



Ecotherapy and the Healing Power of Nature

Ecotherapy is an approach that rests on the idea that people have a deep connection to their environment and to the earth itself. In this same line of thinking, failing to nurture this connection can take a toll on your well-being, particularly your mental health.

What are the different types?

Ecotherapy can involve loosely structured activities, such as walking along the beach or going for a hike in a forested area. You can also choose to participate in more formal approaches, often with guidance from a therapist.

Some of these approaches include:

Community gardening or farming. Gardening with neighbors on shared land offers the chance to grow your own produce, build relationships, and spend time working outdoors.

Wilderness or adventure therapy. This approach to mental health treatment teaches coping techniques and therapeutic skills to teens and young adults as they camp and hike in the wilderness with their peers.

Forest bathing. Slightly more than a walk in the park, this practice encourages the mindful use of your five senses as you ramble through forests or similarly tree-heavy settings.

Animal-assisted therapy. Petting, playing, or working with animals like horses, dogs, and birds outdoors can offer another way to manage stress.

Outdoor meditation and yoga. Yoga and meditation offer well-established benefits, but they might prove even more rewarding outside.

Many ecotherapy practices also prioritize building a two-way relationship with nature by giving something back to the area, whether that's collecting trash or planting trees.

What are the benefits?

One primary draw of ecotherapy? It's can be fairly inexpensive and easy to access nature, depending on the approach you go with.

Here's a look at some other benefits.

- More opportunities for social connection

- A sense of oneness with nature can feel pretty great, but you probably need some human connection, too.
- Ecotherapy often takes place in group therapy settings, but you can connect with others even outside of formal therapy.
- Community gardening, for example, can reduce loneliness, acquaint you with new people, and increase feelings of community solidarity.
- Plenty of people with a fondness for hiking and nature walks prefer to go in groups..

Motivation to exercise

Many ecotherapy practices will get you out of the house and moving. Even gardening, which may not seem so strenuous at first, involves plenty of movement.

Exercise can help improve sleep and other aspects of physical health, of course, but it can also have a positive impact on mental health.

Simply enjoying some fresh air can lift a bad mood, while sunshine may have a more direct effectTrusted Source on feelings of depression or anxiety.

Increased mindfulness

When you spend time in a natural environment, you're more likely to use your senses to experience your surroundings. Calming sounds, like birds chirping or the rustling of leaves, can help you detach from traffic, work conflict, and ordinary stressors of everyday life.

What does the research say?

Existing evidence does suggest a link between nature therapy and improved mental health:

For resilience. According to a 2018 review of studiesTrusted Source, children living in rural areas tended to have greater resilience to stress, higher levels of self-worth, and improved concentration and cognitive abilities. Time outdoors can also promote creativity and strengthen their sense of self, the review authors note.

For post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The same review found support for ecotherapy as a promising intervention for veterans living with post-traumatic stress. A 2017 review emphasizes the potential benefits of nature therapy for symptoms of PTSD.

For nervous system recovery. Research from 2010Trusted Source suggests that when you're exposed to stress, the sounds of nature may help your nervous system recover faster than sounds of traffic and other common city noises.

For improved well-being. A 2020 reviewTrusted Source suggests gardening at home can promote emotional well-being. Research from 2019 also supports the benefits of gardening for patients at a psychiatric hospital. Many



reported better moods, increased calm, feelings of belonging, and a deeper understanding of their mental health.

Techniques to try on your own

True ecotherapy generally involves guidance from a trained therapist, but you can absolutely create your own nature-based wellness practice with these strategies.

Just a quick safety note: Always be sure to check trail warnings and read wildlife or weather advisories when hiking, spending time in a new area, or spending a long period of time outdoors. Most public parks have a website with information about potentially dangerous wildlife and unsafe areas.

Start an informal trash pickup

Bring rubber gloves and a trash bag along on your daily walk to collect litter in your neighborhood. Not only do you benefit from being outside, but you're also cleaning up the community.

Get digging

Here's one more reason to try gardening: *Mycobacterium vaccae*, a type of healthy bacteria found in soil, could help trigger the release of serotonin, a hormone linked to positive moods.

As you work, use your senses to fully experience your garden:

- How does the soil feel in your hands?
- Breathe in the scent of the earth and the growing plants.
- What emotions do you experience when watching your plants blossom?

Explore nature's darker side (literally)

A small pilot study from 2014 suggests that "dark nature" activities like stargazing could offer similar benefits as some daytime nature therapy, including feelings of calm and relaxation and a greater sense of connection to the natural world.

So, instead of spending time with TV stars, consider hitting "pause" on that next episode, going outside (or to a nearby park with less light pollution), and letting the real stars dazzle you.

Spend a day among trees

Set aside a few hours for a long wander so you can fully experience your surroundings. Make sure to stay on marked paths, but beyond that, let your feet lead you where they will.

Consider bringing a book to read under a tree, meditate, journal, or draw about your experience. Your goal is to immerse yourself in the woods.

Try not to use your phone or other technology, if you can avoid it, though you may want to keep it on you in case of emergencies.

Take your regular activities outside

It's OK if you don't have an abundance of time to dedicate to natural pursuits. Even if you can't journey to a forest or beach, you can still incorporate nature into your current schedule by moving some of your usual activities outside:

If you usually work out at home or in the gym, try riding a bike or running along park trails.

Take pleasure reading, school textbooks, or work documents outdoors. Even sitting on a bench under a tree can make a difference.

Everyone has to eat, so why not pack a picnic? Practice mindfulness as you savor a meal in a beautiful natural setting. Make it a social experience by inviting family or friends to join, and challenge each other to notice new things about the environment.

Don't hesitate to reach out for extra support

If you want to reap the full benefits of ecotherapy, it's best to work with an experienced therapist. As an approach to mental health treatment, ecotherapy is still fairly new, so you may have to do a little exploration to find a therapist who offers ecotherapy.

Start with a quick online search for nature therapists or ecotherapists in your area, or try a directory like Psychology Today. Many therapists offer nature-based approaches without listing themselves as ecotherapists, so you'll probably want to reach out to a few and ask.

The bottom line

Scientific evidence continues to explore the mental health benefits of ecotherapy, but it's pretty safe to say that nature, while not a miracle cure, does seem to help people heal.

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