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Sane in the City

What do healthy urban neighborhoods look like?

BY CHRISTI CHIDESTER AND ALEX DIXON

FOR YEARS, research has shown how living in an urban environment can take its toll—not just on residents' physical health and safety, but on their mental health as well.

Yet more recently, researchers have been focusing on how a city's planning and design can promote positive mental health. Though this research movement is still new, early findings have identified some critical features of the urban landscape that might even give urban dwellers an edge over their suburban counterparts.

Research has documented that pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods can be particularly important for maintaining good mental health, especially in the elderly. A study published in the April issue of the *Journal of the American Geriatric Society* found that senior men showed fewer symptoms of depression if they lived in more "walkable" neighborhoods, which have smaller blocks, fewer office buildings, and greater proximity to grocery stores, restaurants, and retail shopping areas.

Prior research had suggested a link between exercise and reduced depression. But in this study, the men's

levels of depression did not depend on how much they exercised. So the benefits of walkable neighborhoods seemed to go beyond their ability to encourage physical activity, suggesting that "it's something about the environment itself" that's associated with lower levels of depression, according to Ethan Berke, the study's lead author.

Berke speculates that walkable neighborhoods might be so important because they promote social connection and reduce isolation, a major predictor of depression. "If people are out walking to destinations, they run into each other," he says. "And then they talk, or interact, or share ideas." He adds that city streets—with their shorter blocks, more direct routes, and greater number of intersections—can be more walkable than suburban ones. They also have greater population density, which increases the probability that people meet one another by chance.

Other research has focused on vehicle traffic in cities. A recent study led by Yan Song of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, compared traffic levels with residents' physical and mental health in different neighborhoods of Los Angeles. They found that, after controlling for a variety of factors, people showed more symptoms of depression when they believed their neighborhoods were overrun with cars.

But Song and her co-authors emphasize that cities can take steps to address the mental health problems associated with traffic. In subsequent research, they've found preliminary evidence that green, open spaces, such as parks and other recreational areas, may offset some of the psychological effects of traffic. Other researchers have made similar findings. For instance, a study published in the journal *Environment and Behavior* in 2001 by researchers at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, found that nature—in a form as minimal as a few trees and some grass—could reduce levels of aggression among urban public housing residents.

In their Los Angeles study, Song and her colleagues also suggest that cities can help alleviate traffic stress by promoting alternative modes of transportation, such as buses and bikes paths, and by keeping streets with heavy traffic away from largely residential areas.

But recommendations like these can be hard to enact.

"There are plans for better streets, recirculating traffic, and for charging a fee for driving during busy or congested periods in the downtown area of San Francisco," says Rhajiv Bhatia, the director of Occupational and Environmental Health in San Francisco's Department of Public Health. "But the reality is that we have not done anything, really, to limit cars. Traffic is growing—everywhere."

Bhatia said that last year, San Francisco's planning department tried to discourage car ownership by reducing the number of parking spaces per new residential unit. Their efforts were strongly opposed by developers, who assumed they could not sell new housing units without parking spaces.

Still, several groups have made inroads toward promoting some of the urban reforms researchers

suggest. In San Francisco, for example, the nonprofit Neighborhood Parks Council (NPC) has worked to revitalize neighborhoods by advocating for safe, accessible parks, mobilizing volunteers to help maintain parks, and supporting park groups, where people can meet by working on their local park together.

"We know the research suggests that if people are getting outside and having social contact, feeling safe, and are engaged in their neighborhoods, they're healthier and happier," says Meredith Thomas, NPC's stewardship program manager.

In Portland, researchers at Portland State University have teamed up with the nonprofit City Repair Project to address social and environmental problems in seven different neighborhoods. They work with residents to rebuild and decorate key public spaces and have been tracking the results.

A study by sociologist Timothy Haney, published in the September issue of *Social Science Research*, suggests how efforts like these are important for mental health. Haney found that when residents see their neighborhood filled with abandoned houses, vacant lots, and other signs of urban decay, they feel lower self-esteem.

So far, results from the Portland project suggest that it's possible to turn these feelings around. In Portland's Sunnyside neighborhood, for example, the City Repair Project helped convert an intersection into a public square. "There were a lot of drug problems in Sunnyside," says lead researcher Jan Semenza.

City Repair Project



"There was a lot of crime, litter, and a dilapidated urban environment."

Two years later, researchers polled Sunnyside's residents and found they were almost twice as likely as people living in unimproved areas nearby to rate their neighborhood as "an excellent place to live." They were also less likely to feel depressed and more likely to feel socially connected. "People were more engaged in community life," says Semenza. "And life in general."

Portland residents participate in the City Repair Project, an effort to beautify urban neighborhoods and build community.

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Good enough

"I'M GOOD ENOUGH, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!" This was the mantra of Stuart Smalley, the sappy, self-help-obsessed character Al Franken created for *Saturday Night Live*. Smalley always seemed to be grappling with a profound lack of self-esteem, and no doubt he's not alone. But new research suggests that, perhaps more importantly, Smalley and countless others like him really suffer from a self-compassion problem.

Self-compassion is a new psychological construct, developed by Kristin D. Neff, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas, Austin. According to Neff, self-compassion has three main components: self-kindness (going easy on yourself when you make a mistake); common humanity (viewing negative experiences as something everyone goes through); and mindful acceptance (viewing your flaws objectively and accepting them).

Several recent studies have explored the behaviors and traits that characterize self-compassion and that distinguish it from self-esteem. In a study published in the May issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Duke University psychologists Mark Leary and Eleanor Tate examined how self-compassionate people judge themselves. They gave participants a questionnaire to determine how self-compassionate they were, then asked them to make up a story that began with the line, "Once upon a time, there was a little bear...." Leary and Tate filmed the participants telling these stories; afterwards, they had them watch the tape and rate their own performance, as well as the performances of two other people. Those who scored high in self-compassion were more likely to rate their performance similarly to the way others rated it, suggesting they see themselves the way others do. This differs from people high in self-esteem, who, in other experiments, have judged themselves more favorably than others did because of their inflated self-image.

Based on their findings, Leary and Tate propose that self-compassionate people accept their flaws but don't become defensive or otherwise feel badly about them. But why?

In one of Neff's studies, published in the August issue of the *Journal of Research in Personality*, she and her colleagues gave participants a variety of personality tests to find correlations between self-compassion and other traits. The results suggest that self-compassionate people are more likely to judge reality and themselves accurately; to be happy, optimistic, extroverted, and motivated; and to feel kindness toward others. They are also more likely to make changes that will lead to a more fulfilling life and to say they get along well with others.

Neff says that while some people might be innately more self-compassionate than others, she believes that, with practice, many more people can consciously boost their levels of self-compassion. "This may come through therapy, a spiritual practice, or by simply choosing to let go of the self-critical voice when it arises in our heads." —Alex Dixon