

LESSON 1 NATURE & SCOPE OF ECOTHERAPY

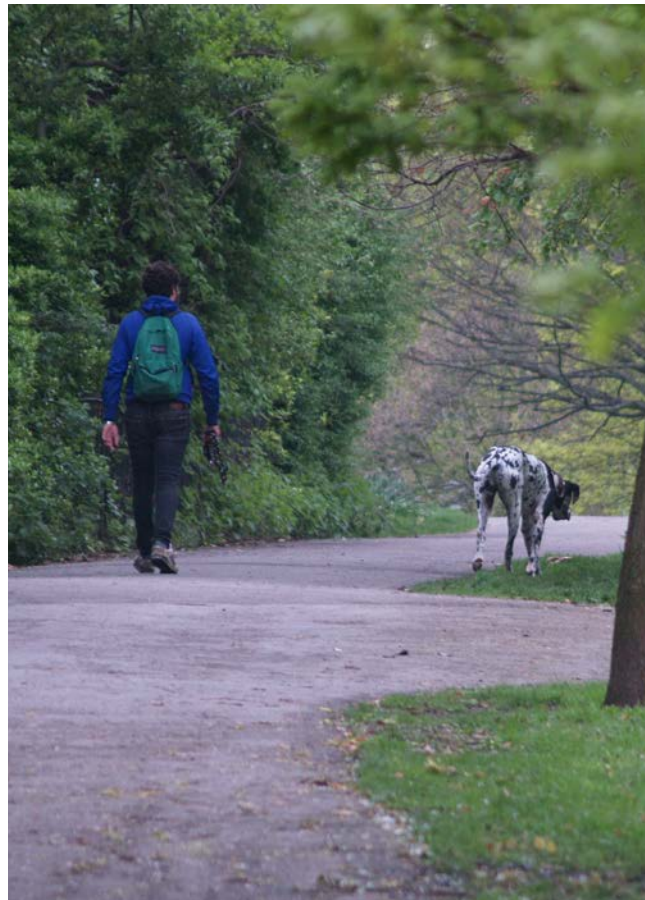
Ecotherapy is also known as 'nature therapy' or 'green therapy'. It is the practice of ecopsychology. Ecopsychology and ecotherapy are relatively new concepts in the field of psychology and counselling.

APPLICATIONS

Ecotherapy may be used by psychologists, counsellors and other health professionals. Applications are broader than just this though. Examples might include:

- Horticultural therapy involves undertaking gardening activities for physical and/or psychological wellbeing, either as formal guided therapy sessions, or informal activity.
- Pet or animal therapies can be varied, such as riding for the disabled, companion animal visits to hospitals or aged care facilities or farm visits for therapeutic purposes.
- Forest bathing emerged as a form of therapy in Japan in the 1980's. It can involve structured, meditative two or three hour sessions led by trained guides, or less formal as simple as going for a walk in a forest.

As you move through this course you will broaden and deepen your understanding of nature therapies or ecotherapies.



ECOPSYCHOLOGY

The name 'ecopsychology' is often attributed to Theodore Roszak. Roszak spent much of his working life as a history professor at the University of Hayward, California, where he investigated the impact of culture on behaviour. He first used the term ecopsychology in his 1992 book entitled 'The Voice of the Earth' where he explored the relationship between psychology and ecology. He argued that the needs of the planet and the needs of people should be viewed as being on a continuum rather than being to separate things. Ecopsychology has had some influence on the field

Suggested Tasks: ▼

Throughout this course you will be provided with suggested tasks and reading to aid with your understanding. These will appear in the right hand column. Remember: these tasks are optional. The more you complete, the more you will learn, but in order to complete the course in 20 hours you will need to manage your time well. We suggest you spend about 10 minutes on each task you attempt, and no more than 20 minutes.

of psychology in general, and sub-branches of psychology such as environmental psychology. It has also had some influence on psychotherapy and counselling. However, it is still outside mainstream psychology.

Ecopsychology is both an ideology and a therapeutic technique. At its core is the premise that human mind is created in a natural environment, even though it is shaped by the modern world around us.

WHAT IS ECOTHERAPY?

Ecotherapy is the practical application of ecopsychology. It provides individuals with the opportunity to explore their relationship with nature. This can often be overlooked in other forms of therapy. Underlying ecotherapy is the idea that we can treat people's psychological issues by enabling them to become spiritually closer to nature. So, the aim of ecopsychology is to remedy psychological problems by creating an emotional connection between nature and humans.

Many ecotherapists use the principles of ecopsychology in their work with people who need help and support. Ecotherapy is based in the belief that people are part of the natural web of life and that our minds are not separate and isolated from the environment. Our connection with the world around us is at the very core of ecotherapy i.e. the wellbeing of the individual and the wellbeing of the planet are not separate from each other, but the two are intertwined. Many ecotherapists believe that the earth has a way to keep itself in balance and that if individuals can harmonise with this, it can improve their wellbeing. Individuals

are therefore part of this system of interaction with the world around them.

Ecotherapy focusses on the activity itself rather than a focus on the person and their mental or physical health difficulties, which is another area that makes it different to other forms of therapy. Although ecotherapy activities may be facilitated by a therapist, coach, or guide, it is nature itself which is the real therapist. Therefore, ecotherapy is more of a passive therapy. Submersing oneself in, or surrounding oneself with, nature and natural things allows nature to heal us or enhance our wellbeing.

Ecotherapy helps us to look more closely at the world around us and become more aware of what is happening to nature. In doing so, ecotherapy also seeks to promote and maintain sustainability as people become more in tune with nature.

Sustainability is quite a complex term with multiple interpretations. A relatively simple definition might be the capacity for human civilisation and the biosphere (all the ecosystems in the world) to live side-by-side with environmental, economic, and social domains all in balance. From an ecological perspective, it is where species and resources are balanced within a system such that resources are not depleted before they can be renewed naturally. In ecotherapy, people are encouraged to harmonise with the earth and its balance systems because personal wellbeing relies on the wellbeing of the earth. We are all part of one larger system.

To summarise, in ecotherapy it is hoped that people forge greater connections with the natural world and in doing so they experience positive wellbeing.

LEARN MORE >>>

Suggested Tasks

Have a discussion with two adult family members or colleagues about how different environments make them feel. Ask them:

In which of the following situations do you feel more relaxed or less stressed?

- Walking through a shopping centre
- Walking along a beach or beside a lake or river.
- Sitting in a garden
- Sitting in a busy fast food restaurant.

Keep each discussion to around 5 minutes, just to get a sense of how some people might react to thinking about being in nature, or being away from nature.

What is Involved in Ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy is a type of therapeutic treatment involving exposure to nature. Although it is often done through outdoor activities related to nature, it is not strictly necessary to be outdoors. Nature and natural objects can be experienced indoors. For instance, wooden furniture can provide a connection with trees, natural stone flooring can provide a connection with mountains or rocks, a painting of flowers can provide a connection with plants - as could a television program on the natural world.

Also, it is not just about seeing natural things. Our experiences with nature can be through any of the sensory modalities – sight, touch, sound, smell, or taste. The experiences could also be through our sixth sense of ‘proprioception’ i.e. awareness of our body being in a natural environment.

There is no single satisfactory definition of ecotherapy, but it tends to refer to activities that include:

- Support the individual or group by a therapist
- Doing something in a green environment
- Exploration and appreciation of nature and the natural world around us
- Spending time with others and interacting with them at your own pace and in your own way

As mentioned earlier, the focus of ecotherapy is on the activity rather than the person’s health or mental health.

Other Therapies

Ecotherapy can be run on its own or in conjunction with other forms of therapy, such as animal therapies, creative therapies (e.g. art therapy, music therapy, drama therapy), horticulture therapy, play therapy, and so on. It may also be used in conjunction with more traditional types of therapy, such as solutions-focussed therapy, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), or counselling.

CBT

Just briefly, CBT is a type of psychotherapy that is used to help a person change how they think and behave. It is particularly useful for people with depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems. CBT is based on the idea that our thoughts, feelings, and actions are connected, and that negative thoughts and feelings can trap us into a vicious, negative circle. CBT aims to help by breaking down problems into smaller parts, in a more positive way. The therapist will then help the person to change their negative patterns of thinking, which then improves how they feel. The focus of CBT is on current problems, rather than looking at the person’s past. By changing how a person thinks and feels, CBT also aims to help the person to improve their quality of life, relationships, and their occupational and academic functioning.

Counselling

Counselling is another a form of talking therapy. Counselling is also used to encourage a person to talk about how they feel and try to improve their quality of life and the way that they feel about themselves. Counselling can be carried out face-to-face, online, or over the phone.

LEARN MORE >>>

Suggested Tasks

Choose a natural setting. For example, a garden, a park, a nature reserve, a field, or a farm. Visit this place and spend half an hour there.

Alternatively, watch a half-hour video or TV programme about a natural environment.

After visiting or watching a video of the natural setting, rate the statements below (rate your answers on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is ‘not at all’ and 10 is ‘extremely’).

Life is good.

I feel well rested.

I am satisfied with my life.

I am unhappy.

I am irritated.

I am annoyed.

I feel calm and relaxed.

CBT & Counselling in Ecotherapy

With ecotherapy, the focus is more about getting involved with nature, so often any CBT or counselling would be carried out in a natural setting. If indoors, it would involve the use of wildlife videos, potted plants, or other natural objects, images, etc.

There is not very much specific research on the effects of conducting counselling sessions outdoors, but some studies do suggest that being outdoors generally can help to improve positive emotions and improve the ability to reflect on problems. It can also be easier to deal with negative emotions such as anxiety and loneliness when we are in a natural environment.



NEED FOR MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTIONS

As more people are reportedly struggling with their mental health (or at least are seeking help because there is less stigma attached), therapies such as ecotherapy can be helpful. The mental health charity MIND reports that almost 3/4 of people have felt unable to cope, overwhelmed, and stressed at some point in their lives. The World Health Organisation (2016) stated that suicide was the second leading cause of death in 15 to 29-year-olds around the world. They also state that depression is one of the leading causes of disability and

having a mental health disorder can mean that a person is more likely to die prematurely.

Consequently, anything which can be done to alleviate symptoms and enhance a person's wellbeing is therefore extremely valuable, not just to the individual but to society generally. We can also extrapolate this to mean that a healthier civilisation is better for the planet.

Also, it should be noted that not all therapies work for all people. Some people may find being enclosed in a room having cognitive behaviour therapy to be stifling, and others just