

Ageing, Nature, and Long-Term Care

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Connecting with Nature Shouldn't be a 'Luxury' in LTC

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We need to create small homes that focus on quality of life while providing compassionate care.

Nature makes a huge contribution to our health and well-being.

This first became clear to me years ago when I spent time with a friend who was struggling with mental health issues. When we sat in his apartment, he would often ruminate and be very anxious. When we walked in nature, I could feel a reduction in his stress and a quieting of his mind. We were often silent together, appreciating the nature or having a meaningful conversation.

In the last decade, the evidence of the value of nature in our lives has become overwhelming. Connecting with nature impacts our well-being, reduces depression and anxiety, and helps our perspective. Research has shown that nature opens our senses and enables us to feel joy.

We all know what it feels like to experience a beautiful sunset, view a starlite sky, hear birds singing, or stand in a garden in full bloom. This often generates a sense of awe. Researchers have discovered that even a few minutes a day with nature can nurture attention and well-being.

Too many people in our society have little access to nature. Frail elders who live in long-term care facilities are perhaps the most nature deprived. My father spent the last year of his life in a long-term care institution. The only time he got outside was when his children or grandchildren took him for a walk. Most people in his facility never got outside.

This is typical of long-term care institutions, where large buildings lack balconies and access to the outdoors. A staff member once said to me, when I was encouraging more connection with nature, “we are busy, we do not have time for that kind of luxury.” This sentiment denies that as humans, we are part of nature and we need regular connection with fresh air, gentle breezes, and soil beneath our feet.

During the pandemic, there have rightly been scathing critiques of long-term care facilities in Ontario. Living in an institution has been shown to be very restricted and routinized. There is little or no focus on people’s need for variety and engagement, two fundamentals for human development.

As we think about designing alternatives to institutions, we need to consider how to create real homes that focus on quality of life while providing compassionate care. Nature needs to be part of this design work.

Imagine a home in a neighbourhood where a few people live together with staff support. Every bedroom has large windows with sunlight coming in throughout the day. There are sliding doors off the living room where you can go outside to a large garden. There are flowers, bird feeders, and large trees. Elders with a range of frailties spend time in the garden, either sitting, walking, or

gardening in the soil with raised flower beds. You not only notice nature in this setting but can also feel it in your body and soul.

While this image does not seem like long-term care, this is the reality in several European countries that have created community homes as an alternative to large institutions. Denmark, for example, stopped building large institutions in 1984, and has put money into smaller homes with a particular focus on people's connection with nature.

Similarly, the Green House Project offers smaller homes for frail elders throughout the United States. A core principle of Green House is 'access to outdoors.' They emphasize biophilia, which means a focus on life and community, with plants indoors and easy access to nature outdoors. Research on the Green House model reports that for residents and families, these smaller places 'feel more like a real home.' Research confirms that people with dementia do better in smaller homes where they can participate in the life of the home and have access to nature.

In contrast to the medical model that is dominant in long-term care facilities, a social-community model of care in smaller homes takes a holistic account of the needs, strengths, interests, and capacities of the people being supported. Attention is paid to people's need for nature and all that that entails, including fresh air, sunlight, and the joyful connection with all kinds of sensory experiences. As indigenous elders have taught us, nature is a wise teacher that should not be denied to people just because they are older and frail.

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