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Think like a mountain: the need for nature for increased mental health

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Abstract
Nature has been an integral part of the human life for thousands of years. Only in the most recent hundred years, societies have begun to view nature as a foreign concept outside of the normal realm of daily life. Along with this disconnect from nature, mental illness has increased in our societal populations. This paper identifies the correlation of the need for nature, the lack of connection to nature, and the significant increase in depression, ADHD, anxiety, and autism diagnoses, among others. It also identifies therapeutic techniques that incorporate and connect with nature, as well as provides a comprehensive reference list in relation to the need for nature.
Think Like a Mountain: the need for nature for increased mental health

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Abstract

Nature has been an integral part of the human life for thousands of years. Only in the most recent hundred years, societies have begun to view nature as a foreign concept outside of the normal realm of daily life. Along with this disconnect from nature, mental illness has increased in our societal populations. This paper identifies the correlation of the need for nature, the lack of connection to nature, and the significant increase in depression, ADHD, anxiety, and autism diagnoses, among others. It also identifies therapeutic techniques that incorporate and connect with nature, as well as provides a comprehensive reference list in relation to the need for nature.
Nature’s Healing

There is something to be expressed in the crisp feel and smell of a spring breeze. Its coldness slaps across the skin and awakens the mind. Its smell pulls in the aroma of fresh rain coaxing the new grass to grow, earthy mud puddles gathering from melting snow, blossoming flowers and budding trees. It’s a fleeting sensation, the spring breeze dancing around a person. And yet, there it is, in the midst of any busy day, a quick wisp of the breath of nature. Nature is a catalyst for reflection and internal contemplation. It is living and breathing, as we are living and breathing. There is beauty, wonder, grief, adventure, sadness, fear, joy, love, and affection in the natural parts of this Earth. All of these feelings and experiences are felt and experienced by us. The self growth of a person can be strengthened by similar experiences that line up between that person and another, or between that person and the world around them. As we draw closer to nature, we are able draw closer to ourselves.

Our present-day disconnect from nature and how it connects

Nature used to be a normative, integrated part of life. In present-day American culture, nature is a foreign, abnormal concept to many people. There is now a fear of getting dirty or contaminated, lost, and in the midst of danger if “alone” in the outdoors. Most people are more familiar with the internet, texting, and video games than traversing a mountain or quietly reflecting on the cloud formations over a wildflower field. The human disconnect from nature has happened rapidly over the last 100 years, the technological advances of society changing many aspects of what people consider the world around them to actually be. As societies have evolved, life in the United States in particular has become dominantly about the materials possessed and retrieving information rather than making the time to know and understand the interworkings of our connection to
the rest of the Earthly world. Where survival used to be instinctual, humans are not in need of surviving out in the wilderness anymore. This is a discrepancy between the current societal lifestyle and the individual’s genetically-encoded, innate understanding of life according to past ancestral lifestyles. Depression, ADHD, Anxiety and Autism diagnoses, among others, are skyrocketing as quickly as the connection to nature is being ignored and neglected. There is now quantitative and qualitative research concluding correlation between the lack of nature and the increase in psychological pathologies. Indeed, the human disconnect from nature is influencing human mental health.

Lack of nature can negatively affect a person’s mental health. Some examples of this include: lack of exposure to the sun contributing to Seasonal Affective Disorder; Hospital patients with windows viewing an outdoor scene have recovered faster than those with a window scene of a brick wall (Gillen & Balkin 2006; Hartig 2007; Ottosson & Grahn 2005).

There is interconnectedness between nature and one’s mental health. Nature encourages people to reach outside their comfort zones and take new risks within a safe environment, building confidence within themselves. Nature is something humans have connected with since our first existence. Present day writers like Richard Louv (author of Last Child in the Woods, 2005) have built their hypotheses on texts from authors as far back as Thoreau and Aldo Leopold. Nature as a necessity in human development has not yet been proven. However, it can be deduced from the countless experiences of nature’s therapeutic touch that there is some kind of connection, correlation, and quite possibly, causation. If nature is a necessity, then, as Louv pointed out, “the real disorder is less in the individual than it is in the imposed, artificial environment” (2005, p. 108).

Therapeutic Interventions to Incorporate Nature
The concept that nature and natural surroundings is therapeutic has existed since ancient times. Chinese Taoists built greenhouses and gardens specifically because they were believed to be beneficial for one’s health (Bhatti & Church 2004; Fukuda 2007). After World War II, Dr. Benjamin Rush established horticulture therapy for veterans. Digging in the soil and nurturing living plants to grow showed significant benefits for the veterans in their healing processes (Hartig & Marcus 2006). The use of nature as an alternative, supplemental or preventative therapeutic technique is integral to one’s mental health (Beringer & Martin 2003; Berman & Davis-Berman 1995; Freeman & Zabriskie 2002; Friese 1995; Fukuda 2007). There are several forms of nature-assisted therapy.

Nature-assisted therapy utilizes natural environments, interactions with animals, and other nature-based beings within general counseling, therapy, and education. Certain studies have found that interaction with animals significantly decreases one's blood pressure (Kahn 1999). Children who experience autism have also shown significant changes in behavior and communication when exposed to nature and animals (Berger 2006). In Iowa, children who have never before controlled their ability to touch were calmly petting a dog and others were walking significantly farther than usual and rolling their wheelchairs more than ever before to search out chirping birds and unique leaves when set in a natural environment (NICCBA 2007). In Animal-assisted Therapy, certified and trained pets (particularly dogs) are introduced to the individual or group to encourage communication, connection to animals, and more (Beck & Meyers 1996; Brodie & Biley 1999). Animals can range from salamanders to bats to deer (Nebbe 1995).

Adventure-based Counseling is used in a group setting, with individualized treatment plans, within an environmental location. The degree of difficulty within the activities varies based on the dynamics and abilities of the group. The individual
or group often is chaperoned to a natural setting to live in a very natural way, utilizing survival skills while having an opportunity to be alone with nature. The **therapy** is not just in the challenging tasks necessary for daily living. It is also in the location, the teamwork, and the self-exploration. It is also in building up the confidence to take risks one may never have taken before, establishing a deeper sense of identity and belief in oneself (Bandoroff 2003; Baruchel 2004; Bossick 2006; Carpenter 2005; Clark 2004; Cooley 2007; Farnum & Russell 2004; Gillen & Balkin 2006; Kluge 2007; Lipsey & Wilson 2000; Neill 2006; Pryor 2005; Stevens 2004; Uhlik 2006; Richards 2003; Roberts 2005; Russell 2000, 2001, 2006; Schoel & Maizell 2002; Stuhmiller 2003).

Integration of environmental education, conservation education, outdoor education, and outdoor recreation can also create a more meaningful, deep development of growth within the person. Mindfulness and the practice of being present can be thoroughly enriched by the integration of the natural environment around us as well. Utilizing these techniques within local nature-assisted environments and events can enhance one's experience. A list of local community resources is included in the appendix of this paper.

**A Final Essence**

Often, in the midst of a busy day, where coworkers are stressed to the ends of their wits, everyone is rushing to get more and more work done, and deadlines for paperwork seem to be more important than life itself, I want to stand calmly in front of everyone and say “Just stop. It’s okay.” The toxicity of fretting over all these material deadlines and elusive rules is potent. We humans quickly lose sight of the meaningful parts of life in order to have orderliness, efficiency, and incredible multi-tasking skills. We are missing the point! Meaningfulness is something to be uniquely developed by each individual, many might argue. However, the more we
obsess over rules and the less we intentionally savor experiences, we are the losing species. There is an incredibly beautiful world we live within, which houses millions upon millions of miracles every day in the breath of life and the thriving survival of living beings.

So many people are overwhelmingly in awe of the natural world when they make moments to be mindful of nature in all it is. It is difficult to see how our need for nature has been ignored and set aside for so long by so many people. As counselors, it is my deepest hope that we take a moment to consider this crucial, integral part of life. As Chief Seattle stated in his wisdom of the Earth:

“We are part of the Earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The deer, the horse, the great eagle are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices of the meadows, the body heat of the pony and man- all belong to the same family... The rivers are our brothers; they quench our thirst. The rivers carry our canoes and feed our children... All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth” (Nebbe 1995 p. viii; Seed 1988 p. 67-73).

The title of this paper, Think Like a Mountain, is reflective of Aldo Leopold’s writings on deep ecology. In his writings, he encouraged people to think like a mountain. How would a mountain observe the world playing out around it? In even standing at the top of a mountain, a person might relate closer to what it would be like to think like a mountain. It is in moments of stillness- quiet- that we become aware of all around us and how it is connected. Those experiences themselves, within nature, allow for our souls to breathe and our hearts to grow.
Comprehensive List of Resources regarding Nature's positive effect on mental health


