Ecotherapy: Healing the Split Within the Western Psyche

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Abstract

The Western psyche suffers from a grave disconnect with the natural world. This split stems from an outdated paradigm based on Newtonian physics and Cartesian thought. Ecotherapy strives to heal this split by reconnecting humans with nature and helping them rediscover their innate sense of belonging to the earth and the universe. This connection to nature is profoundly healing and a growing number of studies point out the importance of integrating ecology and psychology to promote mental health and ecological wellness. Ecotherapy promotes a sense of belonging to the universe which strongly echoes Alfred Adler’s notions of belonging, community feeling, and horizontal striving.

*Keywords:* ecotherapy, ecopsychology, ecology, Cartesian, Newtonian, paradigm, nature, belonging, Alfred Adler, community, healing, mental health
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Ecotherapy: Healing the Split within the Western Psyche

This paper explores the fields of ecopsychology and ecotherapy. Ecopsychology refers to the integration of ecology and psychology (Davis & Atkins, 2004). Ecotherapy is the term used to describe the application of ecopsychology in therapy (Davis & Atkins, 2004). Contemporary psychology generally focuses on the problems and dynamics of the individual and society, giving little regard to the relationship with the natural world. This stance in contemporary psychology reflects the Western paradigm, which separates culture from nature, and affects an individual's sense of belonging and wholeness (Morgen, 1999). This lack of connection with the natural world is reflected in the looming global environmental crisis. It is also reflected in the field of psychology.

Fortunately, this narrow perspective is shifting. More people question if this disconnect from the natural world is not only making the world sick, but is making the human psyche sick as well. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) continues to be expanded and revised, but any mention of the relationship with nature within its pages is sparse (Roszak, 1994). Nonetheless, there is growing evidence in the therapeutic healing potential of nature. An increasing number of studies point to the positive effects that experiences in nature have on mental health and well-being. Furthermore, an approach to mental health that embraces nature as an ally and resource for healing is gaining momentum (Morgen, 1999).

This paper addresses the split within the Western paradigm and points to evidence that the time for healing is now. Ecotherapy and ecopsychology are ways in which practitioners in the mental health field can address and potentially heal this split in Western culture (Roszak, 1994). By investigating current studies within these fields, it is clear why leading ecotherapists and ecopsychologists are speaking louder than ever about the need to integrate ecology and
psychology (Roszak, 1994). They recognize the fundamental importance of belonging and wholeness in a larger context that includes that natural world. In this way, ecopsychology and ecotherapy connect with one of the basic tenets of Adlerian psychotherapy: the importance of belonging.

**The Split Inherent in the Western Paradigm**

The current Western paradigm is contained within the framework of Cartesian philosophy and Newtonian physics (de Quincey, 2005). As such, it utilizes an outdated conception of duality, one which upholds an either/or approach to polarities, creating a grave split in the psyche of the West and hindering psychic integration and wholeness (Keepin, 1991). As de Quincey (2005) asserts, "the West has tended to favor one side of each dichotomy at the expense of the other" (p. 156). Among the dualities affected include subject/object, mind/body, masculine/feminine, spirit/matter, nature/humankind. De Quincey (2005) continues, "this split has had a deep and pervasive impact on our understanding of and attitudes to who we are as human beings. It has affected, for instance, how we relate to our environment, how we view the processes of illness and healing, and how we look for meaning in the world" (p. 156).

**The Cartesian Influence**

To better understand the shortcomings of the current Western paradigm, it is helpful to briefly explore the inherent Cartesian and Newtonian notions of reality that lie within. The term “Cartesian” originated with the French philosopher Rene Descartes and refers to a way of perceiving reality that essentially splits apart aspects of being that were once considered one and the same: mind and body (Kenny, 1994). In short, Cartesian philosophy separates the mind and the body, but instead of creating a balanced duality that recognizes the inherent value in both, Cartesian thought devalues the reality and importance of the body by focusing exclusively on the
mind as the only real certainty (Grayling, 2005). This imbalanced Cartesian approach extends to other dualities as well and lays the groundwork for how Western culture perceives all existing opposites (de Quincey, 2005). Instead of operating in a more holistic approach of “both/and”, the Western paradigm approaches dualities with the notion “either/or”.

This method of splitting reality off into polarized segments and then upholding one end of a polarity to be superior at the expense of the other has resulted in a great imbalance in the world and the Western psyche (de Quincey, 2005). Unlike an integrated approach where polarities are treated as both/and, the either/or approach not only sets polarities at odds with one another, it also limits any possibility of union or wholeness (de Quincey, 2005). As de Quincey (2005) pointed out, "when we in the West introduced the mind-body split, we created a kind of metaphysical and experiential schizophrenia that has not only alienated human beings from nature but has alienated us from important parts of ourselves" (p. 157). While looking for meaning completely through the mind and mental processes, we cut ourselves off from the wisdom of the body and the embodied meaning gained by our main organ of perception, the body itself (de Quincey, 2005).

**Newtonian Physics**

The values upheld under a Cartesian paradigm are further amplified by the acceptance of a cosmology heavily influenced by Newtonian physics. Newtonian physics developed a view of the universe that is deterministic and causal in nature and this is how modern science has viewed the nature of the universe for hundreds of years (de Quincey, 2005). However, this is now changing. As de Quincey (2005) asserted, "discoveries in quantum physics, along with Jung's synchronicity and recent advances in consciousness studies, have revealed 'holes' in the scientific assumption of universal causality and mechanism" (p. 95). Despite the emerging flaws in the
theory, the Newtonian view describes most day-to-day physical phenomena in a rational, easily acceptable view and upholds the idea of a fixed solid universe. As a result, most humans interpret reality in terms of Newtonian three-dimensional space and linear time (de Quincey, 2005). One result from this perception is that humans tend to assume that everything is separate from everything else (de Quincey, 2005).

The influence of Cartesian philosophy combined with the rational, matter of fact cosmology of Newtonian physics led Western humanity to split off and devalue crucial aspects of reality including the natural world (de Quincey, 2005). The state of the earth today demonstrates the devastating results of a paradigm that splits humanity off from nature (Morgen, 1999). By treating the earth and all its inhabitants as expendable or primarily used for humanity's gain, the ignorance of the interconnectedness between humans and nature is revealed (Morgen, 1999).

Cultural historian Thomas Berry (1999) asserted,

The difficulty is that with the rise of the modern sciences we began to think of the universe as a collection of objects rather than as a communion of subjects. We frequently discuss the loss of the interior spirit world of the human mind with the rise of the modern mechanistic sciences. The more significant realization, however, is that we have lost the universe itself. We have achieved extensive control over the mechanistic and even the biological functioning of the natural world, but this control has not always had beneficial consequences. We have not only controlled the planet in much of its basic functioning, we have, to an extensive degree, extinguished the life systems themselves. We have silenced too many of the wonderful voices of the universe that spoke to us of the grand mysteries of existence. (p. 17)
Instead of accepting a humble role in the grand scheme of things, the people of Western nations strived to gain control of and master the world (Berry, 1999). This striving for knowledge and power came with a price. Thomas Berry (1999) continues,

> While we have more scientific knowledge of the universe than any people ever had, it is not the type of knowledge that leads to an intimate presence within a meaningful universe. The various phenomena of nature are not spirit presences. We no longer read the book of the universe. We have extensive contact with the natural world through photographs and television presentations. But as Saint Augustine remarked long ago, a picture of food does not nourish us. Our world of human meaning is no longer coordinated with the meaning of our surroundings. We have disengaged from that profound interaction with our environment that is inherent in our nature. Our children no longer learn how to read the great Book of Nature from their own direct experience or how to interact creatively with the seasonal transformations of the planet. They seldom learn where their water comes from or where it goes. We no longer coordinate our human celebrations with the great liturgy of the heavens. (p. 15)

**A New Direction: Ecotherapy**

Fortunately, some Western individuals are finding that the current restrictive paradigm no longer resonates with their rapidly changing worldview (de Quincey, 2005). Many of these people are aware of how a detachment from the looming environmental crisis is, in many ways, a detachment from ourselves (de Quincey, 2005). The earth is our home and our survival is dependent upon the earth's health. As the divide between ourselves and the earth becomes difficult to ignore, people are working to heal this troubling disconnect. As de Quincey (2005)
noted, "in an attempt to redress the balance, new movements in science and philosophy have emerged in the West in the past few generations" (p. 157). One promising way this is being explored is through the field of ecotherapy (Jordan, 2009).

According to Clinebell, the phrase “ecotherapy” was originally coined in 1996 (as cited in Jordan, 2009). For Clinebell, ecotherapy is a “form of ‘ecological spirituality’ whereby our holistic relationship with nature encompasses both nature's ability to nurture us, through our contact with natural places and spaces and our ability to reciprocate this healing connection through our ability to nurture nature” (as cited in Jordan, 2009, p. 26). As Sackett (2010) pointed out, “essential to ecotherapy is the belief that healing takes place in the context of relationships, including relationships between human and nature. Nature, in and of itself, is healing” (p. 137). In this way, ecotherapy promotes transformation and healing by helping individuals regain a deeper connection to the natural world which, in turn, deepens understanding of themselves.

How does one integrate nature into a therapeutic practice? There are many ways. Jordan (2009) pointed out what is most crucial is remembering our connection to the earth and working to re-establish this connection. As Jordan asserted, “if we draw upon ideas of ecopsychology, believing ‘we are nature’, the self becomes more intrinsically linked into and a part of the natural world” (p. 27). In addition, Jordan (2009) posited that “psychotherapy and counseling have a potential role in repairing the division between self and world” (p. 27). He also asserted that nature is a valid meeting place for therapy to take place and is something that should be considered for future therapists (Jordan, 2009).

As Westlund (2015) stated, ecopsychologists work to “locate the human psyche within what Larry Robinson called ‘the complex, interconnected web of humans, animals, plants, microbes, rocks, oceans, and stars’” (as cited in Westlund, 2015, p. 163). Davis and Atkins
(2004) added, “being in a negative place personally may not just mean conditions of anxiety and depression. Perhaps being in a negative place refers to the jammed freeways, the sealed-up office building, or the suburban home” (p. 214). Are we as a society discounting the impact of our environment on our mental health? Ecotherapists believe the answer is yes. As Westlund (2015) asserted, “Western culture leads to estrangement from nature by dismissing ecological instincts deeply rooted in the human psyche” (p. 163). Ecotherapy and ecopsychology aim to reconnect people to the natural environment in ways that foster a deeply connected and nurturing relationship. The foundation for change within the ecotherapeutic context "is the belief that healing takes place in the context of relationships, including the relationship between human and nature" (Sackett, 2010, p. 136-137).

Evidence Based Research Supporting the Efficacy of Ecotherapy

There are numerous evidence-based studies of the beneficial influence of nature on mental health. The ways of connecting with nature are as diverse as nature itself and include forest bathing, wilderness expeditions, ecotherapy and post-traumatic stress disorder, and ecofeminism.

Forest Bathing

In Japan, the practice of Shinrin-yoku, or “forest bathing” is gaining in popularity. Forest bathing is the practice of “mindfully soaking up a forest’s sensory stimuli, the aroma of damp wood, the sound of crunching leaves, the feeling of plush moss” (Andrews, 2016, p. 1). This is slightly different from hiking because it focuses on mindful engagement of the senses and does not require a particular path or destination. Rather, the focus is on increasing one's awareness of sensory perception: paying attention to how the forest sounds, smells, looks, and feels (Andrews, 2016). The idea is to slowly and mindfully appreciate the surroundings. A study by Brown at
the University of Essex in the United Kingdom supported the benefits of forest bathing which include a sense of well-being, less stress, and overall better mood (Andrews, 2016).

Andrews (2016) pointed out that it is not just in Japan where forest bathing is gaining attention; in America, there is growing interest as well. An integrative medicine specialist, Suzanne Parrish Bartlett, recommends forest bathing to clients as a treatment for stress and anxiety. As Bartlett asserts, "We're all seeking wellness. In Western medicine, we approach it in convoluted ways. What if it's not that difficult? It's a deeply healing practice to slow down, experience the senses, get outdoors, and explore" (as cited in Andrews, 2016, p. 2).

With forest bathing, it becomes clear that little effort is required for healing. All one has to do is immerse oneself in a forest landscape and let it do the work. It is the effortlessness that seems to give a person space to reconnect with elements within him or herself that resonate with the natural world (Davis, 1998). In this way, ecopsychology has a different perspective on humans and nature than Western psychology. For ecopsychologists, the relationship between humans and nature is greatly expanded. Davis (1998) stated, "there is a deeply bonded and reciprocal communion between humans and nature. The denial of this bond is a source of suffering both for the physical environment and for the human psyche, and the realization of the connection between humans and nature is healing for both" (p. 75). There are numerous ways in which ecotherapists can utilize and enforce this bond, including sensory-based therapy, shamanic practices, wilderness experiences, and even psychotherapy (Davis, 1998).

Other studies focus on how forest environments affect and potentially enhance the benefits of human activity. Lee et al. (2014) found that "physical activities in the forest environment can have positive effects on cardiovascular responses" (p. 5). Among these effects were significantly lower heart rates for participants during forest walking versus urban walking.
(Lee et al., 2014). The results support the notion that outdoor physical activity in forest environments promotes cardiovascular relaxation (Lee et al., 2014). Questionnaire analysis further supported psychological benefits of physical activity in a forest environment. Participants experienced less anxiety, hostility, fatigue, and confusion and felt more relaxed, refreshed, and comfortable compared with participants in urban environments (Lee et al., 2014).

In a previous study, physical activity in urban areas was shown to actually increase anxiety levels indicating that urban environments may undermine the positive effects of outdoor physical activity (Lee et al., 2014).

**Wilderness Experiences**

While forest environments have been shown to improve well-being, wilderness experiences of all types can positively impact a person’s overall health (Andrews, 2016). Wilderness therapy is a newer treatment modality in the field of mental health with complete immersion in nature as the most powerful factor (Dolgin, 2014). In a wilderness therapy program, the amount of time spent outdoors is substantially longer than in clinical settings (Dolgin, 2014). In addition, wilderness therapy programs tend to be group-oriented. A typical day in a wilderness program often requires extensive group work and the development of new skills such as cooking, cleaning, and camping (Dolgin, 2014). If conducted effectively, Williams (2000) asserts that "these small tasks play a large role in allowing the members of the group to behave in an unguarded manner that will ultimately foster stronger connection, understanding, and social support" (as cited in Dolgin, 2014).

Wilderness Therapy (WT) offers effective mental health treatment for youth at a time when mental disorders and substance abuse is rampant among adolescents (Tucker et al., 2016). Tucker, Norton, DeMille, and Hobson (2016) set out to examine changes in body composition
and mental health in adolescents participating in a WT program. Given that mental health problems are on the rise in young people, therapists are continually looking for ways to address this growing problem (Tucker et al., 2016). Yet, often the focus in therapy centers mostly around behavior and fails to address the physical aspects of overall health (Tucker et al., 2016). This is unfortunate because, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency (SAMHSA):

> People with mental and substance abuse disorders may die decades earlier than the average person—mostly from untreated and preventable chronic illnesses like hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and cardiovascular disease that are aggravated by poor health habits such as inadequate physical activity, poor nutrition, smoking, and substance abuse. (as cited in Tucker et al., 2016, p. 16)

Wilderness therapy gets young people outside and moving and is designed to improve behavioral and emotional issues, increase levels of personal responsibility and growth, and enhance social relations (Tucker et al., 2016).

Tucker et al. (2016) studied adolescents enrolled in a WT program licensed by the Utah Department of Licensing. Results indicated that participants in the WT program attained and maintained a healthier weight upon discharge by measuring each participant’s Body Mass Index (BMI) (Tucker et al., 2016). Researchers discovered the following: Underweight youth significantly gained weight, Normal weight youth significantly gained lean body mass, and Overweight and Obese youth both had significant decrease in weight, lean mass, and fat mass. In addition, significant improvements to participants’ mental health were also observed, most notably for female participants (Tucker et al., 2016). Females had "higher improvements in self-efficacy, depressive symptoms, and social functioning than males" (Tucker et al., 2016, p. 26).
Although there are limitations with this study, Tucker et al. (2016) asserted that the impact of WT builds a foundation for further research due to the initial positive outcomes of the study.

Another study focusing on wilderness programs by Dietrich, Joye, and Garcia (2015) explored how Wilderness Experience Programs (WEPs) affect combat veterans. This particular study focused on a WEP that lasted six months. The participants were combat veterans who had at least one deployment following 9/11 and who also completed at least half of the WEP program known as Warrior Hike (Dietrich et al., 2015). The Warrior Hike program consisted of three main components. The first included the physical demands of a 6-month hike through remote terrain along the Appalachian ridgeline. This required consistent eight hour days of hiking which were thought to reduce nervous energy and increase restful sleep. The second component focused on the connection with other combat veterans with the aim of building strong bonds between hikers during the program. Connecting on the trail was important for this goal, but Warrior Hike further promoted bonding by holding "trail town events" at local Veteran of Foreign War posts and American Legion posts in towns near the trail. These events helped the veterans connect through social gatherings to tell their stories and gave them a model to successfully re-enter civilian life (Dietrich et al., 2015). The final component addressed in the Warrior Hike program was re-socialization. The trail town events helped with this goal as did the meetings along the trail with diverse hikers. As Dietrich et al. (2015) pointed out, "Dinners and social opportunities give veterans from different generations the opportunity to share their stories and struggles as well as model successful reintegration into civilian life" (p. 398). As many as three million hikers hike the Appalachian Trail, encouraging veteran hikers to interact with a variety of individuals (Dietrich et al., 2015).
Dietrich et al. (2015) found that participants in the WEP felt the experience was overwhelmingly positive. The participants discussed how “their experiences on the trail appear to have given them the time to evaluate themselves and reflect on their experiences, and afforded ample time for consideration of what they needed to maintain the psychological well-being they obtained during their hike” (Dietrich et al., 2015, p. 402). The unique aspect of the Warrior Hike program is that veterans experienced long periods of isolation along the trail as well as the occasional social interaction with hikers or at trail events (Dietrich et al., 2015). The periods of isolation gave the veterans time to reflect and think. Prior to the program, all participants reported difficulty processing their own thoughts and emotions. The solitude of the Appalachian Trail allowed participants ample time to examine themselves and clear their heads in the wilderness (Dietrich et al., 2015).

Additional wilderness therapy studies investigate the diverse populations who participate in wilderness experiences. Hoag, Massey and Roberts (2014) analyzed data from 929 adolescent and young adult clients who attended wilderness therapy programs across the United States. The authors explored different disorders and the overall diagnostic complexity across the wilderness therapy clients in order to gain insight into particular trends such as pervasiveness of substance abuse, mood disorders, and clinical complexity among wilderness therapy clients (Hoag et al., 2014). Hoag et al. (2014) found that wilderness therapy serves diverse populations with complex diagnostic profiles which underscores the need for further exploration into the use of wilderness therapy across the board. Hoag et al. (2014) noted 74% of adolescents and 55% of young adults in wilderness therapy programs were diagnosed with four or more diagnoses. Mood disorders were the most common primary diagnosis and were twice as common as any other diagnostic category. In addition, Hoag et al. (2014) found that Substance-Related Disorders affected 82%
of young adult clients and 68% of adolescent clients in the wilderness programs. In total, the main diagnoses observed in this study were Mood Disorders, Substance-Related Disorders, Behavior Disorders, and Anxiety Disorders, suggesting that wilderness therapy "has evolved to become a treatment modality that serves a diverse population with increasingly clinical and sophisticated diagnostic profiles" (Hoag et al., 2014, p. 394).

Revell, Duncan and Cooper (2014) sought to deduce which particular element was most helpful in an outdoor therapeutic experience: being outdoors, group therapy or the relationship with a therapist. For this study, Revell et al. (2014) defined 'outdoor therapy' as "an intentional psychotherapeutic relationship through which some or all of the program/sessions have taken place in an outdoor setting (i.e. wilderness, nature, adventure activities, gardening etc.)" (p. 282).

An online survey was used to reach the greatest number of participants while allowing for a variety of outdoor therapy experiences (Revell et al., 2014). A total of 43 participants fully completed the survey and analyses were conducted on these 43 responses. Of these respondents, 60.5% were female and 39.5% were male, and 62.8% of respondents were age 36 and over. The survey had three parts. The first section laid out the intent of the survey and explored features of the respondents’ outdoor therapy experience. The second section included The Helpful Aspects of Therapy (HAT) questionnaire which "is the most widely used post-session measure for evaluating the experience of counselling and psychotherapy and was seen to fit within the focus and aims of this study" (Revell et al., 2014, p. 282). The final part of the survey had respondents rate 19 aspects of outdoor therapy experiences on a nine-point scale, including a 'not applicable' category (Revell et al., 2014). Revell et al. (2014) found that clients rated “being outdoors” as the most helpful aspect of wilderness therapy and "having an opportunity to reflect" as the next most helpful aspect (p. 284). In total, 84% of respondents rated being outdoors as the most
important part of the experience. This suggests that the natural environment is a central component in promoting change (Revell et al, 2014).

Margalit and Ben-Ari (2014) focused on the impact of wilderness therapy on adolescents’ decision making process. In particular, they studied the effects of wilderness therapy participation on male adolescents’ decision making involving risky behavior such as drug and alcohol use and sexual activity. To find participants, the Etgarim Association, which operates WT programs in boarding schools, was contacted. The study focused on lower socioeconomic male adolescents from boarding schools who took part in wilderness intervention therapy and assessed their cognitive autonomy at three stages: pre-intervention, post-intervention, and at a 5-month follow-up (Margalit & Ben-Ari, 2014). The intervention therapy included a 4-day backpacking trip and "incorporated behavioral elements such as modeling, positive and negative reinforcement, and problem-solving alongside therapeutic elements administered by a mental health professional" (Margalit & Ben-Ari, 2014, p. 185). The study focused on the effect of WT programs on cognitive autonomy and self-efficacy and results indicated a significant increase in both cognitive autonomy and self-efficacy for participants upon discharge and at a 5-month follow-up (Margalit & Ben-Ari, 2014). The "increase in cognitive autonomy among adolescents at risk who come from a lower socioeconomic background suggests that WT successfully addresses a developmental gap associated with one's background characteristics in this population" (Margalit & Ben-Ari, 2014, p. 190). The notion that wilderness therapy helps adolescents gain ability to make difficult decisions in a healthy, constructive manner proved true (Margalit & Ben-Ari, 2014).

While there are many studies supporting the general notion that wilderness and nature therapy has benefits, some researchers want more in-depth quantitative data to back this up.
Barton, Bragg, Pretty, Roberts, and Wood (2016) set out to quantitatively measure the impact of wilderness experiences on two main factors: self-esteem and connectedness to nature. In this study, 130 adolescents ranging in ages 11 to 18 took part in a wilderness experience. According to Barton et al. (2016), “the aim of the wilderness expeditions was to re-kindle the connections that exist between people and nature and to develop informed leadership in a climate of challenge and adventure” (p. 62). The wilderness expeditions were facilitated by the Wilderness Foundation UK between 2006 and 2012 (Barton et al., 2016). There were sixteen different expeditions that took place during this time at the Imfolozi game reserve of South Africa and in Scotland. The duration of these expeditions ranged between 5 to 11 days. All participants "engaged in activities such as camping, hiking, wild swimming, wild nature watching, food foraging, solo experiences, journaling, and canoeing" (Barton et al, 2016). In addition, each expedition "offered a range of life training skills such as leadership, planning and organizing, decision making, reflection, learning to process experiences, communication and teamwork, and promoted personal development and social skills" (Barton et al., 2016, p. 62).

A one-way ANOVA was used to score self-esteem and connectedness to nature across the different expeditions and a two-way mixed ANOVA was used examine the impact of gender and the wilderness expedition on self-esteem and a connection to nature (Barton et al., 2016). These were administered before and after a wilderness expedition. Findings indicated that the experiences improve adolescent self-esteem (Barton et al., 2016). In addition, there was evidence that the experiences “closed the gap between the differences in self-esteem of boys and girls” (Barton et al., 2016, p. 63). Prior to the expedition, there was a two-way mixed ANOVA that showed a significant difference in self-esteem between boys and girls, with boys having better self-esteem. This difference was no longer evident at the end of the expedition. This
suggested that adolescent girls may especially benefit from wilderness experiences. Barton et al (2016) noted that potential reasons for this "likely include the opportunity for females to challenge conventional notions of femininity; the ability to demonstrate perseverance, strength, and determinations; and the feelings of accomplishment and pride generated from the experience" (p. 65-66). Measurements of connectedness to nature also improved following the wilderness experience as shown by the ANOVA results (Barton et al., 2016).

One theme that arises in many of the wilderness therapy studies is the power of connectedness or a sense of belonging to something larger than oneself, especially when challenged by life’s circumstances. In wilderness therapy, participants are often challenged to cooperate with others while learning to trust their own abilities. This reflects a main tenet of Adler. As Oberst and Stewart (2003) state, “the emphasis on belonging meaningfully with others, apart from the exclusive pursuit of self-actualization, embodies the Adlerian goal of treating the whole person and restoring the sense of integrity that comes from meeting the life-tasks” (p. 134).

**PTSD and Ecotherapy**

Westlund (2015) explored the impact of nature experiences on four North American veterans dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the difficulties it presents to the modern medical model. The subject of PTSD and war is a complicated issue. James Hillman argued that “the very idea that human agony can be named a ‘stress syndrome’ is inhuman, imagining a man as a machine part, a cog in a military wheel” (as cited in Westlund, 2015, pp. 163-164). The need for veterans to feel human again and feel connected in a way that honors their personal suffering requires a deeper level of healing than the medical model typically offers. As Westlund (2015) stated, "human health tends to be placed solely in the urban-
industrial context of the individual, separate human being. Within this context, clinical psychology and psychotherapy are viewed as the best methods for helping struggling individuals, and relationships within the wider world of nature are viewed as irrelevant" (p. 163).

Westlund (2015) conducted in-depth interviews with four veterans "who regard their personal recovery from the stressful and traumatic military experiences as intimately tied to their nature experiences" (p. 161). These interviews were unstructured, open-ended interviews which focused on how each veteran came to realize the importance of the role of nature throughout his recovery (Westlund, 2015). Westlund (2015) then used a process of inductive analysis and "read and reread each interview transcript many times, to draw out and code common themes, ideas and patterns within the veteran's narratives" (p. 164). This analysis showed that, among the many ways in which veterans connect with nature, wilderness retreats, camping, animal therapy and even farming are profoundly healing (Westlund, 2015). As Westlund (2015) pointed out, “there is a growing movement to provide opportunities for U.S. veterans to move into farming after they leave the military. These soldiers-turned-farmers, many of whom suffer from stress and/or post-traumatic distress, are reporting significant benefits from working outdoors with plants and animals and providing healthy foods to feed other people” (pp. 172-173). Ultimately, Westlund (2015) found that the veterans experienced deep interconnections within "more-than-human nature", helping them integrate their traumatic combat experiences and move towards healing (Westlund, 2015, p. 173).

Farmer (2014) discussed one particular uplifting story on the effect of ecotherapy on ex-serviceman Wayne Franks, who suffered from depression and PTSD. As Franks pointed out, “I got no support from anyone when I was discharged. All I got told was ‘here are your papers, see you later’. I had a breakdown and found myself on a mental health ward. I lost my house
because I couldn’t pay the rent. I lost my job due to injury. I had nothing” (Farmer, 2014, p. 19). Franks joined the Idle Valley Ecominds Project in 2010. Ecominds introduces people to non-clinical therapy that incorporates the natural environment as well as alternative treatments such as yoga and mindfulness. A number of local community ecotherapy projects are funded by Ecominds across England and Wales, including the one Franks participated in at Idle Valley. Researchers at the University of Essex were commissioned to measure the impact of Ecominds and established National Health Service (NHS) tools for measuring changes in well-being were used (Farmer, 2014). Results showed that 7 out of 10 participants experienced "significant increases in mental wellbeing by the time they left the project" (Farmer, 2014, p. 19). Three in five people felt more socially included, and four in five felt more connected to their community through the ecotherapy activities (Farmer, 2014, p. 19). Another interesting finding suggested that “eco therapy was popular with men, who are notoriously difficult to engage in wellbeing services” (Farmer, 2014, p. 19).

For Franks, the project was profoundly helpful. As he stated, “I didn’t even know there was a nature reserve near where I lived and I didn’t think that nature could help me in my situation. I tried it though, and now, looking back, if I hadn’t joined the project, I definitely wouldn’t be here” (Farmer, 2014, p. 19).

**Ecotherapy and Ecofeminism**

Roszak (1992) stated that the purpose of ecopsychology is "to see the needs of the planet and the person as a continuum" (p. 14). In other words, what we do to the planet, we do to ourselves. While this view integrates ecology and psychology, ecofeminism takes this notion even further. As Morgen (1999) pointed out, ecofeminism "began in the mid-1970s as a reaction to the exclusion of social and political factors in the deep ecology movement" (p. 2).
Ecofeminism upholds the view that the patriarchal structure of the West is at the root of our disconnect from the natural world (Morgen, 1999). The imbalanced power struggle between humans and nature has resulted in a destructive, dominating relationship with humans trying to control and master nature. A feminist approach, by contrast, “holds that all life on earth is worthy of reverence and respect, all life is interconnected on an atomic, energetic level, and this interconnectedness allows a person to experience a person or object on multiple levels simultaneously, at once being one with and unique from the object” (Morgen, 1999, p. 3). By exposing the underlying oppression of women and minorities and the exploitation of the environment, ecofeminism promotes a positive relationship with nature while working for social and environmental change (Morgen, 1999).

Morgen (1999) applied this notion of ecofeminism to the treatment of a male adolescent experiencing feelings alienation in order to explore "the questions of whether a male adolescent's relationship to nature is a reflection of his relationship with self and, if so, how art therapy using natural materials and subject matter may lead to a more healthful, holistic relationship with self and environment" (p. 2). Two screening measurements were used both before and after treatment to measure the participant’s self-concept. The first screening measure was the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (PHCSCS), which has five subcategories and a comprehensive score designed to measure overall self-concept. The second measure was the art therapy directive 'draw yourself in nature'. In the second measure, the participant was given a wide range of natural materials for creating art including rocks, sticks, moss, clay, and other found objects as well as standard craft supplies (Morgen, 1999). The participant was free to interpret the directive any way he wanted. During the course of therapy, the participant was encouraged to "explore relationships with animals and stones as self-metaphors, creating an ideal
environment, a life review, and exploring gender roles, as well as a balance of free choice of expression” (Morgen, 1999, p. 5).

Morgen (1999) noted that "one of the most prevalent difficulties in researching the hypothesis of this case study was the lack of reliable measures for adolescent alienation” (p.10). While the PHCSCS is inadequate to measure alienation, the 'draw yourself in nature' exercise reflected the participant’s level of alienation more clearly and pointed to the power of creative expression as a means to better understand ourselves and the world around us. The findings of this study suggested that integrating art therapy and nature helps male adolescents express and explore their feelings of alienation and potentially foster new, broader perspectives on the relationship between self and world (Morgen, 1999).

**Ecotherapy and the Adlerian Sense of Belonging**

When one studies the impact of ecotherapy and the philosophy behind the movement, it becomes apparent that one of the themes to emerge is the notion of belonging. The simple act of reconnecting to nature is a potential movement to a greater sense of belonging. As Davis (1998) asserted, “There is a deeply bonded and reciprocal communion between humans and nature. The denial of the bond is a source of suffering both for the physical environment and for the human psyche, and the realization of the connection between humans and nature is healing for both” (p. 75). For Davis (1998), the work of ecotherapy goes deep to the core of our being; it provides an opportunity for transformation and healing (p. 75).

This notion of connection and belonging is one way ecotherapy aligns with the work of Alfred Adler. Adler showed tremendous insight with his assertion that one of the main needs for a human being is to belong (Ferguson, 2010). Although his focus was not on nature, per se, perhaps if Adler were alive today he would have expanded his views to include it. Either way,
Adler’s views on belonging are helpful to explore and speak to the power of this aspect of human experience. As Ferguson (1989) asserts, "Adler stressed that to be human is to be social. To bond with others, to feel belonging, to feel a sense of worth through one’s social embeddedness, is the essence of being human" (p. 358). For Adler, to belong is one of the chief motivators of human experience and mental health increases when everyone in the community feels belonging (Ferguson, 2010). When a child experiences a sense of belonging as an equal and contributing member of the family and larger community, the person strives to contribute to the greater good for all (Ferguson, 2010).

Although Adler focused on belonging within human society, it is not difficult to see how it can apply to the natural world as well. As humans reconnect with the natural world and recognize how all of nature, including humankind, is worthy of reverence and respect and a part of an interconnected community, the sense of belonging to the world and to nature reinforces this connection. Ferguson (2010) stated, "As a person feels a greater sense of belonging, the person is likely to reach out to others more. In turn, the more the person reaches out to others, the more the person is likely to feel belonging" (p. 5). The more humans recognize the interconnectedness of all beings on earth, the more humans recognize the impact of their choices and how these choices deeply matter, not only for them, but for the world at large to which they belong (Morgen, 1999). Regardless of how far one takes the notion of belonging, the essence of it remains the same: “one feels fully belonging when one feels equal with others and that one’s contributions are valued” (Ferguson, 2010, p. 2).

This notion of feeling equal touches on Adler’s view of horizontal and vertical striving (Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2006). For Adler, horizontal striving views people as different but equal. By contrast, vertical striving views people as superior or inferior to one another and not
innate equals. From an ecopsychology perspective, the need to conquer and dominate the earth reflects vertical striving. The ability to feel equal, yet remain unique, reflects horizontal striving (Carlson et al., 2006). As Adler stated, with regards to views on human nature, “there is no doubt that the social feeling is superior to the individualistic striving...the latter is only a superficial viewpoint even though as a psychological phenomenon it is more often to be met within the lives of individuals” (as cited in Ferguson, 2010, p. 1).

Ferguson (2010) pointed out when individuals do not feel belonging, psychological disturbances result. Alienation, depression, lack of confidence, lack of trust in self and others are just some of the potential impacts facing people who have an insufficient sense of belonging (Ferguson, 2010). In many ways, the importance Adler gave to belonging and horizontal striving stem from the notion of “communal life as the absolute truth” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1956) asserted, “if the conditions of life are determined in the first instance by cosmic influences, they are in the second instance determined socially” (p. 128). In this regard, Adler considered the human psyche within the context of the universe at large and within a societal framework. In both instances, the notion of communal life reflects the Adlerian view that humans have an intrinsic need to work together and belong to a larger construct than the individual self.

Ferguson (2010) further asserted that a community will not find harmony or stability unless every member feels equal, safe and valued. This echoes the goal of ecopsychology which is to return human beings to their rightful place in the universe as part of nature and not above it or masters of it (Mest, 2008). In this way, ecopsychology and Adler intersect with their shared value of horizontal striving, promoting the importance of social feeling over superiority.

Adler and ecotherapy share this notion that individual well-being is interconnected with
the well-being of the community. Adler and ecotherapists also understand that connectedness or lack thereof has profound consequences. As Sparks, Hinds, Curnock, and Pavey (2014) pointed out:

A familiar contemporary narrative is that we live in times of disengagement both from others and from the natural environment and that this disengagement has serious detrimental consequences for our current collective welfare and for the welfare of future generations who will inherit the natural environment in whatever condition we leave it. These effects are widely understood as being mediated by the actions arising from this psychological disconnection: the narrative suggests that we are lacking in concern for the state of the planet because of some kind of severed or deficient relationship with the natural environment and with our co-inhabitants. (p. 166)

While it is challenging to trace the influences that left so many disconnected from the natural world, it is less so to recognize how powerful reconnecting can be. Although it is still in relative infancy, ecotherapy is a growing field that challenges us to reexamine our deepest notions about ourselves, nature, and the connections or disconnections that shape the health of humanity and the world (Davis, 1998). Beyond the obvious awareness that nature is healing, "ecotherapy encourages people to redefine the concept of mental health within an environmental context wherein humans are a part of the intricate web of nature" (Davis & Atkins, 2004). In this way, ecotherapy promotes healing of both humanity and the natural world while upholding the values of equality, respect, and belonging. By orienting ourselves as an interconnected member of the world, we no longer are alienated from our own home. As Roszak (1994) asserted, "after our long, strenuous industrial adventure, we are being summoned back along new paths to a vital reciprocity with the Earth who mothered us into our strange vocation. But she summons us now,
not by way of an external image or graphic symbol, but by way of the deep self, out of the underworld of the troubled psyche" (p. 12).
References


Putting Ecotherapy into Practice: A Proposed Group Program

The benefits of ecotherapy have never been clearer and the need to integrate ecotherapy into contemporary mental health treatment continues to grow. Yet, how does one do this? How does a nature-infused therapy practice work within the context of the standard psychotherapeutic model? I created a group model to aid clients in exploring their own connection with the natural world. This product is entitled “Nature as Ally: Reconnecting to the Natural World”. This group will meet in a park or nature reserve for a total of six weekly two hour sessions. The intent of the project is to help group members cultivate a sense of connection to the earth and a healing relationship with nature and those around us.

Group Requisites

This nature immersion group is open to all adults (18 and older) in good physical health with previous experience being in the outdoors. Group members should be comfortable with extended time alone in nature (75 minutes per session) and should have an interest in deepening their connection to nature. Due to the meditative and independent nature of this work, previous experience of mindfulness or meditation practice is recommended. Due to time and sharing constraints, the group should be composed of no more than eight participants.

Group Overview and Outcomes

The group will meet at a designated area at a nature reserve or park for all six sessions. Each session is two hours long. There will be a 15-minute check-in and overview at the beginning of each session to help the group understand the intent of the project. During check-in, group members will share on a scale of 1-5 (1 being very low and 5 being very high) their
current level of well-being. The overview will then discuss the goal of this project: to awaken a deeper sense of connection to the natural world through direct experience and immersion. In addition, each session has its own particular directive which will be given at check-in.

Following the directive, group members will depart into nature. Cell phones and other modern devices are allowed, but it is highly recommended they only be used in case of emergency. Because each immersion experience lasts 75 minutes, group members are allowed to bring water and healthy snacks such as fruit or nuts, respecting a no litter policy. Following a set time of 75 minutes, a loud bell will be rung by the group leader and the group will reconvene at the designated area for a 30-minute group sharing experience. Group members will be encouraged to sit in a circle and use the scale of 1-5 to rate their level of well-being post-experience. In addition, group members will be encouraged to share personal observations about their experience and the particular directive for that week.

**Session 1: Nature bathing - immersion and mindfulness in nature**

Begin with the group check-in followed by this week's directive.

Directive: Group members will depart into the natural setting alone and spend the next 75 minutes practicing the concept of “bathing” in nature. The members will be free to wander, sit, and engage with nature as they wish with the main requirement being mindful engagement: a full experience of all the senses including sight, sound, smell, touch, taste. In addition, interaction with others should be kept to a minimum so each member can practice mindful engagement without distraction.

Upon completion of Session 1, group participants may:

- Be familiar with the concept of nature “bathing”
- Feel increasingly comfortable with the group
• Have a better understanding of how nature immersion feels
• Be motivated to connect with natural environments in more depth
• Notice an increase in well-being

Assessment of these goals is done through the use of a post-experience Likert scale of 1-5 to rate current level of well-being as well as group sharing with the group leader prompting each member to comment and share their feelings on these specific areas of insight.

**Session 2: Nature bathing - connecting inner states to outer world**

Begin with the group check-in followed by this week’s directive.

Directive: Group members will be encouraged to follow the same process as the previous session. This time, however, they will be asked to also engage with a particular thing or object they encounter. Suggestions for potential objects include a tree, animal, plant, or cloud. For example, a person may watch a stream flow. Another may sit by a tree and imagine the roots going deep into the ground. Creative and free exploration is encouraged.

Upon completion of Session 2, the group participants may:

• Feel a deeper connection to the park and the group members
• Recognize the connection between inner and outer worlds: an outside object may conjure up or reflect inner thoughts.
• Deepen a sense of enjoyment with nature bathing
• Notice an increase in well-being

Assessment of these goals is done through the use of a post-experience Likert scale of 1-5 to rate current level of well-being as well as group sharing with the group leader prompting each member to comment and share their feelings on these specific areas of insight.
Session 3: Nature bathing - meditation on boundaries of self and nature

Begin with the group check-in followed by this week's directive.

Directive: Group members will be encouraged to explore the interplay between self and nature. Members will be asked to go and explore their sense of belonging to nature. A number of questions will be suggested for members to reflect on while they are out in nature: Do you feel connected to nature? When you look at your own body, do you feel like you belong in nature or does nature feel foreign? How do you feel when you are immersed in nature and engage your senses? Are you afraid, at peace: what comes up? How does time past? Curiosity and wonder throughout the process will help members explore these questions and other reactions they may have during the immersion experience.

Upon completion of Session 3, the group participants may:

- Experience a growing awareness of how they connect with nature
- Feel deeper connection with group and the sharing process
- Feel motivated to get outdoors more
- Increase general sense of well-being

Assessment of these goals is done through the use of a post-experience Likert scale of 1-5 to rate current level of well-being as well as group sharing with the group leader prompting each member to comment and share their feelings on these specific areas of insight.

Session 4: Nature as ally - recognizing nature’s processes as reflective of one’s own

Begin with the group check-in followed by this week's directive.

Directive: Group members will be asked to engage with any natural processes they encounter in the park. For example, a member may notice the leaves decaying on the ground. Another may notice the sun peeking through the clouds. The members are encouraged to see
these processes as reflective or symbolic of inner feelings and situations. Decaying leaves may signify a person’s own “stuff” that needs to rot away. The sun peeking out may symbolize a feeling of “hope”. In short, how can the natural world reflect inner states? Can one’s emotions or feelings be seen through the lens of nature? By connecting the transformative processes we see in nature (seasons, movement, storms, constant change, death, renewal) to inner thoughts and feelings, we create a healing container or framework in which to see our own situation as potentially transformative, natural, and a part of life. Encouragement during this process to really allow oneself to engage freely with no right or wrong way will help them build self-trust.

Upon completion of Session 4, group participants may:

- Recognize the relationship between natural processes and inner processes
- Expand their view of nature to include that of ally in healing
- Embrace nature as a tool for well-being
- Increase sense of well-being and trust in the process

Assessment of these goals is done through the use of a post-experience Likert scale of 1-5 to rate current level of well-being as well as group sharing with the group leader prompting each member to comment and share their feelings on these specific areas of insight.

**Session 5: Create a ritual or art work outdoors and share intention with group**

Begin with the group check-in followed by this week's directive.

Directive: Group members will be asked to go into nature and create either some sort of personal ritual or art. Suggested examples of a ritual include: creating a healing circle out of twigs or branches to sit in, make a pattern out of found leaves, work with a symbol (sun, moon, storm) and make a small altar to it to honor its effect on your situation. Art suggestions include making sounds out of found objects, drawing in the dirt, making a sculpture out of found objects.
The main focus is self-exploration and healing. The group will be instructed that there are no rules in this process. The purpose is to get participants to begin working intuitively and to start to follow a more instinctual voice. This may be difficult for some participants so let it be known that the purpose of this project is more to explore how this type of activity feels and less about what is actually created.

Upon completion of Session 5, group participants may:

- Appreciate the experience of creating a healing ritual or work of art in a natural setting
- Experience the unique interplay of ritual/art, psyche, and nature
- Express themselves through natural play
- Share their inner healing journey with others
- Increase sense of well-being and trust in the process

Assessment of these goals is done through the use of a post-experience Likert scale of 1-5 to rate current level of well-being as well as group sharing with the group leader prompting each member to comment and share their feelings on these specific areas of insight.

**Session 6: Follow what resonates**

Begin with the group check-in followed by this week's directive.

Directive: Group members will have free reign on how they wish to spend the 75 minutes. They are advised to “listen to what resonates” and follow it. Listening to what resonates is a practice in allowing oneself to follow whatever attracts or interests you and trusting that if you do so, you will be lead where you need to go. For example, if a person feels drawn to draw images in the dirt, they are encouraged to follow this impulse with curiosity, not judgement. How does it feel to be free to do whatever one feels like doing? What motivates them? This exercise is to help the group members hear and trust their own instincts. The group
will reconvene and share their experiences as well as recap what, as a whole, was learned during the past six weeks.

Upon completion of Session 6, group participants may:

- Have a deeper understanding and appreciation for nature immersion
- Hear and listen to one’s inner voice
- Know what types of engagement with nature resonated the most
- Feel motivated to continue to deepen connection with natural world
- Recognize nature as ally on the journey
- Increase sense of well-being and trust in the process

Assessment of these goals is done through the use of a post-experience Likert scale of 1-5 to rate current level of well-being as well as group sharing with the group leader prompting each member to comment and share their feelings on these specific areas of insight.

**Intended Outcomes**

The intended outcomes for this group include the cultivation of a connection to the natural world and a deepening of one’s engagement with nature.

**Measuring Outcomes**

In addition to the Likert scale of 1-5 measuring well-being at check-in and check-out at all six sessions, a Likert scale of 1-5 will be used at the final session to measure the perceived helpfulness of the group. The scale operates from 1 (Not At All Helpful) to 5 (Extremely Helpful) as follows:

1 Not At All Helpful
2 Not Very Helpful
3 Somewhat Helpful
A blank page will be included at the end of the questionnaire to allow participants to freely write about their experiences and add any suggestions or concerns they may have.

Questionnaire:

Please rate the following elements experienced during the last six sessions according to the above Likert Scale 1-5 ranging from Not At All Helpful to Extremely Helpful.

The group check in process
The weekly group directive
The group sharing process
The experience of nature immersion
Meditating on natural phenomenon
Recognizing inner/outer world connection
Creating a ritual or art work in nature
Following what resonates during nature immersion
Connecting with nature during this program
Connecting to myself during this program
Connecting with others during this program
Support from the group
The experience of seeing nature as an ally in healing

Future considerations

The goal of this group was to help members open their eyes to their own intrinsic connection with nature and explore how to use this connection on their own healing journey.
The practice of immersing oneself in nature helps one feel more connected to nature and the universe. The group model is used to help each member share these experiences to increase a sense of belonging to both nature and society. Additional groups in the future could be formed, taking into account the responses from the questionnaire as well as the handwritten section. The more group members connect with nature, the more they will open up to the natural rhythms and healing processes that naturally occur within nature and within themselves.