

## Ecotherapy a short report by George Pilkington

With rising costs of medical care, prescriptions and drugs together with the Government budgetary restraints, viable ways to treat depression and mental health problems should be high on the agenda. The lifestyles lived today, with our modern diets and sedentary life styles affects us all including people with mental health problems who are hospitalised, living in community homes or people attending substance misuse clinics. If a low cost alternative treatment that was easily accessible and beneficial could be found, every effort should be made to consider it. If that option could also lead to an increase in physical activity, reduce obesity, improve mental health and help our service users to re connect with nature, that would be an added bonus. If they were taught to see, feel and hear the natural world whilst outdoors, that option should be sought out post haste! That option could be Ecotherapy, a treatment free of unpleasant side effects, cost effective and natural addition to existing treatments.

Three of the Governments six key priorities set out in the recent Public Health White Paper included reduce obesity, increase exercise and improve mental health. Recent studies have confirmed that participating in green exercise activities provides substantial benefits for health and well being.

Many people have fond memories of encounters with nature and wildlife. Playing in wildflower meadows, climbing trees, watching a colourful butterfly as it alights and flutters by, feeding ducks, listening to birds singing or simply making a daisy chain. Such memories of direct contact with nature can generate either a passion for nature or at the very least, a residual appreciation of it. The connection between mental health and contact with nature may not appear obvious. However, there is now plenty of evidence which has found overwhelmingly in favour of regular contact with the natural environment, whether that is simply going out for a walk in the park or participating in a gardening scheme. In one recent study, the mentally ill had one of the greatest self-esteem improvements.

Students on my courses have visited nature reserves, urban parks, lakes, mountains (including Snowdon) forests, wildflower meadows and numerous other outdoor sites of interest. Once there, they walk through the countryside and have myself as a guide acts pointing out the natural world which they would otherwise not see. They can observe and listen to wildlife, touch, feel and in some cases even taste nature itself.

Some hospitals and care homes still have 'healing' gardens designed to alleviate stress for patients and visitors. Several students at various places I have worked are encouraged to participate in the growing of organic vegetables on site, in raised wooden beds, themselves made by the students. They are also told and shown how to recycle food and cardboard waste generated from the kitchens by making compost, itself re-used on the raised beds in which the vegetables are grown.

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## 2. Benefits of Ecotherapy

Whether it is a simple walk in the park or part of a gardening programme, being outdoors and being active is proven to benefit our mental health.

### Self esteem• 90 per cent of respondents had increased self esteem

after the green walk.

- 44 per cent of people experienced reduced levels of self-esteem following the indoor shopping centre walk.

### Mood

- 90 per cent of people who took part in Mind green exercise activities said that the combination of nature and exercise is most important in determining how they feel.
- 94 per cent of people commented that green exercise activities had benefited their mental health.
- 71 per cent of respondents reported decreased levels of depression following the green walk.
- Feelings of depression increased for 22 per cent of people and 33 per cent expressed no change in their level of depression following the indoor shopping centre walk.
- 53 per cent of respondents said feelings of anger decreased after the green walk, but after the equivalent walk indoors, feelings of anger had only decreased for 33 per cent and 45 per cent experienced no change.
- 71 per cent of participants stated that they felt less tense after the green walk and no one reported any increased levels of tension.
- 50 per cent said their feelings of tension had increased after the shopping centre walk.
- 71 per cent of participants said that they felt less fatigued and 53 per cent of people said they felt more vigorous after the green walk – even though they had just walked for 30 minutes.
- 88 per cent of people saw an overall improvement in mood after the green walk.
- The shopping centre walk left 44.5 per cent of people in a worse mood, 11 per cent showed no change in mood and 44.5 per cent had an improvement in their overall mood.



What is it? I saw one in garden the other day

## Quotes from students regarding ecotherapy

“ I feel better about myself and have a sense of achievement.”

“ I am more relaxed, have better focus of mind, greater coordination and greater self esteem.”

“ My fitness has improved, I feel refreshed and alive.”

“ I feel I can do things without being tired. I am more active, I want to join in things and my body is looser and more agile.”

“ I love being outdoors. It reminds me that there is life outside and gives me something to strive towards.

“ I have always wanted to make a brew up Snowdon.”

“ It makes me feel opened up, not cooped up inside my head. It opens my mind.”

“ I like getting outdoors. I love hearing the birds sing and the wind in my face. The sound of the sea and eating chips on the sea front! I feel like I am on holiday.”

“ I have learnt so much about nature and how important it is to us all, even the tiny little creatures.”

“ It stops the stiffness in the joints that I get when I just sit around doing nothing.”

“ I stop thinking about myself and drink in the freedom and fresh air.”

“ It’s nice to speak with other people about the birds we see at nature reserves.”

“ I can have time to chill and relax away from everyone else.”

“ It keeps my mind off taking the drugs”

## Quotes taken from students on my courses and the Mind Report

### *Refs.*

*Anon. Mind Report “ Ecotherapy - the green agenda for mental health.”*

*Barton. J, Pretty, J (2010) “ What is the best dose of nature and green exercise for improving mental health? A multi-study analysis. University Essex*

*Moss, S, (2007) “Back to Nature” Guardian Newspapers, London*