A Conversation with Richard Louv on Nature-Deficit Disorder

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Mental disorders, diagnoses, and drugs are thrown around all the time these days. Attention Deficit Disorder, Anxiety, and Depression, to name a few, appear to be on the rise. Two minutes in to my Facebook feed has me exposed to several posts from my friends, expressing how sick they are of living with these inescapable feelings of internal war. One has particularly stood out:

“I am so %\*@^&$\* tired of living with chronic anxiety. I wake up with back pain that dogs me all day, I can barely breathe trying to complete everyday tasks, especially when in class, I feel completely overwhelmed by anything that I have yet to do, and my jaw is clenched most of the day and in my sleep.

The worst part is that I feel like I have to feel this way in order to be functional, and so the authority figures in my life expect me to and want me to feel this anxiety all the time, because the alternative would be letting go of my responsibilities and not living up to their expectations.

I am so tired of living with this.”

This post has over one hundred likes and forty comments. These comments express similar pain, empathy, home remedies, words of encouragement, and requests to be rung:

“Trust me, we’re all in the same boat,” “Yo you gottttaaaaa take some adaptogen formula tincture,” “Maybe you need some relaxing beach time,” “This is honestly why I had to drop out of school this year, and I didn't even realize that it was a legitimate illness,” “Oh my god we are so on the same level, my advice; study weed.”

The person who crafted this post is incredibly active on Facebook, often using it to express themself and their thoughts on social activism. But is the Facebook post itself— supported by the overwhelming number of condolences from people who say they can relate—a matter of causation by social media and therefore represents a bias of a population that suffers from anxiety, or correlation with an amalgamation of things like the education system and lack of exposure to nature? Some would say my Facebook friends are victims of technological oppression, slaves to social media, TV, and videogames. I would like to deconstruct and build on that argument, adding that this social media post is a critical example of the underlying issue that needs to be heard: The educational system is rooted in old ways of life. These old ways of life lack the possibility of technology to distract and disentangle youth from the complexities of natural and beneficial stimuli. Decades ago, spending a few hours inside to go to school worked fine because dismissal till dawn was spent outside, exploring backyard forests and playing hockey in the streets. This lifestyle is systematically flipped today, with children spending time outside as an obligation, thinking time inside is necessary to propel their education. The psychological impacts of doing so are detrimental and inherently overlooked by educators who lived their lives the good old way.

I read this Facebook thread to Richard Louv (2005), author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit* Disorder, over dinner just last night. Louv is big on communicating the relationship between children and the natural world in current and historical contexts. I had some questions for him regarding social media’s unavoidable presence in education today, how he thinks the progression of time has landed us where we are, why many of my peers feel overwhelmed by the expectations of their educators, and more. Louv challenges my college-aged Facebook friends and I to spend our free time outside, indulging in nature so we can allow ourselves to pursue a career path that is fundamentally connected to the world at large.

*Around the dinner table, KAYLA CARRINGTON and RICHARD LOUV are finishing up their meals as the topic of social media works its way into conversation. Carrington pulls out her phone. Louv is shocked at the sight.*

CARRINGTON

I hope you can excuse me. I have this post saved on my phone that has been giving me a disproportionate amount of trouble. I gave some thought as to whether I wanted to bring out my phone at the dinner table, but social media has become so unavoidable in my life and in my education. I’m unsure that a casual conversation about it on a post-dinner walk would convey the weight of talk about mental disorders on social media websites. May I?

LOUV

I’ll admit that I was thrown by your go-ahead to use your phone as a resource in our conversation tonight. Why is it you don’t feel a summary of the post would be as productive as a verbatim read-through?

CARRINGTON

Well, for instance, one of my professors made both Twitter and Tumblr requirements for us to communicate with our cohorts and with the public about our research. I find that as ideal as it sounds to avoid social media in professional settings, that is not exactly a reality that students are facing. I wanted to read you this post, in particular, because it alludes to a feeling of entrapment in an educational system with expectations that don’t align with students’ mental capabilities. I wanted to gauge your interpretation of that element of the post, and further discuss its implications. I’ve read Last Child in the Woods, in depth, and believe my peers and I can relate to what you call “Nature-Deficit Disorder” (36). I’m curious to understand how you think this post is both influenced by such phenomena, and would like to call into question the possibility for posts like these to achieve goals similar to those of nature-child interactions.

LOUV

Please, go ahead. But remind me of your questions after you have done so.

*Carrington reads Louv the original post and the comments thereafter.*

CARRINGTON

So, my main question for discussion is- could Nature-Deficit Disorder be a legitimate explanation of what is really going on here?

LOUV

I am not suggesting that this term represents an existing medical diagnosis. Our culture is so top-heavy with jargon, so dependent on the illness model (36).

CARRINGTON

Right, which makes me question the legitimacy of “Chronic Anxiety” to begin with.

LOUV

Nature-deficit disorder describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses (36). Therefore, illnesses such as Chronic Anxiety and Attention Deficit Disorder may very well exist, but it’s a matter of recognizing where nature can aid and essentially reverse some of the symptoms of these illnesses. Now, the magnitude of Facebook commenters who feel similarly to the original poster is not striking but their advice, however, is. Only one commenter suggested nature as a solution. That being said, nearly all the other comments offer solutions that are rooted in verbal interaction and natural herbs for healing. No comments suggest your friend get on antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, or ADHD meds. Had your friend given the same rant to a psychiatrist, for example, the responses might have been entirely different. Nature is often overlooked as a healing balm for the emotional hardships in a child’s life (49). You’ll likely never see a slick commercial for nature therapy, as you do for the latest antidepressant pharmaceuticals. Although countless children who suffer from mental illness and attention disorders do benefit from medication, the use of nature as an alternative, additional, or preventative therapy is being overlooked (50). If I had the freedom to comment on this post myself, I would encourage your friend to spend some time outside, climb trees, and yes- take a walk on the beach.

CARRINGTON

In your book, you offer architecture as an approach to “re-nature” students with their environment, but what about non-physical structures such as educational curricula that are entirely set indoors? Doesn’t this type of education make it impossible for students to get the daily doses of nature that they need? You offer a top-down approach, but what about bottom-up? I am a student. I am not a parent, nor am I an architect. I would like to believe I am in control of my own education, but I am at a loss.

LOUV

Everything could use re-naturing, especially college students’ active involvement with their own learning. Things used to be flipped. In my youth, I’d say 60% of my time was spent outside and the rest inside. My education might have been predominantly run by authority figures, similar to the way things might still be in many cases. But, I learned things from nature that no teacher could impart, not even I. I implore you to spend your free time outdoors, as this time is yours to advance your education. Do your homework outside, bring your study groups to the garden. You are absolutely in charge of your own education. Don’t let social media posts like these lead you to think otherwise. Instead, take your Facebook friends’ words with a grain of salt and take it into your own hands to explore solutions within your own environment. Use these media posts to reflect on how you spend your own free time, but also take the higher path and turn to nature instead of the comment box for a response.

*Carrington puts her phone completely away.*

CARRINGTON

There is still so much I would like to discuss with you. What do you say we go for a walk?

SCENE

Work Cited

Louv, Richard. (2005) *Last child in the woods: saving our children from nature-deficit disorder.*Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.