

Support spiritual
wellness through
creative outdoor
design



Outdoor settings can help older adults find ways to connect spirituality and wellness

by Jack Carman, FASLA, and Nancy Carman, MA, CMC

Wellness—it's a concept we are instinctively drawn to. As health and wellness professionals, to instill wellness in a community or facility, we need to break it down into various components to help us understand its role in creating positive quality of life. Of all the dimensions of wellness—physical, social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and vocational—spiritual wellness may be the most personal and possibly the hardest for us to quantify. Yet spiritual wellness is also the dimension that adds depth and meaning to the other five.

What does spiritual wellness mean? In 1975, the term “spiritual well-being” was defined by the National Interfaith Coalition on Aging, a National Council on Aging special interest group, as “the affirmation of life in relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness.”¹ The spiritual aspect of wellness, as defined by the National Wellness Institute, “recognizes our search for meaning and purpose in human existence.”² It is a lifelong journey in which we seek ways that demonstrate “values through behaviors, such as meditation, prayer and contemplation of life/death, as well as appreciating beauty, nature and life.”³

In his book *Identity and the Life Cycle*, the late psychologist Erik Erikson describes eight developmental stages experienced by humans. In the eighth and final life stage, the psychological task is to come to terms with one's life—to look back on a life lived and find peace and personal acceptance.⁴ Nature allows people to become connected to some-

thing larger than themselves, and to use this setting as a backdrop to self-discovery and the realization that their life has (and will continue to have) deep spiritual meaning.

As they age, people often focus on the meaning of life and the possibilities of life after death. One way individuals seek answers to questions is through organized religion. The Gallup Poll conducted interviews with more than 40,000 American adults between 1992 and 1999 to determine the influence of religion in their lives, and found that “religious involvement and behavior increase in later stages of life.”⁵ This can be seen with the aging of the Baby Boomers and their hunger for programs that explore the more spiritual aspects of life.

Approach to spirituality

Organizations such as the YMCA understand that Boomers are looking for ways to incorporate spirituality into wellness programs. One trend identified in a recent report by the YMCA of the USA, the national resource office for these centers, looks at the implications of spirituality as it relates to today's older adults. According to “Aging Baby Boomers and the YMCA Movement,” the Boomers are “looking for ways to live their religion—to practice their beliefs spiritually, mentally and physically.”⁶ The mission of this Christian organization is to present these programs in ways that the Boomers will identify with and in turn become association members, donors and volunteers.

Older-adult communities are also beginning to better understand the importance spirituality plays in later life, and are creating classes that focus on their residents' desire to pursue self-exploration. Westminster Canterbury Richmond, a continuing care retirement community (CCRC) in Virginia, includes the outdoors as a part of its wellness programming. Patti Pickering, the community's manager of wellness

services, has developed programs that incorporate the “beautiful grounds” of the campus by holding meditation classes outside. And at the conclusion of Westminster Canterbury's quarterly fitness challenge, residents visited Belle Island and the Canal Walk along the James River, allowing them to connect good health and spirituality with the natural environment as part of the “wholeness” concept of wellness.

A person's approach to spiritual wellness can be personal or group directed. Spirituality emphasizes a personal sense of connectedness with something bigger than the “self,” while religion emphasizes a communal spiritual relationship. People can experience spiritual well-being as a private encounter, or as part of group exercises and/or gatherings. For example, adults may find spiritual well-being through meditation, prayer and/or other forms of solo contemplative action, while forums with guest speakers can help to create a framework on which groups can build. Discussion groups make it easier to bring more people into the conversation. This can be a first step in introducing residents or members to the possibility of incorporating spirituality into their everyday life.

The setting

The search for spiritual meaning is often referred to as a path on which we travel. This path can be part of an organized program or an individual quest, or any combination of the two. In fact, this path may literally lead people outside.

Meditating and watching the sunrise in the morning sky combines nature and spirituality. The opportunity to take activities outside can add a whole other dimension to the equation of spirituality and wellness for individuals. In fact, the outdoor environment is considered the seventh dimension of wellness by some

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The Heron Point labyrinth provides a spiritual space for residents and staff of this community in Chestertown, Maryland

because it protects and improves the personal environment.

Nature has been described as a “positive distraction”—a fascination with nature has the ability to take people’s minds off their ills. Gardening, walking, listening to the wind in the trees, and watching the rain fall are just a few of the many ways that nature captures attention.

Being involved with nature can also have healing qualities. A study determining people’s preferences for urban versus rural scenes indicates that “scenes dominated by trees and other vegetation are more effective in eliciting a wakeful, relaxed state.” This study shows that “visual contact with trees and other vegetation is not limited to esthetic preferences, but can also include broadly increased psychological well-being.”⁷

Esther M. Sternberg, MD, author of *The Balance Within: The Science Connecting Health and Emotions*, describes the importance of individuals reducing stress within their everyday lives and how this can positively affect health and well-being.⁸ As health and wellness professionals, we know that stress can make people sick and there is a need to de-stress. Individuals can do this with a daily practice of meditation and/or walking in nature, allowing the body to produce the

positive chemicals (endorphins) that are its feel-good mechanism, thereby creating positive emotions.

“Studies show that being in nature ... has a soothing effect on the mind and body, relieving stress and lowering blood pressure,” affirms registered horticultural therapist Karen Fleming.⁹ These research findings validate what we innately know: Being involved in nature can illicit feelings of peacefulness, quiet and tranquility.

Sherry Hurwitz, a recreational therapist at Princeton House Behavioral Health, a unit of New Jersey-based Princeton HealthCare System, addresses the biological, psychological and social aspects of wellness as part of the healing process with participants in her programs. Hurwitz advises that, within the last 15 years or so, the need to incorporate the spiritual aspects of wellness has added a sixth sense to the five we already know—the sense of awe. This is the realization of the power and connectedness of nature in the world around us.

There are things in nature that have the ability to take people’s breaths away when they experience them, such as standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, watching the vivid evening sky during a sunset or seeing sunlight streaming through a church’s stained glass windows. Integrating spirituality into a wellness program, as Hurwitz explains, “opens up the minds of participants, allowing them to look for these aspects of wellness in their everyday lives.”

Outdoor programs

Wellness programs can accentuate the various aspects of spirituality that exist within the natural environment. Yoga Walking is an example of an activity that involves exercise, meditation and nature. This activity may be led by an instructor who helps participants combine aspects

of breathing, setting a comfortable walking pace and choosing a safe route. Other considerations include selecting an appropriate route (one where participants don’t have to cross traffic), and ensuring this path offers pleasant scenery and highlights fascination and oneness with nature. This form of yoga may be especially good for residents or members who find it difficult to sit still.

One older-adult community that is engaged in the outdoors and seeks ways to incorporate more of nature into residents’ lives is Heron Point in Chestertown, Maryland. This CCRC’s special features include a labyrinth constructed in a healing courtyard garden. Labyrinths are paths laid out in concentric circles that have a clear direction, and these amenities are becoming more common in parks, spas and healthcare settings. Why? Walking the labyrinth helps people meditate and calms the mind.

The creation of the labyrinth at Heron Point was a special project undertaken by the community’s executive director, Reverend Thomas G. Sinnott, and the staff, who aimed to provide a place where residents and staff could walk and meditate outside. “The spirituality of the labyrinth experience is augmented by the nature all around it,” Sinnott says, “including fragrant and healing herbs.”

The labyrinth has become a special part of the activities at Heron Point, including lectures, meetings and special events to highlight its use. One event that has taken hold in the community is a Sunday morning gathering for coffee and pastries, where residents walk these circular paths. In addition, physical and occupational therapists have counted the steps within the various circuits of the labyrinth, using it as a “healing challenge” for residents who are recovering

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Outdoor walking trails allow residents of Medford Leas at Lumberton, New Jersey, to enjoy the ‘positive distraction’ of nature

from surgery or stroke or who need to strengthen their limbs.

At Medford Leas CCRC in Lumberton, New Jersey, resident Miriam Schwartz is surrounded by nature. Schwartz, whose father was a landscape contractor, was immersed in gardening from a young age, and talks about being able to find a quiet place in the garden when her children were growing up. In fact, one of the main reasons why the lifelong gardener and her husband chose to live at Medford Leas is the setting: The Quaker-related community is an 89-acre arboretum that borders on wetlands and a bird sanctuary. “I can get outside and walk in nature,” comments Schwartz. “Gardening, getting my hands in the soil, replenishes my soul.” When asked why she believes that gardening and closeness to nature are important, she says that “being outside, hearing the birds, being ‘in’ nature, you cannot help but feel a presence—there is a real sense of awe”

Kathleen Stanger, a recreational therapist at St. John Neumann Nursing Home in northeast Philadelphia, combines physical activities and faith beliefs in her programs at this Catholic Health Care Services facility. One example is Bible trivia, which involves a resident answering a question about the Bible when

given a ball, then passing the ball to the next participant. This activity can occur inside, or be taken outside to a courtyard garden. As health and wellness professionals, many times we think we have to hold structured activities inside, yet moving them to an outdoor setting can add a spiritual dimension and increase participant interest.

Further, spiritual opportunities can arise in nature that allow people to develop and express their feelings. For example, at Meadow Lakes CCRC in Hightstown, New Jersey, a group of residents saw the opportunity to create a meditation garden in a wooded area off the campus’s perimeter road. One resident, who had been struggling with cancer, wanted a nature-related project to work on, so she led the group’s members in helping to clean up this area and plant flowering trees, shrubs and ground covers. Meadow Lakes added rustic benches suited to the area as a way to encourage others to visit. These embellishments were subtle, yet helped to frame the setting and provide an outdoor area conducive to contemplation. The garden has since been the site of meditation sessions.

Save that tree

An appropriate outdoor setting ideally can set the stage for spiritual growth. This is possible in communities and facilities where the trees and shrubs are established. However, many new developments remove mature vegetation to make way for roads, parking lots and buildings. Construction costs are often already high, and it costs more money to save trees than plant new ones when the job is completed. But the new trees are small. They take many, many years to mature.

Our industry needs a change in perspective. We need to calculate the value of trees not just in financial terms, but also in terms of esthetics, restfulness and spirituality.

People *like* neighborhoods with tree-lined streets, and they are inclined to purchase homes where the lots contain mature vegetation. There is something majestic about older estate-like trees. People love to sit under them. And many individuals feel a sense of awe and spiritual well-being while walking through an old-growth forest. So, the first step is to save that tree.

Protecting wooded areas and specimen trees permits people to walk among the trees, sit and ponder, and experience nature firsthand. Walking trails are a good way to provide access to wooded areas. Planning a trail involves identifying the specific destinations people want to go, the route they want to walk along, and some interesting things they will discover along the way. Vantage points that overlook specific areas—a meandering stream, for example—are great places for benches. Paths can be constructed of natural materials (e.g., mulch or pine needles) or more formal materials (e.g., quarry dust or asphalt). The decision has as much to do with safety and security for users, as it does with esthetics.

There are certain design considerations when creating an area for reflection and meditation. A key question to ask is: What makes an area feel like a place in which people would want to sit and spend some time? Individuals naturally like to have something at their backs—whether it is a tree or a row of shrubs—because it makes them feel protected. People also like to be able to survey the landscape, look out over a field, or see who is coming down the path towards them.

When locating an area for people to stop and sit awhile, it’s important to ensure it is appropriate for those using it. The size of the space needs to be determined, so it will comfortably accommodate the num-

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ber of people anticipated to use it. Will the area be used for group activities? Or will it be a smaller, more intimate “outdoor room” for two or three people? Regardless, it will require adequate signage directing people to the area. This includes individuals who are attending for the first time, as well as those who may have used the space before—not everyone has a great sense of direction.

Connecting in a garden

Some elements are essential in encouraging spiritual experiences. Nature has the ability to stimulate the senses through sight, smell, sound, touch and taste. Rain, for example, has the ability to enliven all the senses. We immediately recognize the feel of rain as it touches our skin, while the smell of ozone makes us think of clean air—even the smell of the earth after a rain is locked into our memory. The sunlight as it glistens through the trees creates a feeling of being in an outdoor cathedral. Listening to the songs of the birds as they fly about looking for nourishment and creating their nests “is a wonderful thing,” points out Medford Leas’ Miriam Schwartz. The touch of a smooth-leaved plant or the texture of fern fronds can soothe. All of these things, individually or in combination, create a spiritual experience.

Access to nature is important to spiritual well-being. Sometimes all it takes is a plot of ground where people can get their hands into soil and “touch nature.” Many individuals feel connected to a higher being when they plant a seed and watch it grow, finding it magical to nurture a young plant, give it water, and help it find the sunlight to thrive. Plants that bring back pleasant memories of a person’s past make the experience even more meaningful. And sharing the experience with others adds a communal dimension.

An avid gardener throughout his life, Leo Molinaro directs the work in the 40 ft.



Leo Molinaro tends the vegetable garden at Stapeley in Germantown, Philadelphia

by 40 ft. vegetable garden at Stapeley in Germantown, a CCRC situated in Philadelphia. Molinaro leads a group of resident gardeners in caring for the garden, helping to bring fresh organic produce to Stapeley’s residents. It’s Molinaro’s purpose to raise tomatoes, peppers, zucchini and other vegetables that are part of the community’s meals. In this way, he is able to affirm his relationship with himself, the community in which he lives, and the natural environment around him. To know Molinaro is to see how he “celebrates wholeness” through gardening.

The design of areas for spiritual reflection must include the users’ personal comfort in the plan—after all, we want individuals to enjoy positive experiences and return to these spaces. Wooden benches that have a seat height of 18 in. and armrests that help individuals rise after sitting are important. Walking paths should be a minimum of 5 ft. wide to allow a wheelchair and a person to pass with ease, although a path in a wooded area may be narrower depending on conditions and to limit disturbance of the natural area. In heavily trafficked

areas, the walk should be constructed of materials that provide a hard surface, such as asphalt or concrete. Mulch, pine straw or quarry dust materials are more appropriate along a lake or through the woods. Lighting is a consideration if people will use these areas in the evening or at night. To reduce light pollution, lights should face downward. Also, solar lights may be applicable in certain settings. Finally, these areas should include elements that invite nature into the setting, such as bird feeders, birdbaths, birdhouses, and plants that are food and harborage for nature.

Access for all

As health and wellness professionals, we need to be aware of how spirituality can add depth and greater meaning in our communities or facilities. How can we create areas that support spiritual wellness for our residents and members? Here are some suggestions:

- Develop outdoor areas where individuals can meditate, pray and appreciate the beauty of nature.
- Talk with residents or members to see what ideas they may have.
- Expand existing programs to involve the outdoor environment.
- Invite guest speakers to present, helping to expand ideas and get people thinking in new directions.
- Deliver programs that involve the use of the outdoors, fostering each individual’s relationship with self, community and environment.

Our goal is to provide settings and help as many people as possible find ways in which they can equate spirituality and wellness.

Outdoor settings allow individuals to connect with something larger. Gardening, walking in the woods, sitting on a bench by the lake, and listening to the birds sing are just a few of the many

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At Meadow Lakes in Hightstown, New Jersey, residents created a meditation garden in a wooded area they felt was conducive to contemplation

ways people can find meaning in their lives. That connection with nature can bring peace and refuge—a place to get away from the distractions of everyday life. It keeps people well mentally, physically and spiritually. In the end, understanding the benefits that spirituality brings and how to nurture it through nature encourages residents and members to place greater meaning on wellness and its contribution to quality of life. ☺

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Nurturing spirituality through the senses

Opportunities to “appreciate beauty, nature and life” contribute to the spiritual wellness of older adults. Here are some experiences that nurture spirituality through the senses:

- watching the sunrise while meditating
- seeing the sunlight through the trees
- listening to the songs of birds
- gardening
- touching smooth-leaved plants or ferns
- walking in nature
- listening to the wind in the trees
- watching the rain fall
- hearing the babble of a stream
- watching the evening sky during sunset
- walking in wooded areas
- sitting under a mature tree
- smelling the fragrance of flowers
- viewing wilderness landscapes