

# Ecotherapy & mental wellbeing

# An introduction



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In this day and age, we're becoming more and more disconnected from our natural environment. In the midst of our fast-paced, technology-driven lives, we often forget the profound connection that we have with nature, and the ways in which fostering that connection can help us in our daily lives. In fact, nature can help us reduce stress, improve our mood, and boost our overall physical and mental wellbeing. How? That is a question that ecotherapy can answer.

Ecotherapy is a nature-based approach which seeks to implement nature in a journey of mental and physical wellbeing. It involves a lot of different activities which can be tailored to everyone's needs, and it is based on a growing body of evidence testifying the positive impact that interacting with nature can have on our lives.

This booklet will guide you through a brief history of the ecotherapy approach, exploring our relationship with nature and discussing various ecotherapy practices, outdoor activities, and mindfulness techniques. The aim of this booklet is to provide an accessible resource to deepen your knowledge of our natural world, offering tips and suggestions to integrate more nature into your daily life.

## Our relationship with nature

The relationship between us humans and our natural environment changed significantly with the development of society as we know it. In the early stages of our history, humans were deeply connected with nature and lived in harmony with their environment, respecting nature's cycles, and its resources. However, with the progression and development of our species, our relationship with nature has shifted. Technical and industrial advancements have allowed us to be less reliant on nature and have therefore detached us from our natural environment.

In addition to raising concerns about the health of our planet and its resources, attention has recently been given to the impact that this change has had on our mental health and overall wellbeing. Our modern, western lifestyle is characterised by a disconnection from nature, but a growing body of evidence testifies how beneficial connecting with nature can be for both our physical and mental health. This concept forms the basis of a nature-based approach to wellbeing and therapy: ecotherapy.

**“In the absence of a healthy natural world, human health is impossible.”**

*Sarah Conn*

## What is ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy is an umbrella term used to define a nature-based approach to therapy. Also known as green therapy or nature therapy, ecotherapy is based on scientific and empirical research on the beneficial impact of natural environments on our overall wellbeing. The underlying concept is that humans are part of the natural ecosystem and as such they are connected to and impacted by it.

Ecotherapy can involve a range of different nature-based activities which seek to promote physical, mental, and spiritual health. These activities can take place in both rural and urban settings, and range from actively working in nature, experiencing nature, or even just spending time with others in nature. The most common forms of ecotherapy are horticultural therapy, animal-assisted therapy, conservation activities, and wilderness therapy.

These activities allow individuals to regain connection with nature, which can induce a sense of peace and tranquillity. In fact, research has shown that nature's sights, sounds, and even smells can help reduce anxiety and stress while improving mood, cognitive function, and attention.

Ecotherapy activities can also provide opportunities for physical exercise and social connection, which have both been shown to be beneficial for an individual's mental wellbeing. This is particularly helpful for individuals who might struggle with issues of physical health or isolation, or with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

However, ecotherapy activities are not restricted to any specific group of people, and can be enjoyed by anyone, from adults to children of all ages. It is important to keep in mind that the ecotherapy approach is not meant



7 in 10 people report feeling fewer depressive symptoms after walking in nature

to be seen as a substitute for other forms of traditional medical and psychological therapy, but rather as a possibility to integrate nature back into our lifestyle to reconnect with it. In so doing, it promotes a sense of awareness and consciousness of our environment, fostering feelings of gratitude and encouraging sustainability. In this way, ecotherapy emphasises the importance of a reciprocal relationship between humans and nature, at a time where nature is suffering due to human actions.

### **A bit of background**

The origins of ecotherapy can be traced back to ancient civilisations, who had a deep connection with nature and believed in its healing powers. They incorporated nature in their healing practices, which still happens today in indigenous cultures. In our western world, a more scientific approach to ecotherapy started gaining recognition around the start of the 19th century, when Dr Benjamin Rush, an American surgeon, started investigating the use of farms for mental health treatment. Even the first forms of talking therapy (or psychotherapy) carried out by famous figures such as Freud and Jung recognised the role of nature in our lives, and they often conducted sessions outside. These ideas gained momentum in the 20th century with the rise of environmental movements, an increased awareness of the detrimental effects of modernisation on mental health, and a recognition of the therapeutic benefits of nature. Today, ecotherapy encompasses various disciplines, namely psychology, ecology, environmental sciences, and mindfulness practice.

“Ecotherapy emphasises the importance of a reciprocal relationship between humans and nature, at a time when nature is suffering due to human actions. ”

### **Our health and nature – studies**

One of the first studies conducted to explore the impact of nature on wellbeing dates back to 1984, when healthcare design researcher Roger Ulrich demonstrated that patients whose window faced a park experienced a faster recovery from surgery than those whose window faced a brick wall. Ulrich’s hypothesis is that natural environments induce positive emotional states, which have restorative effects and facilitate recovery. Since then, this hypothesis has been tested and confirmed by multiple studies, which involved different types of natural stimuli as well as recovery scenarios. For example, an experiment by Alvarsson *et al.* (2010) found that recovery from psychological stress was faster during exposure to pleasant natural sounds.



Image: Colin C Murphy, Unsplash

A study conducted in 2007 by the mental health charity Mind highlights how 71% of participants reported decreased levels of depression after a walk in nature – 26% more than those who had done an indoor walk in a shopping centre. Moreover, 22% of participants who had done the indoor walk actually reported increased levels of depression. Additionally, the indoor walk also led to increased feelings of tension (50% of participants) and decreased self-esteem (44% of participants).

**The science:  
Natural environments  
have been proven to have  
stress-reducing effects.  
But why?**

One explanation is that these environments are less perceptually demanding than urban settings, which require a lot of voluntary and involuntary attention. Natural environments provide our brains with a chance to take a break from the mental effort of our everyday lives. From an evolutionary perspective, it is also believed that humans are drawn to nature thanks to an evolutionary response, meaning that this attraction is related to higher chances of survival.

# Ecotherapy activities

While ecotherapy activities can be specifically organised and offered by certain services, it is also important to remember that interacting with nature is something anyone can do on their own terms. In our busy, modern lives, it is hard to find time to dedicate to ourselves, and scheduled activities might not fit into our daily routines. Luckily, there are multiple ways in which we can find time to incorporate nature into our lives. In fact, research has demonstrated that even as little as 20 minutes in nature can lead to reduced stress and tension.

**TIP:** Ask yourself if there are any natural spots available to you. If you live in the city, this might be a park, a public garden, or a stream. Once you have located them, see if you can find as little as 20 minutes of your day that you could spend there, whether that's on your way to work, on your break, or eating a meal outside. A study by Harvard University has demonstrated that spending 15 to 30 minutes in nature is associated with a significant drop in cortisol levels, the 'stress hormone'.



Image: Kenny Eliason, Unsplash

## Horticultural therapy

Have you ever had a chance to take care of a little garden, or even just a single plant on your windowsill? It is common to hear that these activities bring people peace and satisfaction. Being able to take care of a plant and seeing it grow, potentially even eating its fruits, can bring us a great sense of accomplishment. This sort of experience is at the root of horticultural therapy.

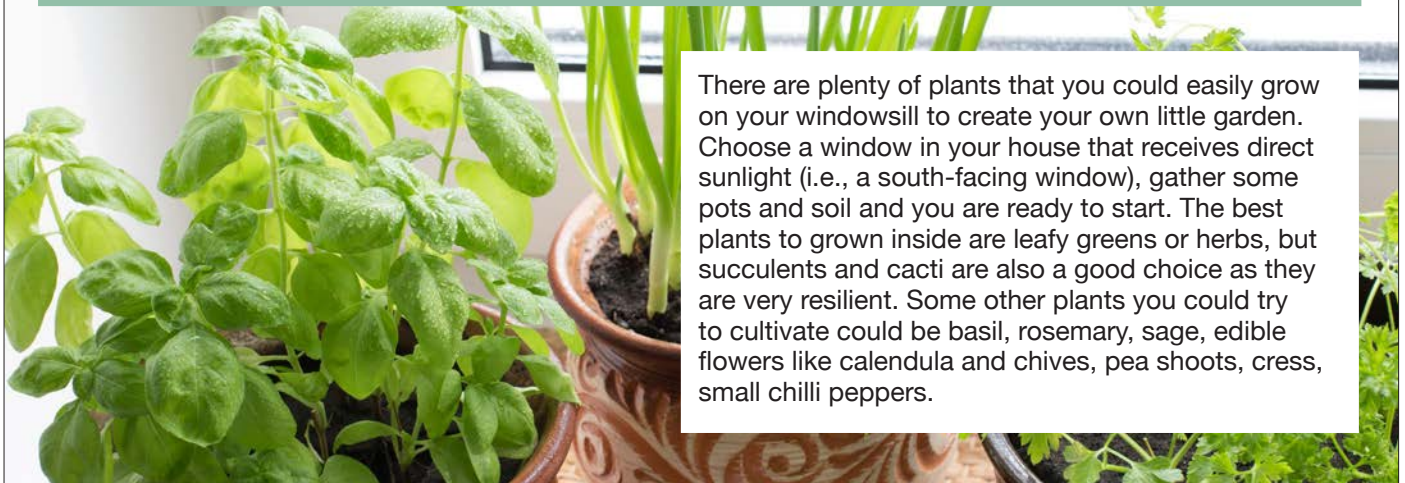
The practice of intentionally using plants and gardens in therapeutic and rehabilitative activities with the goal of improving specific health outcomes is known as horticultural therapy. It is a relatively new discipline, although evidence of this approach being used can be found all throughout human history. During the Middle Ages, sick people would be sent to monastery gardens to recuperate, similarly to how patients were encouraged to spend time in hospital gardens in the late eighteenth century. After the second world war, American hospitals for veterans applied the same strategy, encouraging ex-soldiers to work with plants in the hospital gardens, resulting in remarkable improvements in their emotional, physical, and mental health. The term 'horticultural therapy' started becoming popular around the 1980s, after the first successful studies testified the positive effects of these activities.

Horticultural therapy activities can be done in organised programmes, in groups and under the guidance of a licenced horticultural therapist. These programmes can vary from vocational programmes, aimed at developing skills that will lead to employment, to therapeutic and social programmes, focussed on healing and leisure activities. Through these programmes, the benefits of interacting with nature can be used to help individuals achieve their treatment goals. However, horticultural therapy also involves a wide range of easy activities which anyone can try and benefit from.

Here are some activities you could try:

- Gardening
- Bird feeding
- Watering flowers and plants
- Sitting on a bench in nature
- Bird watching
- Drying flowers and herbs
- Floral arrangements
- DIY nature crafts (making potpourri, pressing flowers, etc)
- Journalling in nature
- Walking, running, hiking
- Exploring nature through scents
- Community outings

### Activity: Windowsill garden



There are plenty of plants that you could easily grow on your windowsill to create your own little garden. Choose a window in your house that receives direct sunlight (i.e., a south-facing window), gather some pots and soil and you are ready to start. The best plants to grow inside are leafy greens or herbs, but succulents and cacti are also a good choice as they are very resilient. Some other plants you could try to cultivate could be basil, rosemary, sage, edible flowers like calendula and chives, pea shoots, cress, small chilli peppers.

### Activity: Exploring nature through the senses



One simple way to engage with nature, especially if natural environments are not easily accessible, is through this sensory activity. This can be done individually, in groups, or it can be a very stimulating and effective way to have young children learn about nature via their senses.

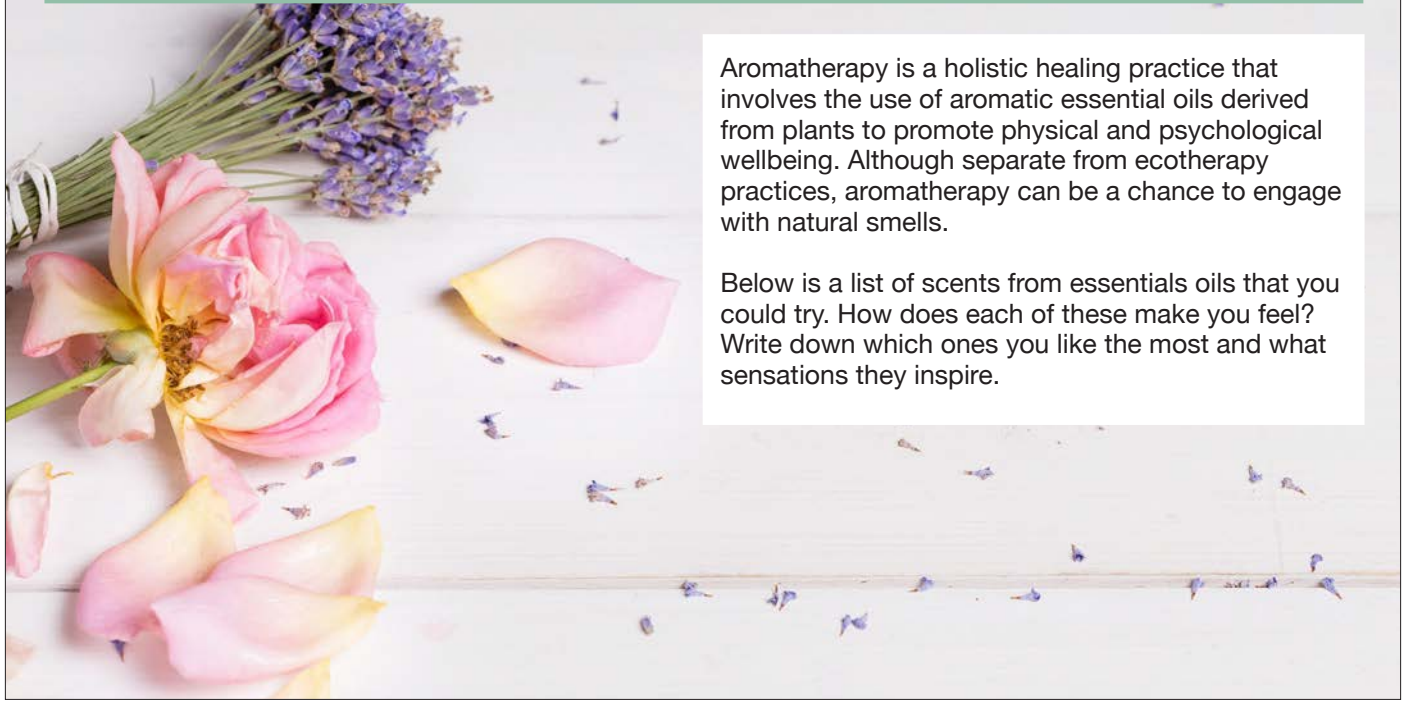
The scents can be from essential oils, which are nowadays widely available to purchase, or directly from plants, fruits, seeds and so on.

Different natural smells have different properties and benefits: for example, lavender and rose are known for their calming and relaxing effect, while peppermint and lemon scents can be invigorating.

## Activity: Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy is a holistic healing practice that involves the use of aromatic essential oils derived from plants to promote physical and psychological wellbeing. Although separate from ecotherapy practices, aromatherapy can be a chance to engage with natural smells.

Below is a list of scents from essential oils that you could try. How does each of these make you feel? Write down which ones you like the most and what sensations they inspire.



Scent	Impact	How does it make you feel?
Peppermint	Boosts energy and aids digestion	
Sandalwood	Calms nerves and helps with focus	
Lavender	Relieves stress	
Bergamot	Reduces stress	
Rose	Improves mood and reduces anxiety	
Chamomile	Improves mood and relaxation	
Lemon	Aids digestion, mood, and headaches	



## Animal-Assisted Therapy

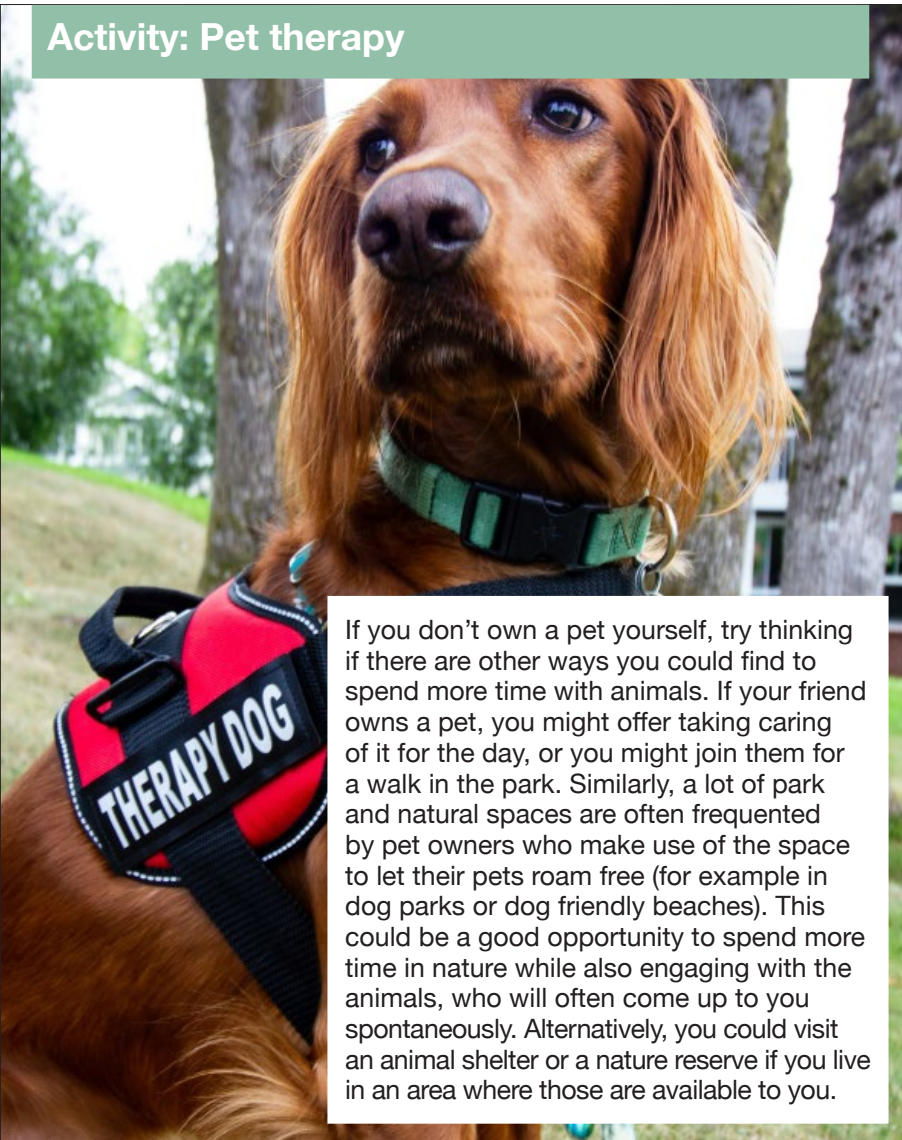
Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a therapeutic intervention that incorporates the use of animals in treatment. It is based on the bond that humans can create with non-human animals, which can help provide a comfortable environment to explore our feelings and experiences. Animals can be specifically trained and certified, such as dogs, cats and horses, but some AAT approaches can even involve animals such as pigs, rabbits or birds. One of the primary goals of animal-assisted therapy is to provide a non-judgemental environment where individuals feel safe and supported. The presence of animals helps with this thanks to numerous psychological and physiological benefits: it can help reduce stress, lower heart rate and blood pressure, and release endorphins.

### Activity: Pet therapy



#### **Certified THERA-PETS**

Therapy animals, or 'therapets', are trained and certified animals that provide comfort, emotional support, and companionship to people in various settings. You can find therapets in hospitals, nursing homes, universities, and other institutions where individuals experience stress, loneliness, or anxiety. Their gentle presence and unconditional affection can promote emotional wellbeing and provide joy and comfort, making them an integral part of an individual's wellness journey.



If you don't own a pet yourself, try thinking if there are other ways you could find to spend more time with animals. If your friend owns a pet, you might offer taking caring of it for the day, or you might join them for a walk in the park. Similarly, a lot of park and natural spaces are often frequented by pet owners who make use of the space to let their pets roam free (for example in dog parks or dog friendly beaches). This could be a good opportunity to spend more time in nature while also engaging with the animals, who will often come up to you spontaneously. Alternatively, you could visit an animal shelter or a nature reserve if you live in an area where those are available to you.

#### The benefits:

- Animal-assisted therapy can be particularly beneficial for people who struggle with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or for neurodivergent individuals such as those on the autism spectrum or with ADHD. Animals can help these individuals to build trust and self-esteem, which helps them express their feelings and emotions.
- Caring for an animal can foster a sense of purpose as well as improve organisational skills. In this sense, animal-assisted therapy also has a range of benefits in cognitive terms, as it can enhance attention, memory, and problem-solving skills.
- Animal-assisted therapy can also encourage communication and promote interaction with others. In fact, it can be used with individuals who struggle to make social connections, as it can facilitate engagement and conversation, and the development of interpersonal skills.
- Engaging with animals, both in therapeutic and non-therapeutic contexts, can also lead us to include more physical activity in our daily lives. Whether it's taking your dog out for a walk, or learning how to ride a horse as part of equine therapy, physical exercise can help with our overall wellbeing.

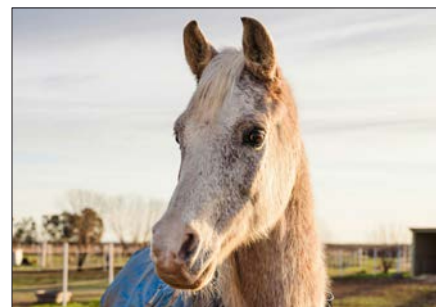


Image: Robert Goyins, Unsplash

#### **Equine-assisted therapy**

Equine-assisted therapy, also known as equine therapy or horse therapy, is a therapeutic approach based on the interaction between humans and horses to promote physical and mental health. It involves various activity such as horseback riding, grooming, leading the horses and so on. This practice dates back to the ancient Greeks, but the way it is currently practised was developed in the 1960s to complement physical therapy. Today, its effectiveness as a treatment for mental health has also been proven, showing evidence of improved mood and reduce anxiety symptoms.

## Conservation activities

Conservation activities provide individuals with opportunities to engage with nature and to contribute to its preservation. They can promote a sense of purpose and empowerment, and a connection to our natural world. By actively working to protect and restore our ecosystem, we can build a stronger sense of appreciation for nature, and in return, benefit from its positive impact on our wellbeing.

“Conservation activities provide us with a great opportunity to establish a two-way relationship with nature.”

**TIP:** Look up your local community’s conservation efforts. These are usually group activities organised by non-profit environmental organisations that require no previous knowledge or skills. Often run by volunteers, these groups are usually keen for new people to come along and benefit their cause.

### Activity: Beach cleanup

Arm yourself with gloves and bin bags, gather some friends or go alone, and start removing litter from your local beach. This activity not only promotes a cleaner and healthier environment but can also foster our appreciation for nature while allowing us to spend more time in it.

In 2021, a total of 5064.8kg of litter was collected from UK beaches, parks and streets during the Great British Beach Clean, an event which saw the participation of over 6,000 volunteers. The five most common items on UK beaches were plastic and polystyrene pieces, cigarette stubs, crisp packets, plastic cups and lids, and strings and cords. These statistics are concerning and highlight the need for more awareness of the use of single-use plastic.



Image: OCG Saving The Ocean, Unsplash

Image: OCG Saving The Ocean, Unsplash



### Eco-anxiety

Eco-anxiety, or climate anxiety, is a phenomenon that refers to the distress and fear individuals might feel in relation to climate change and the ecological crises. Our changing climate, temperatures rising, deforestation, biodiversity loss and other environmental crises can evoke feelings of hopelessness, overwhelm and anxiety. Eco-anxiety has gained attention in recent years as the general public is becoming more aware of the psychological toll that the climate crises might have on us. Although it has not been certified as a disease or a disorder, an awareness of eco-anxiety can be helpful to provide support for individuals who might struggle with these feelings. A recent study has shown that feelings of eco-anxiety are experienced by over 70% of young people – but the percentage grows to an impressive 92% in populations who are directly impacted by climate-related disasters, such as that of the Philippines.

Here are some of the most common conservation activities:

- **Beach cleanup:** removing litter and debris from shorelines, preventing pollution, and protecting the marine ecosystem.
- **Tree planting:** helping combat deforestation, mitigating climate change, improving air quality, and providing a habitat for wildlife.
- **Recycling and upcycling:** promoting the reduction of single-use plastic and packaging, minimising waste, practising responsible waste management, giving a second life to objects that would otherwise be thrown out.
- **Habitat restoration:** removing invasive plant species, planting native vegetation, creating wildlife friendly habitats.

Conservation activities provide us with a great opportunity to establish a two-way relationship with nature. They can also help address specific mental health issues related to the environment such as eco-anxiety, and they can cultivate a sense of hope and resilience. Additionally, as these are often group activities, they can provide us with a sense of community and a chance to enhance social connections. A sense of shared purpose is a great way of bringing people together to combat loneliness and isolation.



### Looking for adventure?

You can engage with nature in a range of physically and mentally challenging ways. Here are some activities you could try if you enjoy riskier, adrenaline boosting situations.

- **Rock climbing:** climbing natural rock formations offers not only physical challenges but also opportunities to confront fears, build trust and develop problem-solving skills.
- **Rope courses:** an activity which consists of moving across platforms, obstacles, bridges, at various heights, often in teams.
- **Multiday backpacking trips/camping excursions:** an opportunity to immerse yourself in nature while facing its challenges without the comforts we are used to in our daily lives.

## Wilderness therapy

Wilderness therapy is an approach to therapy that takes place in outdoor natural settings. The goal at the base of this approach is to be immersed in nature, disconnected from technology and from the stresses of daily life, which allows us to develop a deeper connection with nature and with ourselves. Wilderness therapy involves activities such as hiking, canoeing, and camping. It can also include more adventure-based activities, which entail more physical and emotional risks.

Experiencing life in the wilderness and facing the challenges and difficulties it may entail provides an opportunity for reflection, transformation, and personal growth. This can be done with trained therapists and/or in groups settings, often in the form of camps, and it is used as a treatment option for mental health issues. However, anyone can benefit from wilderness therapy, even individually. It is important to always exercise caution and to not engage in risky behaviours when we are in nature, especially if alone. With that in mind, the concept of wilderness therapy is to embrace the healing power of nature, which offers a unique and transformative approach to personal growth and mental health recovery.

## Activity: Climbing

A common misconception is that climbing is an extremely dangerous and daunting sport. However, like any sport or physical activity, the key is to start slow and at a level where you feel comfortable.

For example, climbing can be practised indoors, where more measures can be taken to ensure your safety. Outdoor climbing doesn't have to be extreme, and it can be tailored to your need and skills.

If you like adventure, adrenaline, and pushing your limits, take that first step. Climbing might be the sport for you!



Image: Yente Van Eynde, Unsplash

## Nature, meditation and mindfulness

Meditation is a broad term to describe a practice of relaxation, which aims at achieving a sense of awareness, peace, and intellectual fulfilment. With a long history rooted in various religions and spiritual traditions, meditation has been shown to lead to numerous benefits, such as reduced stress, increased focus and concentration, and an overall sense of peace. To this day, meditation is a flexible practice that can be mastered by anyone willing to practice and train the mind in this exercise.

Nature meditation is simply the union of meditation practices and the natural environment. This type of meditation can take place in a natural setting, often in groups and guided by an expert. It is especially appropriate as meditation and mindfulness practices are deeply rooted in spiritual traditions, which place special value on nature and being part of it. In this way, individuals who practise meditation in nature benefit from both the advantages of the mindful practice, and the calming and restoring potential of the natural environment.

“Meditation is a flexible practice that can be mastered by anyone ...”

### Activity: Listen to the sounds of nature

Have you ever tried sitting in a park, maybe on a bench or on the grass, and giving up all distractions to focus on the sounds of nature? If you have, you might have noticed more sounds than you were expecting. Sitting in nature and observing its sounds is a great way to relax and decompress. This simple but effective activity can help with focus and concentration, while also relaxing the fight or flight system, inducing a state of tranquillity.

Try sitting in silence and focussing on each different sound you can hear, one at a time. You may wish to write them down.

If this is not available to you, you could try listening to a recording of nature sounds. These can easily be found online and are often used as background sounds or in mindfulness practices.



Image: Catalin Sandru, Unsplash

## Earthing and grounding

Earthing, also known as grounding (different from the grounding techniques used in psychotherapy), is a therapeutic technique which involves physically connecting with the earth. Benefits of earthing include reduced anxiety, depression, fatigue, and pain, as well as reduced blood pressure and more. These benefits are related to the electrical charges from the earth, which can have positive effects on our bodies when we come into contact with them through physical connection with the ground or water. The scientific evidence for this approach is limited, but growing, but a few studies have confirmed that earthing seems to have positive benefits on physical and mental health, and therefore on overall wellbeing.

Earthing includes a range of different activities, such as lying on the ground, walking in sand, or submersing in water. A consistent amount of research has been done on the practice of walking barefoot, which does not only help in reconnecting with our planet, but can also provide a wide range of benefits including better cardiovascular health, stronger muscles, and improved mental health, thanks to the release of endorphins and the activation of the parasympathetic nervous system.

“Benefits of earthing include reduced anxiety, depression, fatigue, and pain, as well as reduced blood pressure and more.”

### Activity: Barefoot in the grass

A great way of connecting with nature while experiencing the benefits of earthing is walking barefoot in grass. Studies have shown that walking barefoot in grass can help decrease stress levels by 62% percent. Moreover, it can also help improve eyesight (there are points under the feet connected to the eye nerve system, and applying pressure to them can help energise the eyes) while keeping your feet healthy and aiding your cardiovascular circulation and sleep.

Try taking your shoes off and walking in some grass in a park or your garden for as little as 15 to 30 minutes. Even just a few minutes will bring benefits.



Image: Nick Page, Unsplash



# Who can benefit from ecotherapy?

It has become clear that ecotherapy can help a wide range of individuals, regardless of age, background, or circumstances. Specifically, here are some examples of groups of people who could benefit from it:

## Individuals with mental health issues/struggles

Ecotherapy has been proven to promote relaxation, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and improve overall wellbeing. This could be particularly beneficial in supporting individuals with mental health conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, and stress-related disorders.

## Children and teenagers

Nature-based activities can provide a valuable resource for children and adolescents to explore and grow as well as to develop emotional and cognitive skills.

## Trauma survivors

By providing a safe space to process traumatic experiences, ecotherapy has been shown to be highly effective with trauma survivors who might suffer with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Ecotherapy can provide a chance to reduce stress and promote emotional healing.

## Older adults and elderly individuals

Ecotherapy activities can provide a chance to engage in more physical and social activities, which tend to be less present in an individual's life after a certain age. Gardening, nature outings and community nature-based activities can improve physical health, provide older individuals with a sense of purpose, and stimulate cognitive activity.

## Neurodivergent individuals

It is important to recognise that ecotherapy interventions for neurodivergent individuals should be tailored to their specific needs and preferences. In fact, neurodiversity as a term includes many conditions, namely autism spectrum disorders (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, and more. Nonetheless, nature-based activities can provide neurodivergent individuals with a non-judgemental environment where they can experience sensory engagement, emotional regulation and engage in social interaction.

Ecotherapy involves a wide range of activities, which makes it accessible and enjoyable by anyone. Whether you want to incorporate more nature into your daily life, or you think you would benefit from an ecotherapy approach as part of your mental health journey, there is likely an activity out there for you!

## Did you know...

Evidence for the ecotherapy approach testifies the importance of integrating nature into our lives. It has become evident that our relationship with nature has changed drastically throughout the centuries, and that we are at a point where we are starting to suffer the ever-growing distance between ourselves and our natural environment. There are many ways in which nature, or lack of it, can impact us, from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), to 'nature deprivation' or to the impact nature can have on our development. These topics are incredibly interesting, and they can offer a lot of insight on our own relationship with nature. For example, did you know that the average adult can be so disconnected from nature that they can spend as much as 11 hours a day in front of a screen?

### Nature as an ally against high screen time and technology addiction

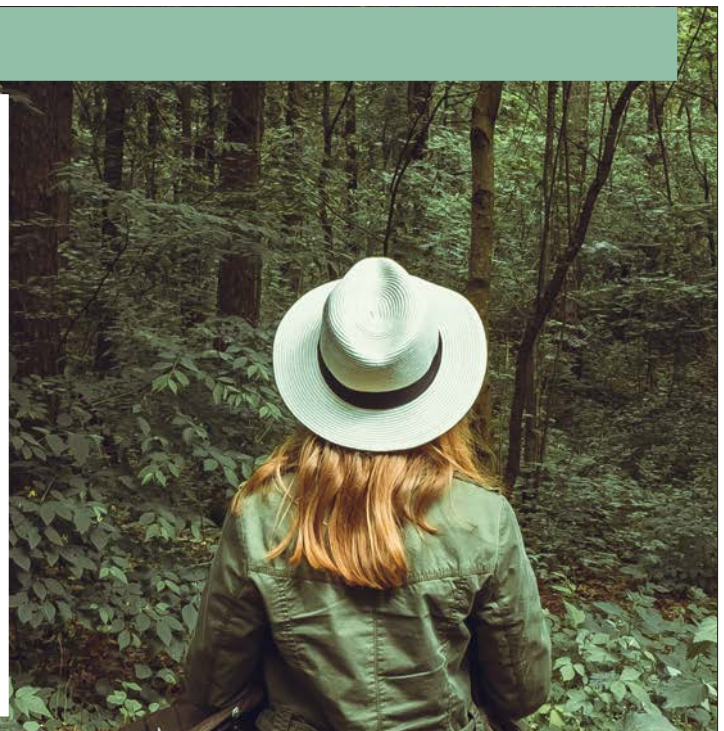
In today's digital age, a big part of our day is spent in front of a screen, with the average screen time being even higher for those who use screens as part of their jobs. Screen time statistics vary depending on age, country of origin, occupation and more, however, some alarming data indicate a global average of almost seven hours of screen time per day, with this number increasing every year.

Instant gratification is the desire for immediate rewards or pleasures without having to delay or work towards achieving them. A need for instant gratification is increasingly more common in today's fast paced world, thanks to the accessibility of information and the way it is available at our fingertips. Think of how used to scrolling endlessly on our phones we are, and how hard it can be to put them down. That is because the reward system in our brain is heavily bombarded by stimuli that cause the release of feel-good hormones, such as dopamine. However, this can become an issue as the brain can become overly sensitised to instant rewards, leading to a decreased interest in long-term goals and delayed gratification.

### Activity: Nature breaks

If you often find yourself scrolling on your phone and losing track of time, you could try and create a habit of spending as much time outside as you spend looking at your screen. If this is not realistic for you, you can tailor this to your schedule and needs. The important thing is to not bring your phone with you to avoid distractions, and to foster a sense of balance between the time spent looking at a screen and time spent outside.

Recognising and addressing the excessive use of screens and even a potential technology addiction is necessary to find support and to re-establish a healthy relationship with our devices. Nature can be a great ally in that journey. Taking breaks from our screens to engage with nature and in outdoor activities is an easy way to find a more balanced lifestyle while benefitting from the positive impact that nature can have on our overall wellbeing.



The numbers indicate how screen time and technology addiction are prevalent issues in our modern society, significantly impacting our physical, mental, and social wellbeing. In fact, the ever-increasing use of smartphones, computers and other electronic devices can contribute to sedentary lifestyles, sleep disturbances, and physical and mental health problems. In addition, the constant stimulation and instant gratification provided by technology can lead to addictive behaviours, where individuals might find it hard to disengage from their devices. This can also lead to social isolation, decreased productivity, and have detrimental consequences on interpersonal relationships. Excessive screen time, especially among children and adolescents, can also take a negative toll on their cognitive development and attention span.

“It is more common to experience SAD during the winter months, as the shorter days and lack of sunlight are thought to be related to changes in brain chemical levels...”

## Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

The positive impacts of nature on our wellbeing have been explored at length. However, there are ways in which nature impacts us that we might not have noticed or considered. For example, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a mood disorder linked to the changing of the seasons. Individuals who suffer from SAD experience a series of symptoms similar to depressive symptoms, but that seem to only occur with a specific seasonal pattern. As a matter of fact, SAD is not considered as a separate disorder, but rather falls under the umbrella of depressive disorders.

Symptoms of SAD may include feelings of sadness, hopelessness, guilt, increased anxiety, lack of motivation and energy, general disinterest and disaffect, changes in appetite/weight and changes in sleep patterns.

Unlike major depressive disorder, SAD symptoms are not persistent throughout the year, but only occur according to a specific seasonal pattern. It is more common to experience SAD during the winter months, as the shorter days and lack of sunlight are thought to be related to changes in brain chemicals levels, which in turn lead to depressive symptoms. However, some people will experience SAD symptoms during the warmer seasons. This might also include symptoms of increased anxiety and discomfort in relation to higher temperatures and longer days.

**According to a recent NHS survey, Season Affective Disorder (SAD) affects around 2 million people in the United Kingdom. If we look at northern Europe, the number increases to 12 million. In Scandinavian countries like Norway, Sweden, and Finland, where the amount of sunlight is very limited during the winter, an estimate of 6.5% of inhabitants have been diagnosed with a severe version of SAD – with women being affected more than men (8.6% compared to 3.9%).**

There are no definite answers to the question of what causes Seasonal Affective Disorder. Often, individuals who suffer from pre-existing mental health conditions (such as depression or bipolar disorder) are more likely



Image: Josh Duke, Unsplash

to experience SAD as their regular symptoms worsen with the change of seasons. It is also hypothesised that SAD is related to a reduced exposure to sunlight as that influences our body's circadian rhythm as well the production of hormones which regulate our body's functions and influence our mental wellbeing.

Because the cause of SAD is not clear, there are not any specific remedies or courses of treatment suggested for people who experience these symptoms. However, some general guidelines can be followed to make the experience of SAD more manageable.

### **1. Try to get as much sunlight as possible**

If you experience SAD during the winter months, when the days are shorter and daylight is limited, try to make the most out of the daylight hours. Even if the weather is cloudy, it is always helpful to get outside and get some fresh air. Ultraviolet rays from sunlight are necessary to form vitamin D, which is considered a crucial factor for mental wellbeing.

### **2. Plan ahead, stick to your routines**

Planning ahead can help if we know we will be struggling when a certain season commences. This might include having routines, stocking up on things you know you will need, and arranging events and time with friends in advance.

**“There’s just something about being at one with nature that makes me feel better.”**

*A patient’s story about dealing with SAD in an interview with The Mind UK*

## Activity: Winter self-care

Engaging in self-care practices tailored to the unique challenges of SAD can help alleviate symptoms and improve overall wellbeing. Taking daily walks in natural sunlight, even during cloudy days, can boost serotonin levels and improve mood. Creating a cozy and well-lit space at home, with warming lighting and comforting decorations, can provide a sense of comfort and relaxation. Indoor exercise is also recommended and thanks to the internet we now have access to a wide range of resources which can guide us during those days when it is harder to leave the house.



### 3. Exercise

Regular physical exercise is a well-known ally in the maintenance of our overall mental and physical wellbeing. For SAD symptoms, it is also recommended to exercise outdoors if possible. It does not need to be intensive; even a walk or a jog, especially if done regularly, can help combat feelings of SAD.

### 4. Light therapy

Although there is not yet much evidence on the impact of light therapy on SAD, it might still be something you can consider if you struggle more when exposure to sunlight is limited. Light therapy consists of exposure to artificial light which is thought to trigger the same response as natural sunlight. This also includes the use of the so-called SAD lamps, which simulate the rising of the sun at the specific time they are set to. This helps as we are waking up to a light instead of a dark environment, simulating the natural circadian rhythm.

### 5. Medication

As a form of depression, SAD symptoms can be treated using pharmacological medication. These are normally SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) which regulate the uptake and production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter responsible for our mood.

## Children and nature

Cultivating a relationship with nature from a young age can be beneficial in a number of ways. In fact, nature can significantly impact not only a child's physical and emotional health, but also their cognitive development.

Interacting with nature can promote a child's sense of curiosity, creativity, and sense of wonder. Outdoor play and exploration allows children to engage their senses, develop motor skills, and gain a deeper understanding of the natural world. Nature also offers a safe and nurturing environment for children to experience freedom, take risks, and build self-confidence.

In addition, spending time in nature has been linked to reduced stress and anxiety in children, contributing to improved mental wellbeing. Connecting with nature at a young age can help establish a life-long appreciation of our environment and encourage a sense of responsibility towards our planet. As children are increasingly exposed to digital screens and urban environments, ensuring regular opportunities for outdoor experiences is fundamental for their physical and mental health, and to nurture a sense of connection with the natural world.

A recent study commissioned by the Wildlife Trust shows the benefits of having children interact with nature, with children's wellbeing having increased after they had spent time connecting with nature.

- 90% of children said they learnt something new about the natural world.
- 79% felt that their experience could help their schoolwork.
- 84% of children felt that they were capable of doing new things when they tried.

### Activity: Children in nature

#### **Nature scavenger hunt**

Create a list of items for children to find in nature, such as rocks, leaves, insects, or flowers. This activity encourages observation and curiosity about the natural world.

#### **Play in the rain**

Splashing in puddles, catching rain drops, making mud pies, dancing in the rain... You name it. Don't let a bit of rain stop you and your kids!



## Activity: Children in nature

### Have a picnic

What better way to enjoy some than to pack a meal, lay out a picnic blanket, and eat outside.

### Build a home for wildlife

Building a home for birds or hedgehogs might be easier than it sounds, and something you can easily involve your kids in. There are plenty of guides online.



## Some of the benefits that nature offers children

### 1. It helps them build their confidence

In nature, children are offered an opportunity to play and engage with their environment which is much less structured than that of indoor play. In this way, children benefit from this freedom which also translates into more confidence as a result of the control they have over their actions.

### 2. It offers different stimuli

Nature provides stimuli for all the five senses, which is something that indoor play often does not do, especially with newest entertainment methods such as videogames. Although those can be stimulating and helpful in different ways, having children also play in nature can enrich their learning opportunities.

### 3. It offers an opportunity for physical exercise

Outdoor play tends to be significantly less sedentary than indoor play. This can be through organised team sports or individual play. Not only is exercise good for the child's body, but it also helps with their focus development.

### 4. It promotes a sense of responsibility

Playing in nature often involves interacting with an alive environment and sometimes with animal species. This helps children to develop a sense of responsibility, which they might not otherwise need when playing with inanimate objects and toys.

### 5. It reduces stress and fatigue

Similarly to adults, nature can be extremely effective in reducing stress, fatigue, and anxiety in children. By having children engage with nature, they can experience its positive effects from a young age, which makes them more likely to continue doing it throughout their adult life.

“Nature can be extremely effective in reducing stress, fatigue, and anxiety in children.”

## Key takeaways

**Accessible:** As a form of therapy, a nature-based approach can be more accessible than other forms of therapy such as medication or talking therapy. The same applies for physical therapy, as nature provides an environment to both challenge and heal ourselves.

**Evidence-based:** A constantly growing body of evidence has been able to assess the effectiveness of the ecotherapy approach, both for mental and physical health.

**Affordable:** Nature is free, and it is for all of us to enjoy. Some activities, especially some ecotherapy organised ones, might require a little investment, but that is completely up to your discretion.

**Environmentally concious:** Using nature as therapy helps to foster a sense of respect for our environment. Ecotherapy is practised in respect and harmony with nature.

**Not invasive:** Nature-based approaches to therapy are not invasive at all, especially compared to other interventions. This might be especially ideal if you are willing to try alternative methods of therapy.

**For everyone:** Whether you are looking to improve your wellbeing, struggling with your mental health, or wanting to involve your kids, a nature-based approach could be what you are looking for. There are many benefits to using a nature-based approach to therapy, healing, and overall wellbeing. Ecotherapy offers a wide range of activities, and engaging with nature through these activities offers a powerful and accessible way of promoting physical health, emotional resilience, and mental clarity. Nature can provide a refuge from the stresses of daily life, as well as challenges and opportunities to grow and improve.

If you are worried you might not be able to include more nature into your life, or if you do not consider yourself a 'nature person', remember that there is not one single correct way of engaging with nature, and that **as little as 20 minutes outside could make a difference to your wellbeing.**

“Being in nature is not only inspiring, it also has medical and psychotherapeutic potential. By experiencing nature, we place our body in the original functional circle made of humans and the environment from which we emerged. We put two matching puzzle pieces together – us and nature into one whole.”

*Clemens G Arvay*

## References

A full list of references is available at:

<https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/Ecotherapy-booklet-references.pdf>



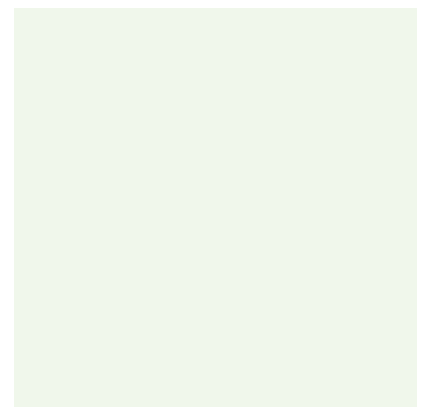
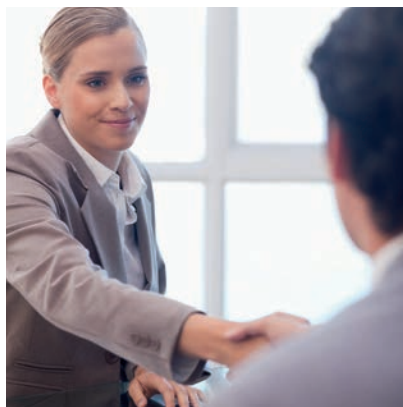
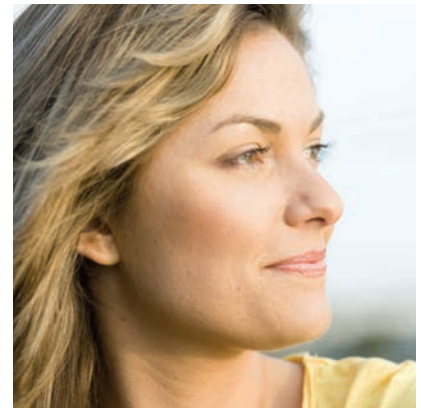


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