
Eco-therapy: The Walking and Talking Cure



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Urbanisation and today's "digital" lifestyle promotes stress and a sense of alienation. Does nature hold the key to our inner peace and development?

Jasper wondered what was happening to him. It had been quite some time since he felt like his usual self. Ever since he had been promoted from managing director of a small-town bank branch, to a role in Treasury at its London head office, his mental state hadn't been the same. He was anxious and restless. He missed his old country house, his daily walks with his dog in the woods, and being surrounded by nature. In London he was lucky if he managed a short walk in the nearest park, a subway's stop away. And even then this only served to make his nostalgia for the woods more poignant.

His current state of mind was affecting his motivation and quality of work. He found it a challenge to maintain focus; he made mistakes and was often in a foul mood. In fact, Jasper was seriously questioning whether he would be able to hold onto his job.

Nature deficit disorder

According to the American author Richard Louv (as developed in his book *The Nature Principle*), people living in today's world often suffer from what he called "nature deficit disorder", the negative, behavioural consequences of the divorce of humans from their natural habitat. He is not alone in this observation. A substantial body of research reflects on the restorative benefits of being connected to nature. According to studies, our mood improves dramatically when we spend time outside. Being in nature appears to decrease the presence of stress hormones in our blood, our respiration rate, and our brain activity. And, as we saw in the case of Jasper, it can even affect our psychological mood.

Being in nature also has a strong primordial influence on our psychological and physical well-being. It can help us move from having a depressed, stressed or anxious state of mind to becoming calmer and more balanced. These findings make a lot of sense given our evolutionary history, of which modernity comprises only an infinitesimal part. Many eco-psychologists – people who study the relationships between human beings and the natural world – note that when we feel alienated from the natural world, we are likely to experience a host of personal, relational and social problems, including psychological disorders such as free-floating anxiety, depression, and other psychosomatic symptoms.

Studies indicate that urban dwellers with little access to green spaces are more likely to have psychological problems than people who live near parks or those who make regular visits to nature settings. Even adding flowers and plants to a work environment can positively affect our ability to be creative, productive, and to solve problems.

A number of other studies have shown that contact with animals may reduce aggression and agitation among children and people diagnosed with Alzheimer disease. In fact, children who live in buildings close to green spaces seem to have better concentration, a greater ability to delay gratification, and are more effective in controlling impulsive behaviour, compared to children who live in buildings surrounded by concrete.

Regular contact with the natural world – whether it is through gardening, contact with animals, nature walks, or nature brought indoors – thus contributes to our sense of self-esteem, social connections, health, and general feelings of happiness.

Eco-therapy to cope with stresses of life

Looking at the present state of the world, it is quite obvious that we are far removed from our original hunter-gatherer existence and have become increasingly alienated from the world of nature. The onset of the Cyber Age has added to this sense of alienation. The situation has worsened with the increasing urbanisation of the population.

But we need to recognise that human well-being and ecological well-being are closely intertwined. Increasingly, human action is contributing to our planet's ecological deterioration. But, by relearning how to care for our natural environment, we can conquer the consequences of eco-stress – the inner deadness and self-alienation from the world.

And here is where eco-therapy enters into the picture.

Eco-therapy, also known as nature therapy, can be viewed as a union between the ideas of eco-psychology and psychotherapy. It refers to the kind of mental health work that puts our connection with the earth at the core of our psychological activities. In taking this approach, eco-therapy may help us to cope with the stresses and strains of daily life.

Eco-therapy is influenced partly by psychodynamic object relations theory, social systems theory, and the psychology of religion. Object relations theory tries to explain the way we relate to others. Social systems theory helps us to understand how we function not only in human systems but also within the greater multi-species systems. And the psychology of religion helps us understand how humans exist within the context of nature phenomena.

To build on this last perspective, in its exploration of how *Homo sapiens* bond with nature, eco-therapy is interested in the examples provided by a wide variety of ancient and contemporary indigenous cultures. Thus we can look at eco-therapy as a way of returning to our roots – the way our ancestors acted for thousands of years.

Increasing potential for transformation

From my work with executives and business leaders, I have learned that spending time in nature provides the space for inward reflection, recharging our energy, thereby increasing the potential for inner transformation. Immersed in nature, we become more conscious of our “self” in relation to our environment. It helps us return to a state of interconnectivity with the world around us. This (re)connection is powerful as it regenerates our spirits,

improves our mood states, eases our levels of anxiety, lessens our stress levels, and enables us to fight depression. Eco-therapy can be used on its own, or it can accompany other treatments such as the talking cure or medication.

“Being in vast landscapes reminds us of our smallness”

I often begin this form of therapy by asking executives to keep a “nature journal” which records how much time they are spending in nature as well as descriptions of the physiological and psychological states of being in nature. I may urge them to hike, take up gardening or engage in other outdoor activities. I even conduct some coaching sessions outdoors so that they may experience the benefit of nature while getting some clinical help – a walking and talking cure.

I also encourage them to travel to wild places. Being in vast and immense landscapes (mountains, seas, plains, forests, etc.) reminds us of our “smallness” and returns to us a sense of awe and wonder for the world we live in. It can also turn out to be an excellent antidote to excessive narcissistic behaviour. Furthermore, such heightening of senses and greater connectedness with oneself and the world around us can lead to intense spiritual, transcendental and awakening experiences.

Reassess ambitions

Given Jasper’s psychological make-up (in which nature has always played a major role), he would do well to reassess his ambitions, and ask himself whether he should return to a place where he feels truly good in his skin. As Edward Wilson, the famous sociobiologist once said, “Nature holds the key to our aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive and even spiritual satisfaction.”

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