

Nature-based Therapy

What is Nature-based Therapy?

Nature has an amazing way of healing us and clearing out our stress. The term "Nature-based Therapy" refers to a therapy session that occurs outside in a park or on a hiking trail. The term itself almost seems redundant, as many people see time in nature as a fairly therapeutic activity in and of itself. It is actually because of this that nature-based therapy is so effective. Time in nature is therapeutic in general, so adding clinical counseling skills to that time can be a very beneficial and healing experience for a client.

Initially, my nature-based therapy sessions were modeled largely after the principles of *Shinrin-Yoku* (Japanese Forest Bathing) and nature-based mindfulness; however, these sessions have evolved into their very own style of therapy over the course of time. While they still often involve elements of mindfulness and a sensory experience of nature, they also involve therapeutic techniques adapted from my experience as a clinical mental health practitioner.

Nature-based therapy involves exploration activities, interventions that promote insight and change, a time for reflection, and processing with a therapist to integrate the experience into your every day life. The purpose of this is to create connection with nature and self, promote insight and self-discovery, and help with integration of lessons gained from the session.

Why Nature-based Therapy?

1. ***Nature-based therapy improves your connection with nature.*** There is something to be said for bringing your senses into your experience in nature and allowing insight to occur. When you connect to nature, you inevitably have the opportunity to connect to your self and your inner healer. It can be a great addition to traditional therapy to help you identify what you need to heal and how to heal yourself.
2. ***Research shows that therapy time in the forest promotes physiological changes.*** Studies have reported that spending time in nature helps reduce blood pressure, decrease anxiety/stress/depression, improve cardiovascular/metabolic health, decrease insomnia, increase feelings of gratitude, increase selflessness, improve sense of self-esteem and identity, decrease cortisol levels, improve memory/concentration, increase pain tolerance, increase energy, boost immune system, and increase production of anti-cancer proteins.
3. ***Nature-based therapy promotes self-reliance and intuition.*** Nature-based therapy helps the client connect with inner voice and intuition, which can ultimately help a client navigate life in a smoother, more confident manner.

Nature-based therapy can help with:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- PTSD
- Sleep Disorders
- Pain Management
- Stress Management
- Healing of Trauma
- Self-esteem Problems
- Subconscious Exploration
- Spiritual Exploration
- Self-Exploration
- Creating a Sense of Peace
- Awaking Inner Healer
- Gaining Insight
- Improving Connection with Life/World/Others

What can I expect in a Nature-based Therapy Session?

You and your therapist will first develop a plan, involving time, location, and intention of the session. You will have to complete a release and liability waiver prior to the session (as unexpected accidents and injuries can occur when in nature). Payment options will also be discussed, as oftentimes payment with a card is not a possibility when in an area without internet connection.

While every session is individualized, the basic framework of a nature-based therapy session typically includes an introduction, connection, reflection, and integration. Some sessions will place more emphasis on this process, while others may feel like a more traditional walk in nature. Distance can vary greatly on the intention of the session; however, distance is typically not a priority. The goal of nature-based therapy is typically not “to get there”—but instead to find yourself and your connection with nature.

When you arrive at the session, the **introduction** phase begins. During this time, any left over office business will also be handled (answering of questions, signing of forms, payment, etc). Intention of the session is usually discussed and emphasized.

Next, you engage in the **connection and reflection** phase, which starts the actual session. During this phase, you will walk while giving your attention to your senses and intuition. This can be an ever-changing kaleidoscope of interventions that are meant to help you move from a clouded, busy, conscious mind to a more grounded, centered, intuitive mind. Approach this phase with curiosity and openness. Achieving is not the goal here—experience is. At times, you may also take moments to begin applying your forest experiences to meanings, lessons, and insights for your life. A leader in the forest therapy movement, M. Amos Clifford, often says “Notice what you are noticing.” This quotation certainly applies to the connection and reflection phase.

The **Integration** phase involves processing with your therapist your experiences from the connection and reflection stage. During this phase, your therapist encourages you to begin processing, applying, and integrating these new insights into your life. Plans may be made on how to follow up the nature-based therapy session or how to address emotions or insights that came up during the session.

How do I prepare for a Nature-based Therapy Session?

Dress comfortably in clothes that you don't mind getting dirty. Bringing water is encouraged so as to prevent any sort of dehydration, and you may want to consider sunscreen and insect repellent.

Generally, people do not bring many things for their nature-based therapy sessions, although a notepad and pen can be helpful. Also, because time in nature of any kind carries certain unforeseen risks, some clients feel more comfortable bringing emergency supplies (matches, poncho, map, flashlight, etc).

When doing nature-based therapy within certain areas, remember that cell phone service is generally limited or non-existent. Clients are encouraged to let a friend/family know where you will be, what time you will be there, and (if you feel comfortable) your therapist's information. If you have any questions or concerns about what to bring or how to get there, be sure to ask your therapist.