

How your brain is wired to want a stunning view



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When Debra Chammas went high-rise condo shopping in Chicago a few years ago, her real estate agent discouraged her from looking at a third-floor unit.

“Typically, no one wants a low floor,” Chammas says.

But this condo was special — not because of its features, but because of its view overlooking a park and a gazebo.

“As soon as I walked in, I loved the feeling,” Chammas says. “It’s a calm feeling, seeing all the trees. And in the wintertime, once the leaves have shed, you see Lake Michigan and the waves rolling up on the sand.”

She snapped up the condo and renovated it, building a custom padded window seat in the bedroom so she could gaze at the view.

As head of global marketing and sales procurement for Wm. Wrigley Jr. Co., Chammas worked long hours and did a lot of international travel. Looking out at trees — and sometimes water — gave her “a disconnect,” she says.

“The park and greenery and lake in the winter are more calming and relaxing, like a bit of a retreat.”

Restorative effect

Chammas’ reaction is not unusual, psychologists say. Nature has a restorative effect not only on people in the midst of it but those who simply glimpse it through a window. In one study, psychologist Rachel Kaplan found that office workers with a view of nature liked their jobs more, enjoyed better health and reported greater life satisfaction.

In another published study, hospital patients who had a view of a natural setting were released sooner, needed less medication and received better patient evaluations than other patients.

How does seeing nature make us feel better?

The answer goes back to philosopher and early psychologist William James, who described two forms of human attention: directed and involuntary. Directed attention is what we use to focus on tasks demanding concentration, like reading a research paper or working on an Excel spreadsheet. Involuntary attention, which occurs when we gaze out a window, requires no concentration at all.

Building on James' ideas, modern psychologists like Kaplan developed "attention restoration theory," which says that tasks that require concentration are draining, but engaging with nature — even through a window — replenishes exhausted mental resources.

"A lot of evidence suggests that view does have an impact," says Jason Duvall, a lecturer at the University of Michigan's environment program, who studied with Kaplan.

A University of Illinois study examined Chicago public housing residents and found that those with a view of greenery coped better with stress and there were fewer incidences of violence as compared to those whose views featured concrete and asphalt. They also socialized more and felt safer.

Exposure to nature causes a reduction in heart rate, blood pressure and levels of "stress hormone" cortisol, Duvall says. "It activates a relaxation response that counteracts the stress response. ... You're giving the direct attention system a break and allowing it to recover and restore."

You don't have to travel to get the benefits

Research suggests that even very short exposures to nature can have a positive effect through what Duvall calls "micro-restorative experiences."

"You don't have to travel to a national park to get these benefits — you can get them by looking out at your backyard," Duvall says.

People who have experienced the positive effects of a property with a view are reluctant to let it go.

Soon after buying her view condo, Debra Chammas married, and she and her husband lived there for several years until his job took them to New Jersey in 2010.

She still hasn't sold the condo.

"Selling it would break my heart, so we're holding onto it and renting it out," Chammas says.

—*Teresa Meek, Tribune Content Solutions*

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