

Scottish nature, anxiety and God: Connecting to the world around us as a benefit for our mental health

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Abstract

From mountain peaks to sandy beaches, we in Scotland are lucky to inhabit an area of such natural beauty. Spending time in nature, at the coast or in a local park, is recognised as a benefit for our mental health. Considering the experiences of Christians with mental health concerns, how might seeing nature as a connection with and self-manifestation of God, present in the natural world as we experience it, further these benefits? In my doctoral research into the lived experiences of Christian women experiencing anxiety, a recurring theme was the importance of connecting to nature, and so to God, during times of poor mental health. In this paper, the words of my research participants will be explored alongside an understanding of the presence of God expressed through the natural world, drawing from the fields of mental health and environmental theology. I will first discuss how participants understood God as present in the natural world around them. An exploration into how this connection between God and nature interacts with feelings of anxiety will then be undertaken, asking if God's presence is calming or concerning. Finally, drawing together the conversation between anxiety, nature, and God, the possible anxiolytic effects of connecting to Scottish nature will be considered.



Introduction: Scotland, nature, and mental health

Having moved to Scotland a decade ago, I have been fortunate to experience much of the natural beauty the country has to offer, living in proximity to the Cairngorms and along the coast of the North Sea. It is this familiarity with the natural world, alongside my practical theological research and personal experiences with anxiety that I will bring together here, to consider how themes of nature (with a focus on the natural environment of Scotland), anxiety, and God might come together. Considering the experiences of Christians with mental health concerns, this article asks how seeing nature as a place of connection with God might further the psychological and physical benefits of engaging with the natural world, as evidenced across interdisciplinary research on the anxious experience. This article draws from the lived experiences of research participants who took part in qualitative interviews for my doctoral research, where they shared their lived experiences of the interaction between faith and anxiety.¹ In particular, the themes of nature, a connection to God, and the proximity of God expressed in these interviews will be explored.

In this article, the term ‘nature’ is used interchangeably with the ‘natural world.’ Hertig et al. define ‘nature’ as referring to the perceptible physical features of the world around us, including “the “living nature” of flora and fauna, together with still and running water, qualities of air and weather, and the landscapes that comprise these and show the influence of geological processes.”² These natural landscapes are areas largely untouched by humans, though spending time in nature may also include walking in curated gardens and other similar green spaces. What is important in engaging with the natural world in the context of mental health is the interaction with natural stimuli through our senses.³ For example, we may breathe in the smell of the North Sea air, gaze across the scenic views of the Trossachs, or feel the interactive exhibitions of the Royal Botanic Garden

¹ Cody Crawshaw, “Doing Faith Anxiously: Exploring the Interaction Between Faith and Anxiety in the Lived Experiences of Christian Women” (PhD, University of Aberdeen, forthcoming).

² Terry Hartig et al., “Nature and Health”, *Annual Review of Public Health* 35, no. 1 (2014): 208, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-032013-182443>.

³ Gregory N. Bratman et al., “Nature and Mental Health: An Ecosystem Service Perspective”, *Science Advances* 5, no. 7 (2019): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aax0903>.

Edinburgh. Each of these constitute an engagement with the natural world here in Scotland. Research conducted by NatureScot/NàdarAlba⁴ highlights that the natural landscape of Scotland is treasured by residents and it has been recognised as a significant contributor to a sense of identity and place across both individuals and communities.⁵ Scotland is therefore a particularly suitable environment for considering the impact of nature on mental health, with the natural world being important to many.

Data from the Office of National Statistics indicates that around 20% of men and 26% of women in the UK report experiencing high levels of anxiety.⁶ In Scotland, recent data from the Scottish Health Survey 2024 reported that 23–25% of adults aged 16–34 identified as having two or more symptoms of anxiety.⁷ It is clear that anxiety ought to be considered in a variety of contexts, including theological and environmental.

Across Scotland, the benefits of connecting with nature for mental and physical health have been recognised. The Natural Health Service was a programme linked to health and social care delivery, developed by NatureScot in conjunction with other organisations to enable access to the outdoors by addressing the barriers in place.⁸ Universities, the National Health Service, and environmental groups such as Forestry Scotland came together to form the Think Health Think Nature partnership, an initiative designed to promote ‘Green Health’ activities. These activities were intended to connect people with nature, whether that be through active engagement such as walking or running, or inactive by encouraging mindfulness in a green space, with emphasis placed on the importance of Green Health being

⁴ NatureScot is Scotland’s Nature Agency, funded primarily by the Scottish Government. For more information, see: <https://www.nature.scot/>.

⁵ D. McGregor and V. Strachan, NatureScot Opinion Survey 2023, NatureScot Research Report no. 1357 (2024), <https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-research-report-1357-naturescot-opinion-survey-2023>.

⁶ Office for National Statistics, “Personal Well-Being in the UK”, 2023, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/april2022tomarch2023>.

⁷ Scottish Government, “Summary” in *The Scottish Health Survey 2024*, vol. 1: main report, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-health-survey-2024-volume-1-main-report/pages/summary/>.

⁸ NatureScot, “What is Our Natural Health Service?”, 12 January 2026, <https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/contributing-healthier-scotland/our-natural-health-service>.

accessible and inclusive.⁹ Though their core funding came to an end in 2024, many of the partnerships created remain active, such as NHS Lothian’s Green Health Strategy,¹⁰ or continuing as one of the key aims of Cairngorms 2030,¹¹ which work to find ways to support people in accessing nature, and the health benefits this brings.



What is anxiety?

In order to consider the interaction between nature, anxiety and God, a definition of anxiety must first be explored. It is important to acknowledge that anxiety is something that we have all experienced in response to various situations, and is to be expected in certain scenarios, such as the run-up to an exam or before stepping out on stage. Anxiety becomes a mental health concern, however, when it becomes chronic, restrictive, or out of proportion.¹² As a mental health phenomenon experienced individually and often insularly, anxiety or chronic worrying is particularly difficult to define. It is therefore important to build a definition from the perspective of those who have experienced anxiety, alongside medical and psychological understandings, in order to offer a definition of anxiety that represents the vast array of ways in which it can present in a person’s life.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (known as the *DSM*, currently on its fifth iteration) defines generalised anxiety as ‘persistent and excessive anxiety and worry about various domains [...] that the individual finds difficult to control.’¹³ It is pervasive, and often

⁹ Think Health Think Nature, “What Is a Green Prescription?”, <https://www.thinkhealththinknature.scot.nhs.uk/what-is-a-green-prescription/>.

¹⁰ NHS Lothian Charity: Green Health, “Green Health Network”, 19 October 2022, <https://greenhealth.nhslothiancharity.org/network-and-news/green-health-network/>.

¹¹ Cairngorms National Park, “Cairngorms 2030”, <https://cairngorms.co.uk/what-we-do/cairngorms-2030>.

¹² Catherine O’Neill, “Generalised Anxiety Disorder or Chronic Worrying: A Brief Guide”, Anxiety UK, 2009, 4.

¹³ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed., text revision (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), 217 [hereafter *DSM-5-TR*].

interferes with living day-to-day life.¹⁴ One of my participants, Victoria,¹⁵ elaborated on this, saying:

I suppose I understand anxiety as something that's just really constant and relentless and kind of this, this just ... not just a worry, but sort of like a deep, I guess, fear that, yeah, like the worst is gonna happen, and I won't be able to cope in different situations. So just kind of this thing that's almost like running in the background that sort of makes you question everything and just makes you excessively worry about everything really.

As Victoria describes, anxiety can be experienced constantly, not just in relation to a particular scenario, but as a phenomenon that 'sticks' to different things, often continuing in the background. This idea of a constant noise of anxiety recurred throughout participants' stories, creating what the charity AnxietyUK terms 'free-floating anxiety'. When one issue is resolved, or the reality is not what was apprehensively expected, another worry appears, creating a continuous cycle.¹⁶ Another participant, Beth, described this free-floating, or non-static, anxiety as '[finding] the things that I cling to most in the world and that I am happiest about, and then [taking] that down from the inside almost.' Experiencing these difficult-to-control worries is accompanied by physical symptoms such as 'restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge, being easily fatigued, difficulty concentrating, muscle tension, [and] sleep disturbances',¹⁷ and can also result in experiencing panic attacks, making anxiety both physically and mentally exhausting. Anxiety can leave individuals feeling isolated and alone, which may be exacerbated further by anxious thought spirals leading them to believe they have done something to upset or offend those around them.

Anxiety is therefore understood here as an overwhelming sense of worry, attached not to a specific event but instead occurring as a constant noise, asking 'What if?' questions in apprehension of various scenarios. Although participants often recognised that these worries were out of proportion to reality, this does not dull its impact on day-to-day life.

¹⁴ *DSM-5-TR*, 224.

¹⁵ Participant names are pseudonymised, no real names are used.

¹⁶ O'Neill, "Generalised Anxiety Disorder", 4.

¹⁷ *DSM-5-TR*, 250–51. Some criteria have been shortened.

Anxiety consumes time and energy and is both mentally and physically exhausting to experience. The realities of living with anxiety, alongside its prevalence within the population, make it a topic of paramount importance to consider in various contexts, including those which may bring about positive benefits for those experiencing anxiety.



Anxiety and nature

One theme that has been considered in relation to mental health and anxiety is the benefit of engaging with the natural world. As discussed in the introduction, the importance of being in nature and the health benefits this brings have been recognised in Scotland through initiatives such as the Natural Health Service. On a global scale, research has supported the hypothesised benefits of spending time in nature, concluding that experiencing nature can reduce the risk factors and symptoms of some types of mental health concerns.¹⁸ As increasing urbanisation has led to us spending less time in natural environments,¹⁹ alongside the increasing prevalence of mental health concerns, fields such as environmental psychology have investigated the relationship between individuals and the built and natural environments.²⁰ Studies such as those conducted by Bratman et al. have observed that activities such as taking a nature walk lead to a decrease in feelings of anxiety and rumination, when contrasted with an urban walk.²¹ Access to nearby nature is associated with positive mental health benefits,²² meaning spending time in nature positively impacts those experiencing anxiety. Furthermore, the increased prevalence of technology in our lives has further reduced our connectedness

¹⁸ Bratman et al., “Nature and Mental Health”, 3.

¹⁹ David G. Pearson and Tony Craig, “The Great Outdoors? Exploring the Mental Health Benefits of Natural Environments”, *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01178>.

²⁰ Linda Steg, *Environmental Psychology: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 2.

²¹ Gregory N. Bratman et al., “The Benefits of Nature Experience: Improved Affect and Cognition”, *Landscape and Urban Planning* 138 (2015): 47, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2015.02.005>.

²² Marcia P. Jimenez et al., “Associations between Nature Exposure and Health: A Review of the Evidence”, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 9 (2021): 6, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18094790>.

with nature, impacting human wellbeing.²³ Encouraging mindful time in nature, away from distracting environments, as exemplified by Cairngorms 2030 and their support of the NHS's approach of 'prescribing nature' by improving local access to natural spaces²⁴ is therefore evidenced as producing positive short- and long-term mental health benefits.



Connecting anxiety, nature, and God

Having explored the connection between anxiety and nature, this article will now turn to how anxiety, nature, and God might be discussed in conversation with one another, and how this might bring about positive benefits for mental health. Again, the lived experiences of participants, as shared with me during my doctoral research, will be foundational to this consideration. With multiple participants having ties to Scotland, this additional locational context will be considered.

There is much theological discussion exploring the connection between God and the natural world, in conversation with creation and humanity's place within it, spanning multiple subdisciplines such as systematic theology and eco-theology. A brief and limited description of how God and nature may be discussed is presented here to inform the final analysis of participants' conceptualisations of anxiety, nature, and God. Of course, this is not the only possible interpretation of the relationship between theology and nature in the context of mental health. The aim is to provide information related to the theologies of those whose lived experiences I will be discussing.

One way in which God and nature are discussed in theological conversation is through the concept of a natural theology. This is concerned with how we perceive nature, and what Christians might discern about God through it.²⁵ Alistair McGrath expresses this natural theology as enabling the 'truth, beauty, and goodness of God to be discerned, and which acknowledges nature as a legitimate, authorised, and limited

²³ Miles Richardson, Zaheer Hussain, and Mark D. Griffiths, "Problematic Smartphone Use, Nature Connectedness, and Anxiety", *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 7, no. 1 (2018): 113, <https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.7.2018.10>.

²⁴ Cairngorms National Park, "Public Health and the Outdoors", <https://cairngorms.co.uk/our-work/public-health-and-the-outdoors>.

²⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 9,

pointer to the divine.²⁶ Through encounters with the natural world, observing and interpreting creation, proponents of natural theology posit that we can come to know something about God, with markers of God's presence found across nature. Linked to many fields such as eco-theology and ethics, natural theology considers the connection between God and the natural world and offers insights into how humanity ought to understand and interpret the presence of God in creation.

A second understanding of the relationship between God and nature is rooted in divine self-revelation. As Gerald O'Collins discusses, this view states that 'human beings are offered the revelation of God mediated through the beautiful and orderly works of creation'.²⁷ God is revealed to humanity through the created world, where God's attributes are recognised and experienced. Encounters with the natural world therefore offer the opportunity for humans to interact with God, through revelation in creation.

Just as the relationship between God and nature is rich in its complexity, so too is the relationship between anxiety and faith, with varied and multifaceted understandings present across individuals' lives. Here, I will briefly consider some of the conceptualisations of the relationship between God and anxiety expressed by my doctoral research participants, in order to then reflect on how anxiety, God, and the natural world might interact with one another.

One of the key themes identified as part of the interaction between faith, anxiety and nature that is pertinent to this topic is the presence and proximity of God. Participants emphasised the importance of an awareness of God's presence during times of heightened anxiety. Beth shared:

I think it's really crucial to know that even when I'm feeling the most isolated and the most lonely, I can turn to God or I can turn to this presence that is never gonna let me be alone and is never gonna isolate me and I don't need to be worried about, which is really cool.

Anxiety can result in feelings of isolation and loneliness. For Beth, her understanding that God was present and close to her countered these feelings,

²⁶ McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 9–10.

²⁷ Gerald O'Collins, *Revelation: Toward a Christian Theology of God's Self-Revelation* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 57.

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helping to calm her during moments of heightened anxiety. The experience of God in her life was comforting, with this understanding demonstrating how faith and anxiety can interact positively. Similarly, Ruth shared that:

I'm much more aware of the presence of God and the nearness of God ... I feel much more calm about it all, I suppose. You know, I think that God is a presence around a lot of the time, and sometimes life is awful and sometimes its alright. And I feel like I can kind of have more of an approachable relationship with God.

Even in the toughest moments of her life, shaped by experiences of anxiety, Ruth felt an awareness of God's presence. With this understanding, she felt much more able to approach God with her worries, and this characterised her relationship with God. By being able to bring her anxieties to a present and proximate God, she found comfort and calm.

Anxiety, nature, and God can be considered in conversation with one another when this understanding of the importance of the presence and proximity of God is linked to feelings of encountering God in and through the natural world. Are the positive benefits of the natural world on anxiety further increased for faithful individuals who are prompted to reflect on God's presence in the world? The reflections shared by my research participants offer an insight into how we might consider God, nature and anxiety together. A reminder of God's divine attributes was experienced by several participants as a result of encounters with the natural world. This included their individual understandings and perceptions of God's presence, proximity, intentional action, and power over creation.

Diane, based in the Northeast of Scotland, shared how important encountering the natural world can be to interrupting the cycles of anxiety she described herself as being 'stuck in'. Based in an urban environment, she emphasised the importance of small reminders of the natural world, and the imagery and connection to God this creates for her. She shared:

You can be so anxious about something, and I've been to the point where I just as I say I'm paralysed, I can't move, I can't think, I can't do anything. But something triggers within me. And it can be something purely innocuous, like seeing something, a butterfly, a bird, and you feel, or for me, I feel God's presence around me.

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These encounters with the natural world provide Diane with a visual reminder of God's presence. The proximity of the divine reminds her that she is not alone during moments of difficulty and anxiety, acting as a calming presence. Diane emphasised her understanding of the appearance of something natural, a butterfly or bird, within the urban landscape outside her church as an action from God, intentionally sent to help lessen her anxiety in that moment. Her focus was taken away from the feelings of panic she was experiencing, associated with feelings of paralysis and a 'freeze' state, and shifted on to God and the comfort God brings her through this experience. God's attributes of omnipresence and omnibenevolence were revealed to her in this moment, countering her anxiety.

Additionally, these encounters with nature bring distraction, a tool for calming anxiety, shifting her focus away from her feelings of panic, as recommended by charities such as Scottish Action for Mental Health as a way to self-manage anxiety.²⁸ By paying attention to one's surroundings during moments of anxiety, an individual can bring their awareness back into the present moment – a technique known as grounding.²⁹ In Diane's case, this grounding technique was further strengthened as a calming practice through its function as a reminder of God, and her relationship to God. Nature and the presence of God within it therefore helps ease Diane's anxiety. God, nature, and anxiety are therefore presented here as related through a positive, calming effect. As explored previously, nature has been observed as having a positive impact on mental health, and here theological understandings of God's presence in and through creation and the natural world aid this further.

A second rich experience shared in relation to nature and encountering God came from participant Sarah, who identified with a 'Celtic flavour of Christianity.' Whilst discussing the relationship between faith and anxiety in her life, she explained that time spent in nature is the most positive way for her to calm her anxiety. She explained:

Whilst humans might have a special job title, it doesn't make them more important than the ... what God has created. So, being in those natural spaces is a helpful reminder of that, and it also does

²⁸ Scottish Action for Mental Health, "Understanding Anxiety", <https://www.samh.org.uk/about-mental-health/mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks>.

²⁹ Healthline, "30 Grounding Techniques to Quiet Distressing Thoughts", 20 February 2025, <https://www.healthline.com/health/grounding-techniques>.

that job, like I described earlier on, about the sort of the putting you into perspective. When you stand on a coastline and look at the sea stretching out endlessly, it's perspective, it gives you perspective. So, I would say that if I'm going into a cathedral or a church, a chapel, a multifaith prayer room, that's almost like a sticking plaster, that's a quick fix for the immediate anxiety that I'm feeling. If I go to the coast, if I go into a forest, or whatever, that is a longer-term support because it helps me get that sense of perspective.

By a 'special job title', Sarah was referring to the biblical call for humanity to care for the Earth, exemplified in passages such as Genesis 2:15 (NRSV) 'The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.' Humanity is said to have received its vocation here. Norman Wirzba observes that this vocation has been misinterpreted and reshaped by our current cultural contexts, altering our modern perception of the human relationship with nature.³⁰ Sarah, reflecting on this, emphasises that, despite this calling, humanity is no more important than the rest of creation, including the natural world. Vocation does not make humanity more special, but rather situates it as integrated within the created order. Being reminded of her place as part of creation more widely, and created equally with the natural world she observes, brings for her a perspective shift that helps to calm her anxieties. For Sarah, this perspective was that despite the vastness of creation, God was still present alongside her, something she discerned from her engagements with the natural world. Her encounter with nature here reflects a part of the truth of God's creation as she understands it, pointing towards the divine and God's presence.

In Sarah's recounting of her experience with the natural world, anxiety, and God, she notes that engagement with natural landscapes is of more comfort to her than attending church. She describes being in church, or other faith spaces, as a 'sticking plaster' for her anxiety. Though they do bring her a sense of calm, this is not as long-lasting or effective as spending time in nature. By spending time in the natural world, looking out across the coast or walking in the forest, Sarah finds more comfort and relief from her anxiety. She further noted in conversation with me

³⁰ Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 62.

that she felt that in Western European Christianity there has been a large loss of the sense of the interconnectedness of everything. This has also been recognised in natural theology, which questions the modern notion that we are detached from nature, existing in some way above it in dominion, as opposed to being an equal part of creation.³¹ Reminders of this interconnectedness and her place in creation brought Sarah comfort, prompted by observations of the natural world and its beauty, and the presence of God within it.

From the data gathered in my study, it is clear that for those of a Christian faith, recognising the presence of God in nature can further increase the benefits of the natural world on mental health. As participants Sarah and Diane exemplify, nature in various forms, such as other creatures or coastal landscapes, can bring about calming effects on heightened levels of anxiety. These natural encounters act as a reminder of the presence of God in creation, something Beth and Ruth's earlier reflections emphasised as important to the interaction between faith and anxiety in their lives, helping to counter their anxieties. The natural world's positive mental health benefits are strengthened by its positive spiritual benefits in these cases.

With Scotland's strong sense of place and identity tied to its natural landscapes, we find a suitable setting for considering the interrelatedness of nature, anxiety, and God. Whether that space be in cities or national parks, various encounters with nature can be experienced across the country. The participants whose experiences were most heavily drawn on in this final consideration had each spent much of their lives living in Scotland, and though it was not discussed explicitly, their realities prompted a reflection on the possible anxiolytic effects of connecting to nature within their Scottish contexts. With initiatives such as Think Health Think Nature and the ability for GPs to 'prescribe nature', as discussed previously, it is clear that the benefits of nature are recognised in this context. By bringing theological engagements with the natural world into this consideration, it is possible that for those people being connected with nature through these programmes may find further benefit when their spiritual and faith-based understandings are a part of this, adding to the positive impacts on their mental health.

³¹ McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 11.



Conclusion

This article has addressed the ways in which recognising the interconnectedness of nature, anxiety, and God might bring about positive impacts on mental health. Having first defined anxiety, a focus on the anxious experience was undertaken, due to the prevalence of anxiety in society today, alongside this author's research specialisation. Undertaking an interdisciplinary consideration of the benefits of nature on anxiety, the importance of the natural world in this area was emphasised. Following a short exploration of the possible interpretations of the relationship between God and nature, this article then turned to a focussed consideration of the experiences of research participants. Engaging with those who explicitly discussed the natural world as a reminder of God's proximity, through the experiences of Diane and Sarah, the ways in which a theological understanding of nature can benefit mental health was discussed. Finally, recognising the benefits of the natural world observed in theological and non-theological research, the ways in which God, nature, and anxiety can be brought into dialogue to offer further benefits to mental health were suggested. Throughout this work, Scotland and its natural landscapes were at the forefront of considerations, drawing from examples of Scottish initiatives and locations, reflecting the participant and my own positionalities.

Having briefly considered the interaction between anxiety, nature and God, it is clear there is scope for more research into this interconnected relationship, and the way this impacts mental health. Issues of intersectionality were not considered here, but as socioeconomic status, race, and gender play a considerable role in mental health, and further impact possible access to natural spaces, future research must consider these factors. Furthermore, this work did not begin to consider the vast impact the climate crisis will have on mental health, through phenomena such as climate anxiety,³² and the relationship Christian theology has and ought to have to this. Considering both these limitations, it must be recognised that Scotland is privileged in its position in the Global North, and so further enquiry into this question must consider the different ways in which these factors will be experienced in the Global South.

³² 'Climate anxiety' refers to anxiety about the climate crisis, and the potentially dangerous results of anthropogenic climate change.

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Ultimately, though limitations are present, this work offers the beginning of a consideration of the relationship between nature, anxiety, and God, using the natural world of Scotland as a starting point for this conversation. The positive benefits of an understanding of God as present in nature work in tandem with the evidenced positive benefits of spending time in nature, creating a theological and psychological interaction with potentially anxiolytic effects.