policy.

Databases Consulted

Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and ResearchGate

Search Keywords

Environment and mental health, green spaces and mental illness, urbanization and health, climate change and mental health, pollution and cognition, ecological psychology, restorative environments, lifespan development

Inclusion Criteria

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Publications between 2005 and 2025, and a few older studies
- Research on environmental influences on mental health
- Full-text articles

Exclusion Criteria

- Clinical studies not related to the environmental context
- Studies without a focus on mental health

Literature Review

Theoretical Grounds

Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a useful framework for understanding environmental influences on mental health (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory suggests that development takes place at multiple levels of environmental systems, such as micro, meso, exo, and

macro, which influence each other. Environmental stressors like unsafe neighbourhoods or climate change can affect individuals' quality of life and influence their psychological states.

Attention Restoration Theory

Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) suggested that natural environments help restore cognitive functioning by improving attention. Studies also show that spending time in natural environments like parks, gardens, forests, or green spaces helps the brain function better and reduces negative thoughts (Bratman et al., 2015).

Stress Reduction Theory

“Exposure to nature decreases physiological stress responses” (Ulrich, 1983). Brain imaging studies show reduced activity in areas linked to negative thinking, such as the subgenual cingulate cortex, after exposure to natural environments (Bratman et al., 2015).

Urbanization and Mental Health

Urban environments do provide us with several opportunities, but also create psychological suffering. “Research indicates that urban residents have higher rates of anxiety, mood disorders, and schizophrenia compared to rural populations” (Peen et al., 2010).

Key stressors include:

- Noise pollution
- Air pollution
- Overcrowding
- Lack of human communication and sharing
- Limited access to nature

“Air pollution has been linked to increased depression risk and neuroinflammation” (Braithwaite et al., 2019). Environmental challenges further increase risk, as marginalized groups are more often exposed to hazardous environmental conditions and have limited access to safe living areas and green spaces.

Urban Planning in Promoting Mental Health

Mental health promotion should not be viewed solely as the responsibility of healthcare professionals. Rather, it requires collaborative efforts from multiple stakeholders, including urban planners, municipal authorities, educational institutions, healthcare organizations, residential communities, policymakers, architects, and environmental agencies. Mental health awareness among these stakeholders is essential to ensure that built and natural environments are intentionally designed as healing spaces that promote psychological well-being, resilience, and healthy development across the lifespan.

Creating child-friendly environments through safe neighborhoods, effective traffic management, proper waste and water disposal systems, pollution control, accessible green spaces, and equitable access to healthcare, education, and psychosocial support services contribute significantly to children's emotional security and overall mental health. Such environments reduce chronic stressors while fostering opportunities for play, social interaction, learning, and emotional growth. Integrating environmental considerations into counseling, school mental health programs, and community-based interventions can

further strengthen preventive mental healthcare by using natural and restorative settings as therapeutic resources.

Investment in healthy environments today is an investment in healthier citizens tomorrow. Cities that prioritize environmental quality, safety, and emotional well-being are more likely to nurture happier, healthier, and socially responsible future generations, reinforcing the principle that positive developmental outcomes begin with supportive places to grow.

Green Spaces and Psychological Well-being

Research continues to show a strong link between green spaces and mental health. A recent meta-analysis found that “exposure to green spaces is significantly associated with a lower risk of common psychiatric disorders, including depression and anxiety” (Zhang et al., 2024).

Some other studies reflect that “greater exposure to residential green and blue spaces is associated with a reduced incidence of psychiatric disorders among adults and older populations” (Liu et al., 2024).

Early-life exposure is also important. “Exposure to natural environments during early life stages contributes to improved emotional regulation and reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression” (Dadvand et al., 2015; Engemann et al., 2019).

A large longitudinal study found that “childhood exposure to green spaces significantly reduced the risk of psychiatric disorders in adulthood” (Engemann et al., 2019).

These benefits may occur through:

- Awareness and planning
- Social interaction
- Physical activities
- Reduced negative thoughts
- Improved decision-making skills

A study by Twohig-Bennett and Jones (2018) shows that exposure to green space reduces stress, anxiety, and depression. Nature-based interventions like forest tours and ecotherapy are also effective in improving mental health.

Environmental Influences Across the Lifespan Childhood and Adolescence

Children are highly sensitive to the environments they live in. Polluted and unsafe surroundings can lead to emotional and behavioral problems, while access to green spaces improves attention and development (Dadvand et al., 2015). Approximately two-thirds of U.S. adults reported experiencing “at least a little” eco-anxiety, defined as a “chronic fear of environmental doom” (Susan Clayton et al., 2017).

Adulthood

Adulthood brings more practical efforts and challenges, such as work pressure, lifestyle changes, family pressure, limited activity or recreation time, etc., which influence mental health to a great extent. Availability and access to green spaces help reduce stress and other mental health issues.

Older Adults

Old age usually brings less professional engagements,

more lonely time and less social contacts. Older adults can benefit from accessible green areas, social interaction, and mental and physical engagement.

However, these things remain a challenge and need a lot of systematic planning and implementation by the govt. local authorities and people in general.

Climate Disturbance and Psychological Distress

Climate change affects mental health both directly and indirectly. “Extreme weather events increase PTSD, depression, and anxiety rates” (Berry et al., 2010).

Common symptoms include:

- Eco-anxiety
- Ecological grief

The effects of these conditions are more severe among marginalized populations due to fewer resources, a lack of awareness, and a higher risk of vulnerability.

Socio-Environmental Inequities and Environmental Justice

Environmental justice focuses on fair distribution of environmental benefits and risks (e.g., United States Environmental Protection Agency). However, low-income communities often face higher exposure to environmental hazards.

These inequalities increase psychological vulnerability, especially when combined with poverty and limited access to healthcare. Trauma-informed planning recognizes that unsafe environments can worsen mental illness along with other health issues and emphasizes the need for supportive spaces.

Restorative Environmental Design and Intervention Techniques

The key approaches include:

- Proper planning
- Nature-based therapies
- Community gardens
- Urban greening projects

These strategies enhance well-being, reduce stress, and strengthen communities. WHO (2021) also recommends integrating green infrastructure into urban planning.

Environmental Determinants of Mental Health in LMICs

Most research comes from high-income countries, but the issue is highly relevant in low and middle-income countries (LMIC). Rapid urbanization, pollution, and lack of green spaces are creating mental health challenges in countries like India. Highly developed cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Bengaluru face high environmental stress, affecting people’s quality of life. Access to safe and natural spaces is extremely challenging in such places. Being a resident of Bhubaneswar, Odisha, I have observed the growing environmental problems over the past 10 years.

Therefore, integrating mental health into environmental and urban policies is significantly important in low and middle-income countries (LMIC).

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- Promote mental health literacy among city planners, municipal authorities, educational

institutions, healthcare organizations, and residential communities.

- Incorporate mental health impact assessments into urban planning and infrastructure development.
- Develop child-friendly neighborhoods with safe roads, effective traffic management, accessible parks, and recreational spaces.
- Strengthen environmental protection through effective waste management, water and sanitation, noise reduction, and air pollution control.
- Ensure equitable access to healthcare, education, counseling, and emotional support services within communities.
- Encourage the use of parks, gardens, and restorative natural environments as complementary settings for counseling, psychosocial interventions, and mental health promotion.

Critical Analysis and Synthesis

The above-reviewed studies consistently show a strong association between environmental conditions and mental health. Evidence suggests that environmental exposure affects stress, emotions, and cognition across the lifespan.

However, the limitations also need to be taken care of with effective planning. Many studies are cross-sectional, which makes it difficult to point out the cause-and-effect relationships. Longitudinal studies are needed for supportive evidence and a better understanding.

Most of the studies are held in high-income countries, creating gaps in low and middle-income countries (LMIC). Their cultural and socioeconomic differences also affect the outcomes.

There are also inconsistencies in how environmental factors are measured, which make comparisons difficult. Standardized approaches need to be developed and carried out uniformly.

Finally, there is a gap between research and policy.

Although evidence supports environmental interventions, they are not always implemented along with the policies effectively.

Despite these challenges, the overall evidence highlights the importance of environmental factors in mental health and the need to address these challenges.

Implications

Theoretical Implications:

Environmental psychology needs to include trauma-informed and justice-based perspectives as a curriculum and research areas as a preventive measure and better implementations.

Policy Implications: Urban planning should consider mental health as an integral part of the design and public health. Environmental policies must include psychological strategies.

Practice Implications: Mental health professionals should consider environmental factors. Schools, workplaces, and public areas should adopt well-

planned designs.

Future Research Directions

- Longitudinal and experimental studies
- Research in low and middle-income countries (LMIC)
- Climate and youth mental health studies
- Evaluation of community-based interventions
- Well-designed equipment and parameters for assessment

Conclusion

Mental health cannot be fully understood without considering environmental conditions. Both natural and built environments play a significant role in shaping psychological well-being and promoting health across the lifespan. Environmental stressors, climate degradation, and hazardous conditions increase mental health risks, especially for vulnerable populations.

Integrating ecological psychology, trauma-informed care, and environmental justice can create a healthy environment for better mental health outcomes. By connecting research, policy, and practice, it is possible to create environments that support healing, resilience, and long-term well-being. Future approaches to mental health should recognize environmental factors as essential and include them in preventive measures, policy making, and clinical practice.

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