

A Guide to **Nature-Based Therapy**

An introduction



“What is the good of your stars and trees, your sunrise and the wind, if they do not enter into our daily lives?”

E M Forster

Have you ever gone for a walk in a forest, by the beach, or even relaxed in your garden and noticed how you feel during and after? The practice of bringing nature into our lives is very popular these days and with good reason. From hill walking to kayaking, wild swimming, dark skies, cold water plunging, the list goes on and it is no coincidence that the effects of being out in nature can play a real part in maintaining good mental health.

Nature-based therapy is about connecting with the natural world around us: the sounds of the forest, the scents of the trees and flowers, the sunlight filtering through the leaves, gazing at the stars on a clear night, listening to the waves on the shore, or feeling the sea breeze blow your stresses away.

How does nature-based therapy work?

Nature-based therapy has its foundations in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). This is a powerful approach to help clients transform their thought patterns, emotions, and behaviours. When applied in the natural beauty of the outdoors, it can be even more transformative.

Nature-based therapy and cognitive distortions

Cognitive distortions are biased or inflexible thinking patterns that contribute to negative emotions and behaviours. Cognitive distortions can lead us to misinterpret situations and experiences, triggering negative emotional responses. Some common examples include:

- **All-or-nothing thinking:** Seeing things in extremes, for example: “If I don’t get this perfect, I’m a complete failure.”
- **Overgeneralisation:** Making broad negative conclusions based on one event, for example: “I messed up this presentation, I’m bad at everything.”
- **Mental filtering:** Focusing only on negative aspects of a situation while ignoring the positives.
- **Disqualifying the positive:** Dismissing positive experiences as irrelevant or due to luck.
- **Mind reading:** Assuming we know what others are thinking, often negatively.
- **Emotional reasoning:** Believing feelings are facts, for example: “I feel like a loser, so I must be one.”

Nature-based therapy, on the other hand, utilises the natural world to promote helpful thinking patterns that improve wellbeing. For example:

- **Mindfulness and perspective:** Spending time in nature can promote mindfulness, allowing us to become more aware of our thoughts and feelings without judgment. This increased awareness is the first step towards identifying cognitive distortions.
- **Shifting focus:** Immersing ourselves in nature allows us to step outside our daily routines and worries. This can provide a mental break and help us gain a new perspective on our problems and thought patterns.

A 2023 study in Germany concluded that being outdoors in nature can be health promoting, can decrease depression, and increase mental wellbeing. The study investigated the relationships between nature-based therapy, mental health, and individuals’ connectedness to nature. Every patient experienced nature-based therapy as effective.

Example: Imagine someone struggling with all-or-nothing thinking about exercise. They might believe: “If I can’t run a marathon, there’s no point in exercising at all.”

Nature-based therapy could involve a mindful walk in nature, helping them appreciate the beauty and peace of the environment at a slow pace. They could pay close attention to the sights, sounds, smells, and textures around them during the walk and focus on the present moment appreciating the details of the natural environment. This experience could challenge their rigid thinking and open up the possibility of enjoying exercise in different ways.

Nature-based therapy and emotional wellbeing

Nature-based therapy offers a range of additional benefits for our emotional health. Here are some of the key advantages:

- **Improved mood:** Nature can boost mood and emotional wellbeing, making us less susceptible to negative self talk and distorted thinking.
- **Improved self-esteem:** Nature-based activities often lead to positive experiences like accomplishment (hiking a trail) or connection (social walks). These positive experiences can challenge negative thinking patterns and build self-esteem.
- **Reduced stress and anxiety:** Spending time in nature has been shown to lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Being around trees, water, and other natural elements can promote feelings of relaxation and calmness.
- **Enhanced focus and attention:** Nature can have a restorative effect on the mind, improving our ability to focus and concentrate. This can be beneficial for people with ADHD or those struggling with information overload by reducing the overwhelming sensory input we may experience online or in cities.
- **Social connection and community:** Nature therapy can be done individually or in groups, fostering social connection and a sense of community with others who share an appreciation for the outdoors.



Activities such as hiking can give us a sense of accomplishment, which helps build self-esteem.

Nature-based therapy and stress

Feeling overwhelmed by the daily grind? You're not alone. Stress is a prevalent issue in our fast-paced world, impacting our physical and mental health. But there's a natural remedy waiting to be embraced. Here is how nature-based therapy capitalises on the power of the outdoors to combat stress:

- **Physiological response:** Nature exposure triggers a relaxation response in the body. Blood pressure and heart rate decrease, promoting a sense of peace.
- **Mindfulness boost:** The sights, sounds, and smells of nature can gently nudge us towards a more mindful state. Focusing on the present moment amidst the trees and greenery allows our worries to fade.
- **Sensory escape:** Urban environments bombard us with constant stimuli. Nature offers a sensory break, allowing our overstimulated minds to find respite and recharge.

Practising nature-based therapy

Below are some helpful ideas to help you get started on your journey into nature:

Forest bathing

Originating in Japan, forest bathing involves immersing yourself in a forest atmosphere. Find a quiet spot, disconnect from technology, and simply breathe deeply, taking in the sights, sounds, and scents of the trees and forest floor.

Using nature as a metaphor

Nature serves as a powerful metaphor for resilience, adaptation, growth, and interconnectedness. We can bring awareness to thoughts and behaviours we hadn't considered before by making use of these metaphors. For example, forests that have been damaged by floods or fire but are still growing out of the damage.

Grounding

Grounding exercises that involve connecting with nature, like mindful walking, deep breathing, or simply absorbing the sights and sounds of the outdoors, are helpful in reducing anxiety and depression.

Meditation in nature

Try and find a peaceful spot outdoors, sit comfortably, and practise meditation. The natural environment can provide a calming backdrop for focusing on your breath and quieting your mind.

Try something new

Try outdoor activities that challenge your fears or avoidance behaviours, and test new ways of thinking and acting. For example, gorge walking, forest ziplines, or wild swimming.

Keep a journal

Write down your observations, feelings, and thoughts inspired by the natural world to increase your self-reflection and connection with nature. You can also incorporate sketches, drawings or photographs.

Celebrate your successes

Nature offers countless opportunities for adaptability, teaching us that life is full of unexpected changes that can be managed. Celebrate your successes and progress in the serene outdoor setting, reinforcing the benefits of all your hard work.



In his book (2018) "*Shinrin- Yoku – The art and science of Forest Bathing*", Dr Qing Li, one of the leading experts in forest-bathing tells us that forest bathing can result in reduced blood pressure, lower stress, improved concentration and memory, and can even lift depression and improve pain thresholds to name just a few of the benefits.

Safety first

Be aware of your surroundings, dress appropriately for the weather conditions, and choose activities that match your fitness level.

Leave no trace

Respect the natural environment by following leave-no-trace principles to minimise your impact.

Find what works for you

Experiment with different techniques and find what resonates most with you and your preferences for connecting with nature.



Nature's embrace – bringing therapy to cities and towns

Gardening can help us get closer to nature and help us feel more connected to the natural world around us.

In our concrete jungles and fast-paced lives, we often crave a connection with nature. This approach recognises the power of the outdoors to improve our mental, physical, and social wellbeing, even in cityscapes and towns.

Cities might seem devoid of nature, but there are hidden pockets of green waiting to be explored. Here's how nature-based therapy can be incorporated:

Park prescriptions

Give yourself time in parks or community gardens at lunchtime and practise mindfulness walks or meditation amidst greenery.

Green Gyms

Public parks can be transformed into 'green gyms' with designated areas for nature-based exercises like tai chi or balance challenges on uneven terrain.

Community gardens

These vibrant spaces not only provide fresh produce but also foster social interaction and a sense of accomplishment while surrounded by nature.

Gardening/horticultural therapy

Engaging in gardening activities can be grounding and therapeutic. Planting, tending to plants, and witnessing their growth can foster a sense of accomplishment and connection to nature.

Nature's infusion: nature-based therapy in the workplace

Even at your desk at home or in the office, a touch of nature can work wonders:

Indoor plants

Having plants in your home and workplace offers a multitude of benefits for your physical and mental health. From improving air quality to reducing stress and boosting mood, plants can significantly enhance the quality of your living/working space. So, why not add some greenery to your home office or workplace and experience the positive effects for yourself.

Natural décor

If bringing plants inside isn't an option, try bringing in natural elements through decorations, such as pressed flowers, sand, pebbles, photos, or paintings. These are things you can look at or touch to remind you about your connection to nature.

Sounds of nature

Similarly, listening to the sounds of nature at work can help us be more productive and feel more positive about our working environment. There are many forests sounds on YouTube including bird song, babbling brooks and rustling leaves for you to enjoy.

Smells of nature

Don't forget that you can use all of your senses when bringing the outdoors in, including smell. If you work at home or have your own office, essential oils, scented candles, diffusers, and even wood shavings like cedar wood can bring the smells of the outdoors into the workplace, reminding you of the peace and quiet of the natural world.

Workplaces can also do their part to make the most of natural elements to boost employee mood, productivity and wellbeing:

Bringing nature in at work

Workplaces can invest in wellbeing gardens or rooms with natural materials and features which replicate the sights, sounds and smells of the outdoors to create a calming atmosphere.



Meeting outside

Ditching the conference room and having one-to-one meetings outside can take advantage of the natural setting to boost ideas and creativity. Incorporating nature-based therapy into our daily lives, even in small doses, can significantly enhance our wellbeing. From city parks to workplace greenery, nature offers a powerful therapeutic tool readily available for us to embrace.

Summary

Nature-based therapy isn't a one-time fix, but a practice to integrate into your life. By making nature a regular part of your stress management toolkit, you will be better equipped to navigate the challenges of daily life with a calmer and more resilient mind. So, step outside, breathe in the fresh air, and let nature work its wonders.

Further reading

- Shinrin-Yoku: The Art and Science of Forest Bathing (2018) Dr Qing Li.
- Grounded: How connection with nature can improve our mental and physical wellbeing (2021). Ruth Allen.
- The Well Gardened Mind: Rediscovering Nature in the Modern World (2020). Sue Stuart-Smith.
- <https://tfb.institute/> (The Forest Bathing Institute, London)
- Ecotherapy and Mental Health, First Psychology booklet, <https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/ecotherapy-booklet.pdf>

“Study Nature,
love nature,
stay close to
nature. It will
never fail you.”

Frank Lloyd Wright

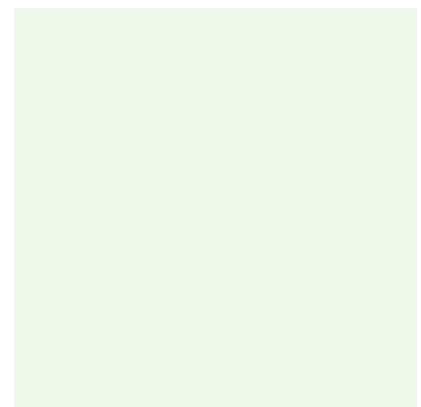
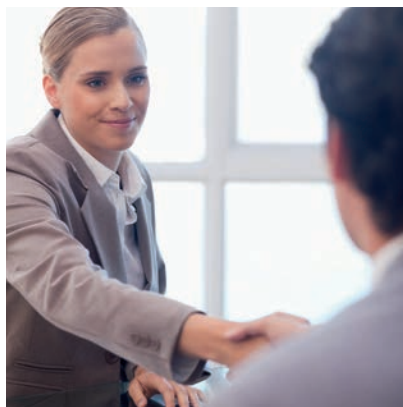
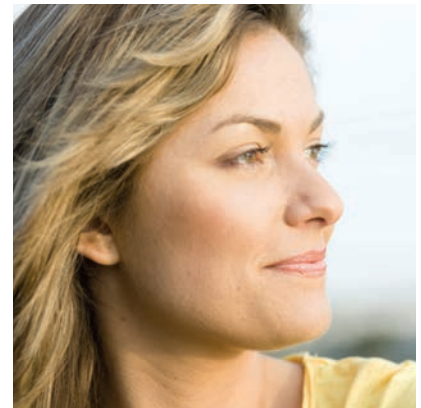


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Newcastle | Perth | Online

Tel: 03330 344115
Email: info@firstpsychology.co.uk
Web: www.firstpsychology.co.uk

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