

A Reflection on the Evolution of Nature-Based Allied Health Practice

text by
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What differentiates inside and outside therapy is that outdoor environments present challenges and are the ‘real world’, an integral part of a therapeutic rehabilitation process.

To some of us, the COVID-19 pandemic seems like a distant memory, but it was only four years ago when we were confronted with the unknown and mysterious virus. It was a confusing and scary time for many, including me. One constant that kept me afloat was being outside - walking, hiking, working, reading, picnicking, and gardening. Some days it felt too frightening to leave the condominium, venture down the stairs and through the lobby to go outside, but I knew that for the sake of my physical and mental health and well-being I had to do it. Masked up, I persevered. Never did my decision to confront my fears and to give myself the time and space I needed to inch my way outside disappoint me. No matter how I was feeling, going for a walk left me feeling restored and more hopeful. Living in South Florida at the time, never had I seen the range of birds, reptiles, and other animals, which were out and about

before or since the pandemic. The world was still, and these elusive creatures felt safe to venture out. I took from their strength and fortitude and joined them in quiet harmony. I greeted each creature with a sense of reverence and began to think about how my positive experiences of connections with nature and being outdoors for my personal and professional benefit could inspire others. With an invitation from a publisher, I set off to co-write and publish, with my occupational therapist colleague Shannon Marder, a book that would connect the pieces of my training as an occupational therapist with my love of nature to encourage other therapists from the healthcare and mental health professions to embrace providing therapy outside. Upon reflection I recognize that the pandemic inspired this book and I wonder if I would have written it had we not experienced COVID-19.

Nature + Therapy

To provide some context to a seemingly disparate relationship between therapy and outdoor environments, I invite you to think about why nature + therapy is in fact, a winning combination. Let's take it a step further. What if outdoor environments were reconceptualized and reimagined as alternative spaces in which to provide health care services? This reconceptualization provides a unique opening for landscape designers to collaborate with therapists to create outdoor environments that support therapy services.

Maybe you are wondering, why provide therapy outside when the indoors offers a controlled and predictable environment for clients to learn new skills or relearn those they have lost? For some people, receiving traditional indoor therapy services may work well, with a caveat, which I will get to in a moment. What differentiates inside and outside therapy is that outdoor environments present challenges and are the 'real world', all too often overlooked in therapy programs. Despite attempts to be well maintained and cared for, 'real' outdoor environments; parks, city plazas, and playgrounds, to name a few are not always 1) safe, 2) predictable, and 3) controlled. Sidewalks may have cracks and fissures, pavements may be heaved, park trails may not be well groomed, and play elements may be in disrepair. This is the real world and oftentimes, an integral part of a therapeutic

rehabilitation process is being able to reintegrate into one's community. It is not the same experience to learn to walk again after having an illness or injury on a smooth linoleum clinic floor, although it is a good place to start. Learning to adjust to differing light conditions cannot happen as effectively inside as outside. Inviting children with sensory integration challenges to explore various natural materials such as pinecones, stones, shells, and leaves placed in a bin in the clinic is lovely but all that is much better when it can happen outside. Talk therapy may flow more easily when walking in tandem and talking in a quiet park or on nature trails. Learning outside improves attentional focus and standardized test scores (Kuo et al, 2018; Otte et al, 2019; Schutte et al., 2017). And for many, regardless of injury, illness, or other challenges, time spent in nature is inspirational, comforting, and restorative (Meidenbauer et al., 2020; Ulrich et al., 1991). At pivotal and charged times when we need help to recover physically, mentally, and to learn better, nature can and does serve us well. I invite you to consider that therapy outside is a power boost for the body and mind. Here is the caveat - if therapy outside is not feasible, bringing nature inside, through strategies like potted plants, cut flowers, small water features, nature images, and natural light is also health promoting (Mcsweeney et al., 2014; Yeo et al., 2020). In essence, nature can and does play an important therapeutic role in improving quality of life and health and well-being when we need it most. Think of this as nature-based therapy.

Experiencing therapy outside can include a balance challenge in the 'real world.' (Image credit: Jessica Kingsley Publishers)



What is Nature-Based Therapy

Nature-based therapy, a broad term encompassing all therapeutic practices that involves interaction with nature, recognizes the intrinsic connection between human well-being and the natural world. It integrates outdoor experiences, interactions with nature, and environmental awareness into the therapeutic process. The fundamental idea behind nature-based therapy is that spending time in outdoor settings can elicit a profoundly positive impact on a person's mental, emotional, and physical health. A few examples of nature-based therapy include:

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Therapy activities outdoors

This form of nature-based therapy can reference the location of therapy, meaning that traditional therapy such as strengthening exercises, relearning to speak, or engaging in activities of daily living happens outside.

Ecotherapy Walks

These are therapist-guided walks or hikes in natural settings where individuals can immerse themselves in the sights, sounds, and sensations of nature.

Outdoor Group Activities

Group therapy sessions, when conducted in outdoor environments, can foster a deeper sense of community and connection among participants.

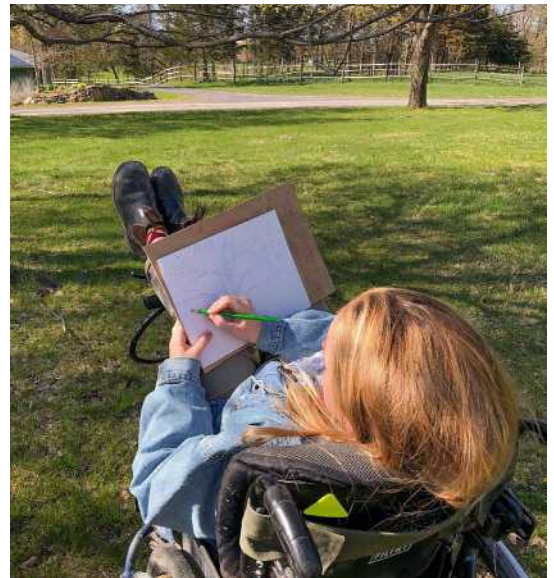
Wilderness Therapy

Longer outdoor expeditions, often involving camping or backpacking, that challenge individuals physically and emotionally, promoting personal growth and resilience are the essence of wilderness therapy.

Physical therapy outside can include strength training in the park.
(Image credit: Jessica Kingsley Publishers)



Bringing therapy outside.
(Image credit: Jessica Kingsley Publishers)





Gardening as a therapeutic intervention.
(Image credit: Jessica Kingsley Publishers)



Therapist guided social hiking supports physical and mental health.
(Image credit: Jessica Kingsley Publishers)

Therapeutic Horticulture

This sort of nature-based therapy involves engaging in gardening and plant-related activities to promote relaxation, stress reduction, and a sense of accomplishment.

Animal-Assisted Therapy

Interacting with animals in natural settings, such as equine therapy or tending care farm animals, to build trust, empathy, and emotional regulation are the foundation of animal-assisted therapy.

Using nature-based materials

When therapists determine that doing outside is not possible, there are benefits to bringing natural materials inside.

Getting close to a window

Like using nature-based materials indoors when going outside is not possible, there are benefits to viewing nature.

What Makes Nature-Based Therapy Necessary?

Nature-based therapy, facilitated by licensed practitioners offers a wide range of benefits for individuals seeking healing and personal growth.

Some of the evidence-based findings include:

Stress Reduction

Spending time in nature has been shown to lower cortisol levels, reducing stress and anxiety (Javelle et al., 2021).

Improved Mental Health

Nature-based therapy can alleviate symptoms of depression, boost mood, and enhance overall mental well-being (Preuß et al., 2021).

Enhanced Physical Health

Outdoor activities promote physical fitness, lower blood pressure, and increase cardiovascular health (Araújo et al., 2019; Astell-Burt et al, 2014).

Increased Resilience

Facing challenges in natural environments fosters resilience, self-confidence, and problem-solving skills (Han et al., 2017; Sia et al., 2022).

Emotional Regulation

Nature provides a calming and grounding environment that supports emotional regulation and self-reflection (Wicks et al., 2022).

Greater Mindfulness

Nature can encourage mindfulness, helping individuals become more present and attentive to their inner thoughts and feelings (Berman et al., 2008).

While the COVID 19 pandemic may have been the catalyst to write the book, my personal love of being outdoors and a firm belief of its restorative qualities remains my inspiration to continue to connect with nature and health and advocate for commencing therapy outside and to work alongside landscape designers to create outdoor spaces that enable therapy outside to flourish and enrich the lives of those receiving services and those providing it. Why? Because we ALL need and deserve the opportunity to connect with nature. Our lives depend on it.

About the Book

Nature-Based Allied Health: Creative and Evidence-Based Strategies was published in October 2023 by Jessica Kingsley Publishers. It is available at <https://us.jkp.com/products/naturebased-allied-health-practice>), as well as through all online booksellers and as an eBook, and at bookshops (ISBN 9781805010081).

Nature-Based Allied Health Practice begins with a chapter discussing important ethical considerations such as ensuring client privacy and safety that are associated with providing therapy outdoors. The following chapter reviews the seminal and current evidence-based research that supports the global benefits of being outdoors and the theories that align with nature and health. The evidence, from both self-reported measures and physiological biomarkers continue to be published at an astonishing rate and much of it confirms the value of nature to allow us to be at our best in body, mind, and spirit. The chapter continues by addressing inequities in practice; providing clients with humble, self-reflective, evidence-based, and client-centered care can be a small step toward righting the inequalities that affect healthcare and education systems throughout the world.

The remainder of the book is organized in a developmental, life-span fashion, beginning with chapters on children, youth, and families followed by adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, and older adulthood. There is a focus on the developmental tasks associated with each age range and evidence that supports connections with being outdoors, in nature. A concluding chapter provides resources and suggested ways to measure nature-based therapy program outcomes.

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This book also includes several other unique features:

1. A series of *Case Narratives*, exemplar models of more than 35 current therapy programs offered outside and the research that supports these programs. The narratives are included in most chapters according to the population that they serve. Each case narrative is accompanied with photographs.

2. *Nuggets of Nature*, information linking the positive benefits of nature to health, are included in all chapters. *Nuggets of Nature* are intended to inspire and empower therapists to take their practice outside. The Nuggets of Nature in the developmental age range chapters also include therapeutic nature-based activities and practical suggestions that with adaptation, can be applicable to multiple age groups.

3. A series of *This Much I Know* testaments are woven into the chapters. These are personal comments and reflections from children, adolescents, young adults, adults, and older adults who are sharing their thoughts about being outside for therapy or simply for the joys of experiencing nature and how it is meaningful and purposeful for them. Noteworthy is that children drew pictures and share a brief explanation of their favorite ways to be in nature. The comments and drawings shared in the developmental age range chapters correspond with individuals in that age group.

4. An appendix that provides two practical *Readiness Checklists* for two types of outdoor therapy program models. This feature is designed to help plan, organize, and facilitate the process and ease the transition from indoor to outdoor therapy.

(Excerpted from *Nature-Based Allied Health: Creative and Evidence-Based Strategies* with permission from Jessica Kingsley Publishers).

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