As our technological society advances and urbanizes, it is apparent that we are putting distance between ourselves and how our ancestors once lived. Could it be that our distance from nature is having an impact on our psyche? While some efforts aim to reduce the distance by bringing humans back to their roots in nature, nowhere is it more important to bridge the divide from nature than in the therapeutic work of counselling professionals.

Ecotherapy is the name given to a form of experiential therapy that incorporates counselling interventions in the natural world to improve the client’s growth and development. There are wide ranges of treatment programs, which aim to improve mental and physical well-being through outdoor activities in nature. Examples include nature-based meditations, physical exercise in natural settings, horticultural therapy, adventure therapy, conservation activities, and therapeutic-based nature therapy.

**WHAT IS THERAPEUTIC-BASED NATURE THERAPY?**
Therapeutic-based nature therapy is an aspect of ecotherapy that has shown great results for work with individuals and/or groups. It encompasses working with clients in a natural setting with an end goal of individual and/or family wellness. This style of therapy has a close relationship to family systems theory in that both theories recognize the inter-relatedness of being and our surroundings. Nature is viewed as a healing partner in the counselling process. For instance, when an individual is depressed, they often retreat into indoor spaces, isolating themselves from the world around them. Using a nature-therapy approach can help encourage individuals to move outdoors while still engaging in therapy.

Further, nature-based counselling helps cultivate awareness in individuals as they explore their relationship to themselves and others and their sense of place in the world and natural surroundings.

The fundamental process for therapeutic practices in nature is the reconnection to nature as a reconnection to self.

**EFFECTIVENESS**
Research on the effectiveness of therapeutic-based nature therapy is limited but encouraging; however, there has been considerable research into the effects of individuals spending time in forests. Several studies demonstrate the unique ways forests can affect individuals and the counselling process.

In Japan, a very popular and well-studied concept is Shinrin-Yoku or...
forest bathing, which involves the simple health-improvement strategy of immersing oneself in a forest. The effectiveness of this practice is well documented with benefits such as immune-function enhancement while in contact with forest environments. Being in natural environments also has been shown to lower elevated stress levels.2

The therapeutic rationale for having experiences within nature is to encourage clients to awaken their senses. An important step is truly grounding oneself through distress. In Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind, Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist cite enhanced self-concept, self-esteem, and self-confidence as benefits to therapeutic-based nature therapy.3 They also believe employing nature is a potent therapeutic intervention to facilitate treatment of mental health issues or to improve family relationships. Nature has been shown to improve mood, anxiety, stress, and depression. It has also been demonstrated that it works well for a variety of ages. Nature therapy is about utilizing these demonstrated benefits in order to help facilitate a client’s therapeutic goal.

The traditional office setting can be an intimidating experience for some clients. The face-to-face interaction can be off-putting and cause unease. Moving therapy to an outdoor space can alleviate this as some people experience nature therapy as less intimidating than therapy in an office setting.

In “Walk and Talk: An Intervention for Behaviourally Challenged Youths,” P.A. Doucette outlines the nuances of walk-and-talk therapy as walking outdoors whilst engaged in counselling.4 Walk-and-talk therapy happens outside the usual confines of an office space. In Doucette’s research with adolescents, therapist and participants met over six weeks, once per week for 30-45 minutes of walking outdoors on school grounds. This research revealed considerable improvements on the individuals’ moods. Participants discussed what had happened that week, and they were taught strategies during the sessions, including ways of managing stress and painful situations, positive self-talk, and mental imagery and focusing techniques to reduce stress.

CONSIDERATIONS
Moving from the confines of the traditional four-walled therapy space involves some considerations in order to be successful. It is important to discuss during the initial assessment any fears the client may have about the outdoors. Comfort levels with the weather can vary and are important to mention. If the client gets cold easily, it is obviously best to avoid the outdoor space when the temperature dips down. Client safety in outdoor spaces is important, and so simple well-worn paths without any obstacles are recommended.

It is also imperative that the counsellor knows the area well before embarking on sessions with clients in an outdoor space. The therapy should be the focus, not trying to navigate both you and your client back along an unknown path.

The confidentiality piece is important and needs to be addressed at the initial assessment. While the

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Ecotherapy is the name given to a form of experiential therapy that incorporates counselling interventions in the natural world to improve the client’s growth and development.
Michael is a bank teller. His past counselling experiences have not been positive. Michael mentioned that his previous counselling sessions had brought up very difficult feelings he did not know how to handle. At assessment, Michael talked about his family history, which included how his mother and father’s marriage had been unstable with numerous splits and walkouts. He noted that his father was very volatile in his family interactions, while his mother had been very self-absorbed. Michael had grown up with a poor sense of self, quite often adapting himself to others’ needs and wishes in order to be liked.

Michael was mistrustful, and it was apparent that he felt attacked and persecuted through the standard line of assessment questioning in counselling. There were long pauses and silences in the subsequent sessions, and Michael reported feeling very ambivalent about therapy. As the sessions indoors felt so difficult, the counsellor suggested they might meet outdoors and walk together and for them both to see how this felt.

They met at a local municipal park, and then walked and talked as they made their way through a quiet forest loop. In the session, Michael talked more about how he felt, and the session went well. At the end, the counsellor asked Michael how he felt about this way of working. Michael reported that he found it much easier to talk without the room and the eye contact of the counsellor, and that compared to his previous therapy experiences, it was much easier to open up and share with the counsellor while they were walking outdoors. They continued to meet outdoors for subsequent sessions.

Outdoors, the counsellor also found it easier to attune to Michael on an embodied level and made contact with him more easily than he had done indoors. At times, Michael would stop and make eye contact when he had an especially important thing to say. As the sessions progressed, Michael was more able to initiate contact in this way during therapy and started to be more able to stay in touch with painful feelings whilst moving outdoors.

four-walled office space provides you with a contained, private venue for intimate discussions and limited interruptions, the outdoor space brings with it other challenges. For example, counsellors should discuss with their clients what is comfortable for them when other people are encountered on the trail. Would they prefer to stop conversation, lower their voice, or continue talking?

INTEGRATING NATURE INTO YOUR COUNSELLING PRACTICE

Therapeutic-based nature therapy is not for every client or every counsellor, but there are many who would benefit from the alternative therapy setting. When you think of resistant clients who really struggle in a traditional setting, it can be worth it to look for new spaces to engage them in therapy. Incorporating nature in a relational way into your practice can support new internal perceptions to help individuals reflect, challenge, and support new ways of thinking on their therapeutic journey.

Nature has been healing us through the times. As society becomes more urbanized, it will be increasingly important in therapeutic work to remember the inherent connection we have to the natural world. As David Abrams so eloquently describes in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, “By acknowledging such links between the inner, psychological world and the perceptual terrain that surrounds us, we begin to turn inside-out, loosening the psyche from its confinement within a strictly human sphere, freeing sentence to return to the sensible world that contains us.”

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REFERENCES


FOR FURTHER READING
