Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: To say that this past year and a half have been tough is an understatement. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every facet of our lives and put a strain on our mental health. One simple way to destress and rejuvenate yourself is to explore the outdoors. With summer here, now's a great time to go outside. I'm Emily Yeap.

My guest today is Austin Money from Missouri State University. He's the assistant director of Outdoor Adventures and Student Development at Foster Recreation Center. Money joins me to share benefits of heading outdoors, as well as tips and advice to maximize your trips.

Austin Money: There was some research done with elementary children, and there was a control group that always stayed inside. And then there were two other groups. One group did an urban hike and the other did a more wilderness type hike. And the control group saw significantly lower, both physical fitness metrics, as well as grades. So it really helps our mental health as well as our physical health. Even comparing the urban hike to the outdoor more wilderness park hike, those grades were also higher. I think a lot of people reconnecting with the outdoors because we get into this busy life, especially in our urban areas, and it reconnects us down to our roots, as well as giving us just an outlet for physical fitness.

Emily Yeap: When going outdoors, be aware of what you and your group can handle.

Austin Money: The big thing with the outdoor stuff is making sure that you're not getting over your head in the types of activities that you're doing. So knowing where you're going, knowing how to stay safe in the outdoors, whether that's your local urban park or more of a wilderness setting. And all of that's going to vary as far as your personal safety goes.

Emily Yeap: Money highlights some great options for people to explore in our area.

Austin Money: There are so many places, especially state parks around Missouri and Northern Arkansas in the Ozarks to go camping. A lot of your local state parks, even Busiek State Forest, about 15 to 20 minutes away from Springfield, you can get a free permit to go camping there. It doesn't have some of those facilities like bathrooms, but you do have wonderful hiking. Other kinds of water-based things which are going to be really popular this summer, James River is really popular if you want to do a point A to point B river paddling trip. Or like Lake Springfield and right there, if you have your own boats or you can rent them through there, you can go paddle around their lake. Go to the Nature Center, stuff like that.

Emily Yeap: When planning a trip, reach out to the outdoor professionals at the area   
you’re visiting.

Austin Money: Your state parks are going to have people. Your rivers are going to have people. I call up those people all the time to be like, "Hey, what's your river level like? Are there any dangers on the river? I'm thinking about going on Friday" and they will talk my ear off because their whole job is to get people to their location. So, the best piece of advice is figure out where you're going and then talk to the people that are responsible for that location, because they will give you all of the information.

In general, any time that we're talking to our trip participants or getting people outside through the university, biggest thing is weather. And that can change at a moment's notice. So, if you're trying to do rental things, big thing to keep in mind is the cancellation policy. So, if it's raining, when do you need to let them know to get your refund? Because some of those places aren't cheap, so you don't want to be out money if you don't follow their cancellation policy.

Emily Yeap: What should you pack If you're taking an overnight trip or longer?

Austin Money: I break it into the negotiables and the non-negotiables. So the non-negotiables if you're camping, think about everything that you need. Shelter, water, food, all of that stuff. So, make sure you have a tent. If it rains, does it have a rain fly? Are you prepared to be in cold weather? Are you prepared to be in hot weather? Biggest one is don't wear new footwear. You're going to have a bad time with blisters. And then on the negotiables, it's the fancy stuff. Anything that would make you comfortable, throw them in the car if you got space.

Emily Yeap: Don't let any barriers prevent you from enjoying the outdoors.

Austin Money: Regardless of what barriers you're facing, experience and financial barriers being the two biggest ones. There are so many options even here in town, five minutes away from you, for you to enjoy the outdoors, for you to help your physical and mental wellness and stress reduction and everything that comes with taking time for yourself outside. And the biggest thing that I want to make apparent to everyone trying to get outside is whether you're going to Phelps Grove two minutes away from campus, or you're going out west to Colorado, that's still getting outside. You can still achieve all of the things of getting outside in the mental and physical wellness, regardless of where you're going and how big of a trip it is and how much money you're spending.

Emily Yeap: If you need help with resources, contact Money AMoney@missouristate.edu. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.