

Spending Time in Nature

Coping

Exercise

n/a

Client

Yes

Past research has shown that spending time in nature can have a restorative effect. For instance, Ottosson and Grahn (2005) found people in an aged care facility who were exposed to nature for one hour a week had improved attention compared to the elderly people who remained indoors. In a completely different context, Kuo and Sullivan (2001) found young adult residents who had a view of nature had higher scores on attentional capacity and were also less likely to be aggressive, compared to people who lived in the inner city. In an experimental attempt to address the effects of exposure to nature, Berto (2005) evaluated if contact with nature could restore attention after mental fatigue. A task was administered that involved individuals sustaining attention and subsequently participants were shown images of natural or urban environments or geometrical patterns and then assessed again on the sustained attention task (Berto, 2005). The results revealed that viewing the nature photographs improved attention, and exposure to photographs of city settings decreased attention. These findings suggest that spending time in nature can be a powerful way to restore attentional resources.

A theory that explains the cognitive benefits nature provides, is Kaplan's (1995) Attention Restoration Theory (ART). ART explains that nature has the capacity to renew attention after exerting mental energy such as; feeling tired after studying for exams or working tirelessly on a work project or an assessment. Kaplan outlined that there are two attentional systems. The first attentional system is called "directed attention" and requires prolonged focus during which distractions must be actively ignored. As a result, the individual is prone to mental fatigue. An example of a use of directed attention is trying to solve a problem at work as an individual must intensely focus attention and ignore the surrounding distractions at the workplace. The secondary attentional system is referred to as "soft fascination" and does not require focus and involves effortless reflection. It is proposed by ART to be utilized in natural environments, referred to as restorative environments as they enable the directed attention system to recover from depletion. Thus, a natural environment is assumed to be effective in renewing our resources, due to the process of increasing effortless reflection.

Goal

The goal of this tool is to offer clients a widely accessible, simple and affordable way to replenish their attentional resources.

Advice

- Clients may spend time in nature in an active way (e.g. taking a walk in a forest) or in a more passive way (e.g. sitting at a bench at the sea). Past research has shown that physical exercise can be a powerful way to decrease symptoms of depression (see for instance Craft & Perna, 2004). Therefore, nature walks may be effective as a

supplemental therapy for depression. Moreover, research has shown that depressive people showed significant increases in memory span and increases in mood after a nature walk relative to an urban walk (Berman et al, 2012).

- Note that data regarding the positive mood effects of exercise involvement, suggest that the focus should be on frequency of exercise rather than duration or intensity. In other words, clients may benefit more from having regular nature walks, than from having few long and intense walks. This is especially relevant for clients who are not quite physically fit.
- If clients plan to walk in genuine wilderness, or in an area with dangerous wildlife or terrain, they should be informed to take all the precautions necessary for any sensible hiker. In these cases, clients should make sure somebody knows where there are. Moreover, they should avoid long walks in excessively hot or cold weather, especially in secluded areas. They should bring water should be discouraged to walk alone after dark.



Suggested Readings

Berman, M. G., Kross, E., Krpan, K. M., Askren, M. K., Burson, A., Deldin, P. J., ... & Jonides, J. (2012). Interacting with nature improves cognition and affect for individuals with depression. *Journal of affective disorders, 140*, 300-305.

Berto, R. (2005). Exposure to restorative environments helps restore attentional capacity. *Journal of environmental psychology, 25*, 249-259.

Craft, L. L., & Perna, F. M. (2004). The benefits of exercise for the clinically depressed. *Primary care companion to the Journal of clinical psychiatry, 6*, 104.

Kaplan, S. (1995). The restorative benefits of nature: Toward an integrative framework. *Journal of environmental psychology, 15*, 169-182.

Kuo, F. E., & Sullivan, W. C. (2001). Environment and crime in the inner city: Does vegetation reduce crime?. *Environment and behavior, 33*, 343-367.

Ottosson, J., & Grahn, P. (2005). A comparison of leisure time spent in a garden with leisure time spent indoors: on measures of restoration in residents in geriatric care. *Landscape Research, 30*, 23-55.

Passmore, H. A., & Holder, M. D. (2016). Noticing nature: Individual and social benefits of a two-week intervention. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 1*-10.

Tool Description

Instructions

Invite clients to find a quiet, natural area and go on a walk. The following instructions can be used:

1. Choose a natural place to go to. You may for instance choose to visit a wooded area near you, like a city park or a flood plain in the suburbs or take a long weekend to national park.
2. Dress in comfortable clothes and walking shoes
3. Visit the natural place: the more quiet and peaceful, the better.
4. Keep the mind alert, yet relaxed. Walking through nature peacefully engages the mind, body, and spirit; differently than if you were walking down a city sidewalk.
5. During the walk, focus your attention on smells. What does the air smell like?
6. Focus your attention on sounds. What do you hear? Is it the rustling of trees? The chirping of birds? Notice all sounds as they come and go.
7. Focus your attention on sights. What do you see? What are the predominant colors?
8. Continue to walk slowly.
9. If something you notice is eye-catching, allow yourself the time to fully appreciate it.
10. Cycle through steps #5-#7 for as long as feels comfortable to you.
11. Walk for as long as you like.