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How Autumn Leaves Color Our Inner Lives

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By Linda Andrews

Autumn is a magical season, when a leafy landscape that has been green for months is suddenly splashed with yellow, orange and red. The burst of vibrant color captures our attention and captivates our imagination.

Philosophers and poets have long rhapsodized about multicolored leaves, but psychological researchers have been relatively quiet on the subject. Yet, in theory at least, there are multiple ways in which appreciating autumn's changing leaves may change us for the better.



To gain some insight into the psychology behind our response to fall color, I talked with a couple of experts who share my love of the season, but who think about it from differing perspectives. Together, they made a strong case for getting outside and taking the time to appreciate the spectacle of autumn leaves.

Visual Tricks and Treats

“Visual contrast grabs our attention from infancy onward,” says Jason Brunt, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at Biola University in California. Brunt’s view of autumn is informed by his research interest in cognitive development. He notes that the classic scene of turning leaves in autumn is rich in visual contrast, with bright red, orange or yellow often juxtaposed with bright green.

“Heavy visual contrast, saturation and brightness are perceived as pleasantly exciting, and all of those properties characterize peak fall season,” Brunt says. “There is also a striking temporal contrast. You get green, green, green from spring through summer, and then —bang! You see the first leaf fall, and within a couple of weeks, the trees are ablaze with color.”

Our brains interpret this dramatic change as a signal. Brunt likens the experience to listening to a steady hum of background noise and then suddenly hearing a loud boom. When we encounter a unique stimulus, we tend to think it’s meaningful — and if the stimulus comes and goes at regular intervals, we attribute even more meaning to it. Such is the case with the yearly blast of autumn color.

Stress, Interrupted

The attention-getting power of brightly hued leaves has a practical side. An autumn stroll can be an excellent stress reliever, says Michelle Harris, M.A., LMHC, ATR-BC, who teaches counseling psychology and expressive arts therapy at William James College in Massachusetts.

Harris specializes in trauma-focused expressive arts therapy. She says, “When I work with clients who are very stressed, I try to interrupt their stress reactions with positive sensory and kinesthetic experiences.” She notes that stress shifts the brain and body into survival mode, but a positive experience that redirects attention can reverse this process. “When you’re walking and focusing on the changing leaves, you’re no longer cuing your brain to run or fight,” Harris says. “Instead, you’re cuing your brain to pay attention to something beautiful and enjoy it.”

Becoming more aware of day-to-day changes in colors and patterns can be an exercise in mindfulness. “I like to notice how the leaves are changing on the same tree each time I walk past,” Harris says. “Are they yellower now? Have some dropped since last time? I find it meditative.”

Leaping Into the Leaf Pile

Besides being lovely to look at, autumn leaves evoke associations with past experiences, including events that recurred year after year in childhood. For many people, the associations are positive: reconnecting with friends at school, sipping hot apple cider, going trick-or-treating, jumping in a pile of freshly raked leaves.

“Later on, when you encounter fall leaves every year, a lot of those memories are at least partially activated,” says Brunt. Even if you don’t consciously think about the memories, they may color your view of the world. If the associations are largely positive, you may notice that your spirit lifts at the first hint of sweater weather.

Of course, fall can also carry negative connotations. If you hated school or lost a loved one in October, your response to the season might be quite different. But regardless of the emotional valence of your reaction, the principle remains the same: The change of season may bring up strong feelings rooted in past experiences.

Awe-Inspiring Autumn

If you’ve ever gazed in awe at a wooded hillside awash in vivid fall colors, you know the sense of being overwhelmed and humbled by a breathtaking sight. “Research shows that, when we encounter something greater than ourselves, it may reduce self-centered thoughts and increase cooperative behavior,” Brunt says.

Depending on your personal bent, that experience of awe may leave you feeling emotionally moved or spiritually connected to god or the cosmos. Like the leaves, the feeling may fade quickly. But the memory persists, enriching your life in ways that may last long after the final leaf has fallen.

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