

Back to nature

A growing field of outdoor and adventure therapy practices connects individuals to the healing benefits of nature. But are we doing enough inside the therapy room to address the impact of environmental issues on mental health?

By Martin Jordan

In its most basic sense, ecotherapy is about the healing and psychological benefits of being in nature and natural settings. In a modern context the links between nature and positive effects on mental health can be traced back to the early part of the last century. When psychiatric patients were housed in tents due to an outbreak of tuberculosis, doctors found their condition improved. But when they returned to the inside of the hospital, most reverted to their original chronic state. Further research at the time looked at the benefits of tent therapy and found that psychiatric patients improved when living out of doors.¹

More recently Mind published a report on ecotherapy, which found that people's mental health significantly improves after activities in nature. The report highlights its own definition of ecotherapy, referring to horticultural development programmes supervised by a therapist and 'green exercise' in nature.²

The term 'ecotherapy' was first coined by Clinebell.³ He posits a form of 'ecological spirituality' whereby our holistic relationship with nature encompasses both nature's ability to nurture us, through our contact with natural places and spaces, and our ability to reciprocate this healing connection through our ability to nurture nature. In this sense, ecotherapy has always shared a close relationship to ecopsychology⁴ – placing humans within a reciprocal healing (and disconnected and destructive) relationship with nature.

Recent developments, particularly in America, have placed ecotherapy in the role of 'practising clinician', viewing it as 'applied' or clinical ecopsychology, just as psychotherapy can be described as applied or clinical psychology. A forthcoming book edited by Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist⁵ outlines many kinds of ecotherapy, including horticultural therapy, green exercise, animal assisted therapy, wilderness therapy, natural lifestyle therapy, eco-dreamwork, community ecotherapy, dealing with eco-anxiety and eco-grief, and much more. In this context, and in the absence of a definitive statement on what ecotherapy is, I see it as a set of practices, a process and an experiential connection with nature.

The biophilia hypothesis

For millennia we have lived in intimate existence with nature and to all intents and purposes we still do. We are intrinsically connected to water, food, the turning of the seasons and the climate. Technological development has fostered our ability (in the western world) to exist primarily

within urban or semi-urban environments, causing us to disconnect from nature – changing and challenging our sense of identity and affecting our mental health.⁶

The 'biophilia hypothesis' defined by Edward Wilson⁷ is the innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes. Wilson believes that we are biologically programmed to seek kinship with more than the human world. The biophilia hypothesis suggests human identity and personal fulfilment somehow depend on our relationship with nature, and that the human need for nature is linked not just to the material exploitation of the environment but also to the influence the natural world has on our emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, and even spiritual development.

Stephen Kellert says: 'The manifold ways by which human beings are tied to the remainder of life is poorly understood. The term biophilia may do well in drawing attention to psychological phenomena that rose from deep history, that stemmed from interaction with the natural environment, and are now likely to reside in the genes themselves.'⁸

A body of evidence drawing upon research from environmental psychology has explored the effects of nature on human perception, emotions, behaviour and cognition. It has been found that the quality and content of a view from a hospital window has a significant affect on a patient's recovery, with a view of nature fostering a quicker recovery post surgery.⁹

A parallel issue for counsellors and therapists that runs alongside any discussion of ecotherapy, is when, and in what ways, do we engage with the environmental issues that are affecting our planet, within our therapy practice? This is complicated, for, as therapists, affect is located at the level of the individual, embedded in problematic relationships – in the present, the past, and in the therapy room itself. I don't advocate that therapy outside is somehow better than inside, both are very valuable. For me, it's about how therapy is placed in the service of making connections, the locating and re-embodiment of felt emotion in a network of relationships, both positive and negative, and the ability to both be able to sit with, tolerate and attempt to change some of these emotions.

Environmental issues, our relationship with the planet and the oppressive economic conditions which give rise to aspects of personal distress, are all issues of relationship, and therefore it can be argued they should be integrated fully into our therapeutic practice. The fundamental process for ecotherapy and therapeutic practices in nature is the reconnection to nature as a reconnection to self.



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Nature as therapeutic presence

Therapist variables have been seen to be important. Several researchers have concluded that it is the quality of the relationship and the therapist's ability to form and sustain a therapeutic alliance with the client that is important to the outcome of the therapy.¹⁰ Working within nature adds another variable: the role of nature itself in therapeutic change. If nature acts as a therapeutic presence in the process, then the person engaging in eco- and nature-based therapy needs to form a sustaining and therapeutic relationship with nature. This falls into two aspects: passive receiving of the aesthetic and healing beauty of nature and natural environments that in themselves become places of healing and restoration; and a more active engagement whereby therapy is conducted utilising the resources of the natural environment, as in adventure, wilderness and horticultural therapy.

The deep ecology movement points us towards the importance of ritual to affirm our connectivity with the earth. What is required is a 'remembering' of the connection and this can be facilitated by 'intention' to connect and re-establish contact. This idea centres on the fact that we are descended from thousands of generations who practised rituals acknowledging our interconnectedness.¹¹

By placing nature in a central role in therapy we are asked to shift our perception of nature as a *thing* and invited to give it a form of subjectivity. If we draw

upon ideas of ecopsychology, believing 'we are nature', the self becomes more intrinsically linked into and a part of the natural world. As most of our therapeutic trainings haven't accounted for this connection in our psyches, we have to look further back for an evidence base for our practice.

Aboriginal culture

I will draw upon ideas from Australian Aboriginal culture whilst acknowledging that a form of these beliefs existed for our own indigenous European ancestors – just much further back in recent history. By drawing upon these ideas I am attempting to illustrate how a psyche can be represented and 'seen' in a natural context and form part of a reciprocal feedback loop, whereby psychology and emotions become intrinsically linked to the land upon and within which we exist and function.

Aboriginal culture existed for at least 40,000 years unchanged prior to colonisation by European settlers. It is a culture so intrinsically linked to the land that what the Aboriginal saw (and still sees) was not an environment with different geographical aspects, but a profoundly metaphysical landscape capable of expressing their deepest spiritual yearnings.¹² The sacred landscape, framed within the confines of the church or cathedral walls for the European, existed for the Aboriginal as open space, trees, rocks and rivers, central to wellbeing and happiness. From this perspective the land becomes iconic in its essence, not only a container in

its purely physical attributes but in terms of its metaphysical qualities. This web of systemic connections becomes central to the idea of land as self and can also be seen in Celtic and Norse mythologies – known in one form as the ‘web of wyrd’, the interconnectivity between all things, human and more than human.¹³

Case example

I was engaged with a group exploring personal transitions from student to qualified health professional. The setting was a mountainous area in Wales where the group was camping over a weekend. The group participated in a number of exercises, moving around a wheel of self comprising of the four directions: north, east, south and west. The ‘four shields’ psychology, developed by Steven Foster and Meredith Little,¹⁴ is based on the Native American tradition of the medicine wheel; the four directions correspond with the four points of the compass and the four seasons. They also represent aspects of our psychological make-up and the stages of maturity that the participant is seeking to pass through in a journey of transition. The four shields shares a kinship with ancient psychology where there was no differentiation between people and nature, where human life was intimately tied into the seasonal changes.

South is summer; the psychological aspect is of childhood and bodily sensation, instinct, urge, desire and lust. West is autumn; the psychological aspect is of adolescence, introspection – emotions such as fear and self-doubt may be present in this shield. It is a place of initiation when the child of summer is preparing to become the adult of winter. The north is winter; the psychological aspect is of adulthood, mind, design and order. The adult of winter must do what needs to be done to survive, to store food for the long dark nights of winter, to make sure there is enough fuel for warmth. Finally the adult makes the transition to the east, which is spring. The psychological

state is a reflection of the other shields manifest in wisdom and the position of ‘elder’ but also paradoxically of infant and rebirth. It is the state of insight, spirituality, and healing.

After one exercise where participants were instructed to walk in the direction of the south and reflect upon their childhood experiences, a participant returned with this account: ‘I came to an area of vegetation where a dry bush had been burnt in a fire. From the ashes new growth was emerging, looking much healthier than before, with more nutrients from the ashes starting to sustain new growth. I took from this encounter a metaphor of my difficult childhood: growing up in a barren environment, the product of an unhappy marriage, an experience that had “burnt” me in a similar way to the bushes being burnt. My interest in psychology and therapy was largely a result and an attempt, as I suspect of all therapists, to heal myself. I wondered whether I had to feel pain again to grow, to heal – seeking nutrients from the ashes of my experience.’

The exercises evoke experiential and psychological memories of childhood, both joyous and painful. Representation can take the form of encounters with trees, plants and animals, which then are associated with the feelings and thoughts of childhood. Nature acts as a mirror – reflecting back to the person aspects of themselves and their relationships. Symbolism and metaphor become important in relation to bringing greater understanding for participants through their contact with nature. Symbolism is used to invoke feelings and thoughts which can then in turn aid the process of inner reflection.

Seasons of life

The idea of the self as existing within a seasonal process reflects back the idea that we are not static in terms of our state of mind or our ability to transcend difficulties. We are always in a process of change and transition from one season to

the next. This idea has been used in lifespan psychology to understand the seasons of a person’s life.^{10,15} Moving around a wheel of self allows us to connect with a wider process in nature – of death, birth, growth and renewal. These are seen as inescapable facts of a nature-based psychology.

By incorporating nature into therapy and therapy into nature, the myth of the isolated mind separated from nature is challenged. Mind becomes a relational phenomenon, not only in relation to other humans but in relation to the more than human world. The relational term in psychotherapy and counselling argues that the person is motivated by meanings given to interactions and how this interpersonal matrix is configured and participated in. A relational therapeutic process takes the position that change occurs through the client and therapist participating in interactions with each other, giving rise to an emergent process of new ways of being in relation.¹⁶

By working in a relational way with nature, new internal landscapes start to emerge in interaction with external landscapes, which reflects, sustains, challenges and supports the person on their therapeutic journey. The myth that the self is somehow separate from nature becomes exposed as the fallacy it is.

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The Fifth International Adventure Therapy Conference exploring the outdoors, nature, wilderness and adventure as a context for psychological therapy, takes place in Edinburgh, 7–11 September 2009. The conference will examine the developing field of outdoor and adventure therapy and will include keynotes, presentations, and workshops from leading international researchers and practitioners working in this area. For more information see www.bacp.co.uk/5iatac or email katy.hobday@bacp.co.uk

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