personal development

Walking in nature helps boost physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being.

what is it?

To be able to live low-impact lives, we have to be able to reach a certain level of personal development that's very difficult in modern society. Let's look at four aspects of development:

Physical development is about our bodies, but also the physical world and our interaction with it. Individual development is a bit pointless if our species is destroying the ecosystem of our home planet. So it's about maximising physical health, but not the quantity of physical, material things we possess. This isn't 'development', just materialism. However, for many in the world, personal development involves a struggle to obtain adequate food, water, shelter etc.

Mental development represents intellectual growth – the truth-seeking of philosophy, not just knowledge acquisition or training. Philosophy also encompasses ethics and critical thinking, tapping into a bank of human experience that includes socialisation and moral teachings.

Emotional well-being depends on co-operation with others in communities. We, along with all primates, are social animals – it's not possible to develop as an island – only together with your fellow humans. It takes a 'village' to raise a child, but also to maintain emotionally-balanced adults.

Spiritual development means different things to different people, and isn't really measurable. Life is 'just a ride', as the late Bill Hicks used to say. Perhaps the best we can do is be at peace with the fact that as humans, we can recognise it when we feel it, without being able to define it precisely or to ascertain any deeper purpose in life.

Maslow: it's difficult to leave out Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) from an introduction to personal development. His famous 'hierarchy of needs' places physical needs at the bottom and self-actualisation at the top. It's not possible to achieve the higher levels without having secured the levels beneath.

Religion: the core messages of the main religions are complementary. The Vedic Scriptures spoke of the Oneness of everything (which cutting-edge science appears to support), and letting go of ego to reunite with the Oneness. The major prophets focused on ways to do this – Taoism stressing harmony with nature; Buddhism, enlightenment; Christianity, love; Islam, submission. Similarly, Quakers stress simplicity, truth, equality (of opportunity, rather than talents) and peace. All these teachings appear self-evidently beneficial (with the possible exception of 'submission' – but we all have to submit to death; we're all going back to nature, to the Oneness), but the system that we live under negates these core religious messages and instead promotes the domination of nature, hedonism, competition and materialism.

what are the benefits?

Physical: the benefits of physical development are health (so less stress on health services), resilience, greater capacity for physical work and survival in case of disaster. Living with physical simplicity means a lower impact on nature.

Mental: mental development means more critical thinking – crucial in identifying and dealing with problems as nature degrades rapidly. It means an increased capacity for problem-solving, for oneself, one's community and for humanity.

Emotional: emotional development can mean greater resilience to stress and suffering, with better relationships that can help with conflict resolution, meaning more peaceful communities, and ultimately, reducing the risk of war.

Spiritual: spiritual development can promote non-materialism and inner and outer peace.

In combination, personal development can reduce depression and anxiety, more respect for self and others, more creativity, cohesive communities and ecological diversity.

In India, as well as physical and mental (meditative) development, the aim of yoga is to help the human spirit unite with the Oneness, the divine (the root of the word is the same as 'yoke' – to unite, to tie together).

lowimpact.org

Humans are social animals that need the myriad social interactions that occur in a community for mental & emotional well-being.

what can I do?

First, love yourself. This may be difficult if your self-esteem was damaged by childhood experiences. Therapy might help (in fact, it really can't hurt – for anyone), including nature therapy.

By opposing the norms / rules of the current economic system, we can try to:

- live in harmony with nature (when the norm is to consume as much as possible);
- seek enlightenenment / think philosophically (when education is becoming more vocational);
- love and co-operate (when the norm is to compete, as individuals and nations);
- explore spirituality (when the norm is to make money and be materialistic).

We'll be healthiest if we live in a way that evolution prepared us for – physical exercise, healthy food, plenty of rest, strong community, work that's creative, useful and appreciated by our peers and connection to nature. We have prehistoric bodies, minds and emotions, but we have to use them in a space-age society that they're unprepared for.

Here are some things we might do in an attempt to develop physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, although of course all these aspects of personal development are intimately connected:

- exercise: mix cardio, resistance and stretching for stamina, strength and suppleness;
- diet: Michael Pollan's advice is 'eat food, not too much, mainly plants'; and if you make sure it's fresh and mainly unprocessed, you'll find it difficult not to get enough protein, fats, carbohydrates and vitamins (avoiding the need for expensive supplements);

- fresh air, sleep and avoiding toxins in both food and surrounding environment;
- obvious 'don'ts': smoking, drinking too much etc;
- mental development involves philosophy – reading, talking, thinking, learning – not just education to slot into the economic system;
- studying political philosophy will help you understand the nature of democracy in the modern world;
- embed yourself in a community – emotional well-being is all about relationships, so deal with others with compassion and integrity;
- reduce your exposure to media (including soc media) that invites you to compare yourself negatively to other people;
- be compassionate with yourself, not angry – no self-flagellation for not doing well enough, which leads to depression and shame;
- go for a walk in nature;
- think of all the people who've loved you, liked you, respected you, helped you;
- don't accept any form of domination, and don't try to dominate.

If you accept that life is 'just a ride' and that we have to submit in the end, there's an argument that true spiritual development is about preparing for death – *memento mori*. When we look back, what will we think of our contribution? Don't be afraid of failure – see it as a learning experience.

Psychiatrists 'fix' people damaged by the stress, alienation, bullying and lack of community caused by the economic system, only to throw them right back into the same system. Healers of all kinds perhaps have a duty to at least comment on our socio-economic system. We think that 'personal development' should first focus on helping to create a sustainable world where everyone has the basics of life, before providing affluent people with expensive books and course programmes for professional development without challenging the *status quo*.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/personal-development for more info, links & books, including:
- Robert Wringham, *Escape Everything*
- John Lane*, Timeless Simplicity*
- Starhawk, *the Empowerment Manual*
- helpguide.org – helping improve well-being
- peacedirect.org – helping to prevent war
- crinfo.org – conflict resolution