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How I took my emotions out for a walk

Which is more stressful, the country or 'Murder Mile'? David Smith uses a new gadget to find out

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Imagine strolling through the countryside or bustling down crowded city streets. Then imagine taking a bird's eye view not only of the route you took - right down to fields, footpaths and zebra crossings - but how you were feeling each step of the way.

This is called emotion mapping and it enables people to compare their moods with their surroundings more precisely than ever before. It measures not just major reactions that tend to stick in the memory, but also the degrees of stimulation caused by speaking to a stranger, crossing the road or listening to birdsong.

Emotion mapping combines two existing technologies. First is a simple pair of 'finger cuffs', long used in lie-detector tests, which record the changing sweat levels on the skin as a measure of mental arousal and making no distinction between positive or negative. Second is the Global Positioning System popular with drivers in satellite navigation devices. In this case the user carries a receiver which, by locking on to three satellites, continually records their location as they walk from place to place.

By calling up data from the finger cuffs, emotion mapping displays the user's fluctuating level of arousal, expressed as peaks and troughs along the route.

So a walk down a country lane might produce only a mild curve. But dashing across a busy road or

being confronted by a mugger might show up as a sudden spike.

The system was devised by an artist, 30-year-old Christian Nold from Brixton, south London. 'It's the opposite of what architectural simulations do, predicting how buildings will be used,' he said. 'This shows what is there and how people are physiologically responding to it. But the interaction people have with each other is much more important than the built environment, although architects might think otherwise.'

Nold, a former Royal College of Art student, suggests practical uses for his system, such as helping children suffering from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder who, as part of their treatments, are sometimes given a camera to document their day in the hope of reviving memories.

Emotion mapping might also give an insight into panic attacks and whether they have an external cause.

Bucolic bliss did little for my arousal quota

Walk 1: Bibury, the Cotswolds

William Morris described it as 'the most beautiful village in England'. So, surrounded by green leaves and stone cottages, I set off in the spring sunshine at peace with the world.

At the first corner a local man inquired what I was up to. This mere act of conversation, I would later discover, caused a peak on the emotion map. I walked on to Arlington Row, built as a monastic wool store in 1380, converted into a row of weavers' cottages in the 17th century and now beloved of movie-makers seeking a pristine, chocolate-box Cotswolds. But none of this bucolic bliss had much effect on my arousal quota.

I crossed a footbridge over the Rack Isle watermeadow, then headed up a country lane, not sure of my next turn. This produced the largest spike: Christian Nold confirms that anxiety about direction can cause stress. Eventually I chose a footpath and headed out to rolling farmland.

Here, with few distractions - and no interaction with people - my arousal began to flatline. It was only the sight and sound of animals, in particular a sign 'Beware of bull', which quickened my pulse.

Then the graph picked up some more fluctuations. Could it be the mere effort of climbing a country stile? The final peak came as I got back to my car, suggesting we find natural reassurance in the sight of base camp: there's no place like home.

Three men watching me caused a surge

Walk 2: 'Murder Mile', Hackney, London

Upper and Lower Clapton Roads earned this name after eight gangland-style shootings in Hackney in 2001. So, drawing attention to myself with expensive satellite equipment, surely my arousal levels would be off the scale compared to those in placid Bibury, Gloucestershire?

Not at first. Heading south from the top of Upper Clapton Road, a peak came when I sensed three men watching me intently. I nodded and exchanged a few words, enough to cause a surge on the emotion map. In the shadow of the Gooch House tower block, two schoolboys shouted: 'You're gay! You're gay!' Charming: and another fluctuation on the graph. On Lower Clapton Road my reactions accelerated. Here there were bunches of people, roaring traffic, the ring of my mobile, the aromas of ethnic restaurants. Here, also, an oasis of peace in Clapton Pond, where my arousal level reached a high point.

But my most powerful reaction of all came when I reached a roundabout to find that construction work would force me to walk the long way round. Judging by the big spike this produced, there's nothing more arousing than laziness.

· Click [here](#) for photographs of David Smith's emotional journey

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