



nature therapy



what is it?

It's any practice that involves nature in a therapeutic intervention with humans. It really works (see resources). It can involve animals, walking on a beach, in a forest, and/or doing things in nature, like gardening. People often do this kind of thing automatically, but therapy involves a therapist or facilitator who sets up the experience (depressed people may not bother to go into nature themselves, or to seek company).

Often, when people enter the mental health system, they're automatically prescribed medication, ignoring the free resource provided by nature, without any side effects (apart from the occasional nettle sting or spot of sunburn). We're not saying that nature therapy should replace medication or talking therapies, just that it could be taken into consideration a lot more than it is, and in many cases, it will be all that's required.

The structure of the therapy depends on the facilitator. Some might involve the use of therapeutic language, with a psychologist or counsellor; other approaches may involve the belief that nature doesn't need language, but is therapeutic in itself. Nature therapy is an umbrella term that takes in the broader 'ecotherapy', or 'ecopsychology', which involves psychologists using a more nature-based approach.

Nature therapy works with all senses to elevate mood. For example, the smell of terpenes (from coniferous trees) or the sound of birdsong are known to improve mood and reduce anxiety and depression; and the physical exercise involved in moving through nature improves mood too. Nature therapy can help with recovery from addiction too, and the health benefits of having an allotment for older people are well-known.

History: traditional cultures have always practiced nature therapy as part of their daily routine; the modern movement originated with the Quakers, who used nature therapy from the 16th century, for people who would otherwise have been admitted to brutal institutions. They owned farms where people would go to recuperate whilst doing useful outdoor work.

Japan has a long nature therapy tradition. Shinrin-yoku, or 'forest bathing', involves immersion in a woodland setting. Doctors in Japan have long prescribed short amounts of time in woodland to improve mental health. Nature isn't just forests of course – the therapeutic effects of mountains or oceans are just as effective, as well as therapy involving particular species of animal. Equine-assisted therapy, for example, is a well-established therapy that involves working with and riding horses.



Animals are often used in nature therapy. Horses are a favourite.

what are the benefits?

Nature therapy is particularly important now that, for the first time in history, over 50% of the world's population live in urban areas – and this will rise to 70% by 2050. Younger people especially are spending a large proportion of their time indoors, in front of a screen. Our sensory world has shrunk. Urbanisation and separation from the natural world has been linked to a deterioration in mental health. Walking in a natural environment reduces the neural activity associated with a risk of mental illness, and boosts immunity, compared to walking for the same amount of time in an urban environment. Apparently, the chemicals that plants emit to protect themselves from rot and pests are also good for humans.

Separation from nature is bad for us – it's as simple as that. Time spent as far from human technology as possible is time well spent, in terms of physical and mental health – and yes, spiritual health as well, or whatever the correct word is – a kind of well-being that can't be defined in terms of physiology or psychology. We've evolved to live closely with the rest of nature, and our society is defying that evolution.

Nature therapy reduces the need to fund corporate drug companies; and pharmaceutical prescriptions like Prozac, can have side-effects such as insomnia, diarrhoea, flu symptoms and nausea, when in fact, communing with nature has been shown to be effective in treating PTSD, but without the side-effects, or corporate profits.

Most mental health practitioners work indoors, under artificial lights, in clinical conditions. There is a significant level of burn-out in the profession. Therapists can get nature therapy themselves, which can give them a new lease of life.

If you have nature nearby, you can treat yourself, for free, as often as you like. If the benefits of green spaces are more widely understood, more land might be put aside for nature, which is good news in terms of ecology.



For the first time in history, more of us now live in urban than rural areas; and screen time has replaced outdoor play for many children.

what can I do?

Receiving nature therapy: for mild stress or anxiety, get yourself into nature to see if it makes you feel better. If your problems require more focused treatment, you can join a 'nature quest' – a group meet-up that involves walking and observing nature. The group can keep you focused, and the 'quest' involves seeking knowledge or understanding.

Animals can often teach us things about ourselves that we hadn't understood before. Nature therapist Kim Brown tells us that during a horse therapy nature quest, she was bitten by a horse. She realised that she wasn't being respectful to the animal, and she realised that she sometimes behaved that way with people too (although people don't usually respond by biting her). She was able to gain this insight by talking with other people on the quest – which she may not have done had she been alone. Humans have evolved to live in tribes, as well as existing close to nature, and there are psychological benefits to be gained by interacting in social groups. Helping people to do things like climb over gates, collect wood for a fire etc. has a bonding effect in a social group.

You can search for nature therapists locally. There are also holidays available with a nature-therapy focus – again, search online. Take the time to see what feels intuitively right for you. Are you drawn towards forests, mountains, rivers, beaches or animals (and what species)? Try to remember what fascinated you about nature when you were

a child. This may seem too silly as an adult, so you may have to attempt to connect with your 'inner child'. Therapists are more catalysts than experts; individuals are in the best position to gauge what they enjoy and what makes them feel better. When people start to take ownership of their own expertise and experiences, and things start to work, then that's therapeutic in itself, and the beginning of healing.

Becoming a nature therapist: no professional qualifications are required at the moment. This will happen, and it may well be a good thing, although there's a danger that some of the inherent creativity and freedom may be lost when more structure is introduced. Stricter application of health and safety regulations may prevent people from climbing that tree / swimming in that river / getting too close to that animal etc. Courses are available, although there is no central organisation / registration as yet, so just search online. If you're already a therapist, adding nature therapy to your practice will add value professionally and in terms of your personal growth.

resources

- lowimpact.org/nature-therapy for more information, links & books, including:
- Florence Williams, *the Nature Fix*
- Sarah Ivens, *Forest Therapy*
- Qing Li, *Forest Bathing*
- ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4997467: review of research into effects of nature therapy
- forestbathinginternational.org: promoting forest bathing internationally



Shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing, involves immersion in a woodland setting.

Feel free to upload, print and distribute this sheet as you see fit. 220+ topics on our website, each with introduction, books, courses, products, services, magazines, links, advice, articles, videos and tutorials. Let's build a sustainable, non-corporate system.

facebook.com/lowimpactorg

Lowimpact.org

twitter.com/lowimpactorg

Registered in England. Company Ltd. by Guarantee no: 420502