Can walk in the park improve mental health of city dwellers?

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis.

In 1865 the great landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted looked out over the Yosemite Valley and saw a place worth saving. He urged the California legislature to protect it from rampant development. Olmsted had already designed Central Park in New York City; he was convinced that beautiful green spaces should exist for all people to enjoy. “It is a scientific fact,” he wrote, “that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character … is favorable to the health and vigor of men and especially to the health and vigor of their intellect.”

In England researchers from the University of Exeter Medical School recently analyzed mental health data from 10,000 city dwellers and used high-resolution mapping to track where the subjects had lived over 18 years. They found that people living near more green space reported less mental distress, even after adjusting for income, education, and employment (all of which are also correlated with health).

It’s difficult to tell from studies like this why people feel better. Is it the fresh air? Do certain colors or fractal shapes trigger neurochemicals in our visual cortex? Or is it just that people in greener neighborhoods use the parks to exercise more?

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