

CULPEPER TIMES, JULY 2023 / Ellen Phipps, Editorial

Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul. John Muir

As summer approaches, I am reminded of this quote by mountaineer, John Muir and reflecting on my visits to the Shenandoah National Park, particularly throughout the pandemic. At a time when we were all socially and physically isolated from friends and family, getting out into nature was a saving grace. I recall the first time my husband and I drove up to the National Park after those first few months of lockdown. Being out amidst the magnitude of the mountains; the wildflowers, the birds, the running streams and the trees did indeed give strength to my body and soul. An awakening of the senses with beautiful scenery and smells of nature. As the pandemic lingered, I continued to get up to the park for hikes, but also sometimes just for a drive. I always returned with renewed energy to face each day. I must admit, with the pandemic largely behind us, I have taken less trips to the parks, but with summer approaching, I am reminded how important it is to take the time for a hike. However, Virginia can get hot and humid in the summer, so indoor options also work well.

Participating in various forms of recreation is particularly important for older adults. Research has shown that being active is related to greater self-reported physical functioning, less fear of falling and fewer depressive symptoms. Studies have also shown that going outdoors and being physically active can have long term functional health benefits for older adults. With outdoor activity, the relationship between Vitamin D and bone health is well established.

Recently, there has been much talk about brain health at Aging Together, hopefully you were able to join us for [The 6 Pillars of Brain Health](#) webinar. If not, we hope to present again soon. It turns out, exercise has also been shown to directly benefit the brain, including in adults that have already experienced mild cognitive impairment. As one physician put it: “exercise can turn back the clock in the brain”.

Staying active improves your thinking skills by promoting gray matter retention in your brain, which helps you process information. Research also shows that spending time in nature reduces stress, which can help clear brain fog, too.

As the saying goes, what is good for the heart is good for the brain, and that includes lots of forms of exercise such as walking in nature, activities like pickleball, yoga, Pilates, canoeing, biking, swimming, dancing, and so many more options offered by your local parks and rec or at state and national parks. So, challenge yourself to get out in nature or in at a rec center or a place of your choosing to be engaged in activity this summer – and, if you are looking for ideas, be sure to check Aging Together’s Resource Guide under “Life Enrichment”!