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Nature-based counseling

Over the past few years, the helping professions have seen increased interest in nature-based counseling. While the pandemic has been challenging, to say the least, one silver lining is that people (including therapists) have taken a renewed interest in their connection to the natural world. The pandemic has forced us all to think of new ways to connect with our clients. Many counselors went virtual, but others ventured outside, finding ways to connect not only with clients but also to nature.

As a species, humans have lived thousands of years in an intimate relationship with the natural world. The understanding of one's surroundings was critical to the survival of the individual, the clan/tribe and the species as a whole (Martin Jordan and Joe Hinds, 2016). Indigenous communities have long understood and continue to maintain these important beliefs and practices.

Yet for many in the industrialized world, the connection to nature has shifted with modern ways of living. Now most of us spend the majority of our days indoors, sedentary and often in front of screens. Researchers show that this growing disconnection between humans and the outdoors correlates with increasing ailments, including anxiety, depression and attention-deficit disorders (Rachel McCormick, 2017; Alicia Thorp and colleagues, 2011).

Helping humans heal and reconnect to nature can bring about positive change. The benefits of nature come with boosts in mood and energy in as little as a few minutes (Calum Neill and colleagues, 2019).

Nature-based counseling, or ecotherapy, is defined as contact with the outdoors and nature as a method or element of therapy that addresses the interweaving between humans and the natural world (Megan Delaney, 2020). Ecotherapists use various techniques and interventions, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. Techniques can include therapy sessions spent walking or sitting in nature, immersive wilderness therapy, horticulture therapy or therapeutic gardening; animal-assisted therapy such as therapy dogs or equine therapy; and adventure-based activities such as rock climbing or ropes courses.

An important piece of ecotherapy is that both the therapist and the client see the natural world as a partner in the healing process. In other words, counselors do not just use nature but also foster a deeper understanding of the human-nature connection and treat the natural world as one would any important relationship. As the natural world takes care of us, we too take care of the natural world (Linda Buzzell,

2016). Ecotherapists help clients establish ways of thinking about reciprocity in all their relationships, including their relationship with nature.

Research supports the physical and mental benefits of reconnecting with the natural world (Caoimhe Twohig-Bennett and Andy Jones, 2018), but how counselors understand and use nature-based interventions is largely unknown. Recently, researchers Jacqueline Swank and Ryan Reese (2021) explored this question in their scholarly study: "Do counselors and other helping professionals use nature-based counseling?"

RESEARCH STUDY OVERVIEW

Swank and Reese's study explored the attitudes toward, uses of and barriers for infusing nature-based counseling into therapy practices for helping professionals. Respondents included a random sample of helping professionals from across the United States, resulting in 406 participants. The participants were primarily female (76%) and white (85%), and most reported having a master's (55%) or doctoral (37%) degree. The participants identified as professional counselors (36%), social workers (33%), psychologists (29%) or other (2%). Most identified as being "nature-friendly" practitioners, but only 18% reported having received any training in nature-based therapy practices.

The participants completed three online surveys. First, the 60-item Reese EcoWellness Inventory (Ryan Reese and colleagues, 2015) was used to measure participants' multiple connections to the natural world, including physical access, sensory access, protection, preservation, spirituality and community connectedness (Ryan Reese and Jane Myers, 2012). Second, the researchers' self-designed survey was used to assess whether helping professionals understood, labeled and utilized nature-based counseling practices. Finally, participants were given a demographic survey to complete.

Swank and Reese found that participants used nature-based counseling in a variety of ways, including sitting outside during therapy (50.8%), assigning nature as homework (60.6%), integrating natural elements in their inside offices (68.8%) and providing psychoeducation in nature/wellness practices (68.8%).

Barriers to using nature-based counseling included weather/seasonal considerations (66.7%), safety and liability issues (59.9%), and confidentiality (63.2%). That being said, many clinicians utilized a nature-based counseling approach with clients (between 9% and 68% for any given nature-based counseling approach). The most widely used practices

SCHOLARLY ARTICLES AND OTHER MATERIALS CITED

- » “Construction and initial validation of the Reese Ecowellness Inventory” by Ryan F. Reese, Jane E. Myers, Todd F. Lewis and John T. Willse, *International Journal for the Enhancement of Counselling*, 2015
- » “Do counselors and other helping professionals use nature-based counseling?” by Jacqueline M. Swank and Ryan F. Reese, *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 2021
- » “Does access to green space impact the mental well-being of children: A systematic review” by Rachel McCormick, *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, 2017
- » *Ecotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* by Martin Jordan and Joe Hinds, 2016
- » “Ecowellness: The missing factor in holistic wellness models” by Ryan F. Reese and Jane Myers, *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 2012
- » “The health benefits of the great outdoors: A systematic review and meta-analysis of greenspace exposure and health outcomes” by Caoimhe Twohig-Bennett and Andy Jones, *Environmental Research*, 2018
- » “The many ecotherapies” by Linda Buzzell, in Martin Jordan and Joe Hinds (Eds.), *Ecotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 2016
- » “Nature contact and mood benefits: Contact duration and mood type” by Calum Neill, Janelle Gerard and Katherine D. Arbuthnott, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2019
- » *Nature Is Nurture: Counseling and the Natural World* by Megan Delaney, 2020
- » “Sedentary behaviors and subsequent health outcomes in adults: A systematic review of longitudinal studies, 1996–2011” by Alicia A. Thorp, Neville Owen, Maike Neuhaus and David Dunstan, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 2011

included guided imagery (used by 65%), natural elements in the counseling room, nature/wellness psychoeducation and client homework to interact with nature. Furthermore, 82% reported a wish to increase their use of nature-based practices.

APPLYING THIS RESEARCH TO YOUR PRACTICE

Overarching results of Swank and Reese’s study confirm that counselors are engaging in nature-based counseling, but there continues to be a need for training, ethical considerations and further research on best practices. This section describes ways to integrate nature into your practice.

If you are interested in doing nature-based counseling, start by making sure you have a well-established connection to nature yourself. What does it mean to you? Do you have certain nature-based activities that help you with your own mental health?

Begin by reading the literature mentioned in this article and branching out from there. Research ecotherapy or nature-based counseling training opportunities in your area or at your favorite conferences.

To bring nature into your own practice, reflect on your motivation for doing so. Why do you want to bring nature into the counseling process? What are you hoping to gain or experience?

While gaining clarity on the role you see nature playing in your practice and how you think it will help your clients, take time to reflect on your own relationship with nature. How has nature benefited or affected you? What do you do to heal the earth (sustainable practices and attitudes)? Where can you

continue to improve your relationship with nature, and how can you give back to the earth?

Clearly articulating the importance of your own relationship with the natural world, including the ways you engage in sustainability efforts, and envisioning how you wish to incorporate nature into your practice are important first steps in establishing your philosophical framework.

On a practical level, you need to begin thinking about where and how you will conduct or incorporate ecotherapy. It is important that you are comfortable with the trails, beaches, parks or other outdoor spaces before bringing a client there. This is an opportunity to actively explore your area as you determine which trails, park benches or spots would make for a great walk by considering privacy, the level of difficulty, the length of time needed and physical safety concerns (i.e., should clients bring sunscreen, bug spray or other protective gear?).

As a counselor who sees clients in natural settings, I (Megan) have witnessed the benefits of nature-based counseling firsthand. I see my clients primarily at a local park with plentiful safe trails that provide sufficient privacy and do not require demanding physical ability. In fact, sometimes we just sit in rocking chairs facing the woods.

I also teach ecotherapy and adventure-based counseling at my university, educating my students about the theoretical base and research evidence on multiple types of nature-based counseling practices, as well as providing firsthand opportunities for the students to experience nature as a place of health and healing.



Nature-based counseling is applicable in school settings too. I (Sage) incorporated the outdoors into my counseling curriculum when I was working as a school counselor. I conducted guidance lessons outside when the weather would allow, took students out for individual and small group counseling, and implemented structured recess on the playground with students exhibiting behavioral issues.

Schools provide a safe way to get students outside when many of them do not have access to outdoor spaces. I found that time spent outdoors reduced students' anxiety, improved classroom behaviors and improved the quality of my relationships with them; teachers certainly noticed a difference too.

School-based counselors should review the schedule and plan to bring students outside when there is no recess and no physical education classes going on. This will limit distractions and increase the available areas that you can use. If you are unable to get outside with clients or students because of weather, safety or other constraints, brainstorm ways that you can bring nature inside, such as by adding plants to your office or collecting natural elements for art and mindfulness interventions.

When you are ready to start using ecotherapy with your clients, you will need to talk to your insurance carriers to discuss certain considerations. After that, revisit your informed consent for existing clients, and update this information for new ones. When you take your clients outside, you can't guarantee that no one will hear your conversation or see you together. Your clients need to be made fully aware of this so that they can make an informed decision on whether outdoor sessions are right for them.

Before taking clients outside or bringing nature into the counseling room, be sure to gather health information, such as allergies and what to do in an emergency (e.g., does your client carry an EpiPen and know how to use it?). This information can be included in your informed consent and intake paperwork, in addition to the conversation that you should have with your client before moving sessions outside.

When working with children, always make sure that their parents are fully aware and in agreement with your plans. In addition to reviewing the safety and practical concerns, be sure to ask specific questions in the intake interview about a client's emotional and spiritual connection to nature.

Once you begin your ecotherapy work, start small. You can begin by using nature as a metaphor. For example, I (Sage) love asking clients to give me their emotional weather report for the day and sometimes ask them what they think the forecast will be. You can add plants and natural decorations to your office space, which will benefit you and your clients.

During session, discuss topics such as eco-grief, eco-anxiety and climate stress, in addition to ways clients can engage in sustainable behaviors and foster a reciprocal relationship with the earth. Use natural materials for art-based activities and mindfulness practices. Or assign nature-based homework to your client (e.g., park prescriptions), which can range from spending a few minutes outside to choosing something in nature to represent themselves to cultivating a special place.

I (Megan) take the same trail with my clients, and we marvel at the seasonal changes in nature throughout the year. Many clients report going back to the same path on their own as a place to find peace and respite.

There are so many possibilities with ecotherapy. Have fun and get creative. ☺

Megan Delaney is an associate professor and chair in the Department of Professional Counseling at Monmouth University (MU). Her recent book, *Nature Is Nurture: Counseling and the Natural World* (2020), combines research and practical application for counselors to infuse nature as a therapeutic partner. She teaches applied ecotherapy courses at MU. She also has a private ecotherapy practice, Therapy Without Walls LLC. Her research agenda focuses on clinical outcomes in ecotherapy as well as student experiences in nature-based counseling curriculum. Contact her at mdelaney@monmouth.edu.

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