

What is Ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy is a collective term for a variety of psychotherapies which use nature as a major part of the therapeutic process. It is about creating a deeper connection to nature and feeling better for it. Psychological therapy outdoors is grounded on the same foundations as conventional therapy but has the added input of nature as a kind of co-therapist.

Instead of sitting indoors in a traditional therapy room, I offer one-to-one sessions outdoors in a natural setting, walking side by side. We may stop at any point to do a focused awareness activity or just notice something of interest like an interesting flower or bird. There is potential for a great deal of flexibility here, governed by client preference and weather.

Psychological therapy helps people to work through emotional challenges by increasing self-awareness so that we can make more conscious choices in our lives. This is often done by exploring our relationships with those closest to us. Nature is also a significant other in our lives – the state of our relationship with nature will affect our sense of wellbeing just as the type of relationship we have with family, friends and colleagues will too.

Nature has its own vital energy, its balance and its rhythms. Tapping into these can help to restore our own balance as well as help us to reflect on the seasons and rhythms in our lives. Ecotherapy can get people 'moving' – both literally and metaphorically. It introduces nature as a source of emotional support which can continue long after sessions with the human therapist have finished.



What are the benefits compared to therapy indoors?

For millennia we have been intrinsically connected to the rhythms of our natural environment. Research suggests human identity, emotional well-being, and personal fulfilment depend on our relationship with nature (Wilson, 1984). Most people are already aware of the beneficial effects of simply being on a beach, paddling in a stream, or walking in a forest. Researchers believe that conflicts can arise between our modern society's disconnection from the natural world and our in-built need to relate to it, which can give rise to emotional and behavioural problems (Louv, 2011). There seems to be a strong need for us to find ways of re-integrating nature back into our lives, so that we can redress the balance.



An ever-expanding volume of scientific research now clearly supports the benefits of ecotherapy (e.g. Bragg & Atkins, 2016; Doherty, 2016; Lovell, 2016; Summers & Vivien, 2018). The mental health charity *Mind* has published reports demonstrating that people's mental health significantly improves after activities in nature (Mind, 2007; Bragg et al., 2013). Mind calls for ecotherapy (or 'green therapy') to be recognized as a clinically valid, cost effective treatment for mental distress, free of unpleasant side effects and a natural addition to existing treatments. A RSPB report also highlighted evidence suggesting that contact with nature benefits mental health, sometimes in quite dramatic and unexpected ways (Bird, 2007).

A review of studies exploring the benefits of contact with nature (Maller et al., 2005, cited in McKinney, 2011) concluded that natural environments foster recovery from mental fatigue, are restorative, improve one's positive outlook on life, enhance one's ability to recover from stress and illness, and restore concentration. McKinney (2011) documented further mental health benefits of ecotherapy including: increased confidence, increased feelings of tranquility, increased self-discovery, a sense of well-being and happiness, a heightened sense of presence, and decreased states of aggression.

On a physical level, walking lowers blood pressure and improves circulation. As well as the obvious health benefits, this helps to activate both sides of the brain, synchronising the left hemisphere, involved in logical, rational thinking, with the right, which is linked to creativity. Clients who participate in ecotherapy tend to become more aware of their bodies, how symptoms of stress manifest in bodies, as well as mind-body connections. In addition, therapy outdoors motivates clients to use physical activity as a self-care strategy on a more regular basis, which in turn improves sleep patterns.



Ecotherapy is often focused more on experiential learning; clients learn and change through immersing themselves in the environment and activities. Because of this, change can occur without the lengthy discussion often associated with many traditional talking therapies. One study suggested that 'walk and talk' therapy allows the therapist and client to get to the issues more quickly (McKinney, 2011).

Working effectively in the outdoors tends to take the client out of their traditional comfort zones, raising their personal awareness and insight. Nature connection can also catalyse feelings of awe, inspiration and a sense of connection to a greater whole. Ecotherapy can be particularly helpful for people who feel trapped in roles that don't fit them anymore. Being outdoors and talking about their issues seems to enable new, creative ways of thinking to come to light; it's as though they are freer to see things from a different perspective, opening up new possibilities, finding solutions where perhaps they were unable to before.



Exploring psychological issues in nature can be meditative and grounding; we can engage all our senses to provide an anchor when we are struggling emotionally. Nature provides us not only with calming views, but also brings up metaphors allowing us to work with symbolism to find solutions and new perspectives. Of course walking forward is itself a metaphor for moving ahead, symbolising change and moving past difficult times.

Some people find the thought of face to face therapy indoors, in a relatively confined space, a daunting prospect. They might find it easier to open up and engage with difficult feelings, and be more expressive in their body language, while walking side by side, in a less formal manner. It's been suggested the therapeutic space becomes more democratic, removing the potential power difference created by the 'therapist's space', as the environment is shared by both client and therapist. Also, people working in a seated position all day may relish the chance to stretch their legs and get some fresh air.

The combination of physical activity and engagement with nature add up to more than the benefits of either alone. If you add therapy skills to this mix you have a powerful forum for resolving deep seated issues and improving psychological wellbeing.

Where are the sessions held?

I like to arrange the first 2 or 3 sessions indoors at the Salisbury Practice so that we can develop a shared understanding of your difficulties, and discuss the differences of working outdoors, considering together things like where we meet, how we manage the time, the weather, the pace etc. It's a chance for you to share what you are looking for, and to take into account any particular needs or concerns. See below for a table of possible starting points for sessions outdoors.

What about confidentiality? What if one of us sees someone we know?

During our initial indoor sessions, we will discuss issues of confidentiality and how we will negotiate encountering other people when out walking. The general public is used to seeing people walking together every day. We are simply two people walking and talking; there is nothing overt that states that this is a therapy session.



It is likely that we will come into some form of contact with people and animals. We will discuss what you would like to do if we meet someone you know when we are walking. Resting or changing route are both simple ways to resolve or avoid such situations. We may just pass by, engrossed in our conversation, or pause until you feel happy to continue talking. I will follow your lead and will never compromise your confidentiality.

What should I wear?

Dress for the occasion. Wear shoes you don't mind getting a bit muddy, like old trainers, walking boots or wellies. Comfortable clothes matching the weather, made up of adjustable layers (T-shirt, jumper, waterproof coat for example) are ideal. Better to be too warm than be cold. In summer bring a bottle of water and maybe a hat and suncream. To carry spare clothes and water, a rucksack may be preferable to a shoulder bag as it allows you to walk more freely, but this is not essential.



What about the weather?

Weather can offer an added dimension to the therapeutic process. Sometimes, as long as we are equipped for the outdoors, the weather can be a powerful and invigorating part of the experience to be encompassed in the therapy. However, I will always consult with you before setting out, taking weather and other risks into consideration. Should the weather be too unforgiving on the day, the session can be re-arranged for an indoor or outdoor session within the following week instead.

What if I'm not very fit?

The emphasis in ecotherapy is on the therapy, and the physical activity is a secondary benefit. You will set the pace of the session. You can choose to have a gentle stroll or a more active, faster paced session. We can find places to sit along the way. You do not need to be 'super fit' or consider yourself to be to an 'outdoors' sort of person to benefit from ecotherapy. Together we will move you toward a healthier way of relating to your mind, body and spirit.

If in doubt, double check with your doctor that there are not medical conditions that would prevent you from participating in therapy outdoors.

Can we switch back to indoor therapy if I find I don't enjoy this? Or can we alternate from week to week?

Absolutely. Again, it is your choice to take the session outdoors, or to go back to meeting at the Practice if that is what you prefer. I respect your choice and honour what feels best for you.



Possible meeting points

Please note that all routes consist of non-tarmac tracks, with some uneven sections. If this could be a problem for you, but you would still like to explore ecotherapy, please let me know, and we will look for the most accessible options.

| Start | Parking | Terrain | Toilet/refreshments |
|--|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Five Rivers Leisure Centre, Salisbury, SP1 3NR | Plenty of free parking | Grass/woodland paths, mostly level, benches | Café, toilets and changing rooms on site |
| Nadder Leisure Centre, Tisbury, SP3 6HJ | Plenty of free parking | Grass/gravel paths, mostly level, no benches | Café, toilets and changing rooms on site |
| Langford Lakes Nature Reserve, Steeple Langford, SP3 4NH | Plenty of free parking | Gravel/grass paths, mostly level, bird hides | Café (Thu-Sun), toilets on site |
| Dinton Park, St Mary's Road, SP3 5HH | Free parking for at least 10 cars | Grass/woodland paths, undulating, benches | None on site |
| Coombe Bissett Down Nature Reserve, Pennings Drove, SP5 4NA | Free parking for 5 or 6 cars | Grass paths, some steep slopes with level stretches | None on site |
| Devenish Nature Reserve, between Little Durnford and Salterton, SP4 6AJ | Free parking for 5 or 6 cars | Woodland paths, one short steep slope (63 steps), benches & logs | None on site |

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