

Ecopsychology

Ecopsychology is based on the idea that humans have an in-built connection to the natural environment. It seeks to help people to explore this connection and restore the bond where it may have been broken.

The applications of ecopsychology are offered to help improve well-being. Ecopsychology techniques are thought to produce improvements in mood, well-being and an increased ability to cope.

Initial studies suggest that access to green space and exercising in natural environments has some physical and psychological benefits.

Whilst more high quality research is needed, Penny Brohn Cancer Care supports the principles of ecopsychology and its related therapies.



Helping you live well.

Information on ecopsychology

This evidence based information sheet aims to provide clearly sourced and reliable information to help you make informed choices about ecopsychology, one of a range of complementary approaches available to support people with cancer. If you would like more information on how to access the range of services Penny Brohn Cancer Care provides, please contact our Helpline on 0845 123 23 10. We are able to provide our services free of charge, thanks entirely to the charitable donations and voluntary contributions which fund our work.

Penny Brohn Cancer Care opinion

We support this approach and include it as part of the Bristol Approach	We support this approach, but do not offer it as part of the Bristol Approach	We do not support this approach
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Practitioner perspective

“Walking and just being in nature is one of the most often quoted ways that people say they manage their stress and also connect to something 'bigger than themselves'. Ecopsychology is the study of this fundamental relationship and how we might develop this to further support ourselves. Here at Penny Brohn Cancer Care we have always accessed nature as a part of our services as a place of contemplation, mindfulness, healing and relaxation. We offer simple but effective techniques to support people in further integrating the relationship with the natural world into their ongoing recovery and healing.”



More information: What is ecopsychology?

Ecopsychology brings together the principles of ecology and psychology. It stems from what is known as the ‘Biophilia hypothesis’, which was coined by Edward O. Wilson in 1984. He theorised that humans have an inbuilt emotional connection to nature. This natural bond to the environment is also known as the ‘ecological unconscious’¹. Ecopsychology seeks to help people to become aware of this intrinsic link and to restore this bond where it has been broken. This has become an increasingly prominent concern in industrial societies where ecopsychology is seeking to redress the destructive relationship that often exists between people and the earth.

The idea of ecopsychology has been reinforced by evolutionary psychologists, who believe that people have an inbuilt preference for natural environments². The term ‘ecopsychology’ was first used by a cultural historian Theodore Roszak in 1992³. Earlier, in the 1960s, Robert Greenway was seeking to apply similar principles through ‘the wildness experience’⁴ where he was seeing the transformative effects of extended stays in the wilderness.

Today these principles are used in increasingly diverse ways. Efforts to apply these ideas therapeutically have come under differing names, such as ecotherapy, wilderness work, nature-based therapy and green psychology. Some people have opted to use the term ‘green care’ or ‘nature-assisted therapy’ as an umbrella term for these and other interventions using nature.

What happens in a therapy session?

The basic principles of ecopsychology are applied in a number of diverse ways, and are often classified under the umbrella term 'green care':

- **Ecotherapy** is the therapeutic use of the environment, often through conservation projects, designed to improve health and well-being whilst benefitting the environment.
- **Green exercise** involves exercise undertaken in a natural environment. Often this may take the form of a walk in the woods or another natural environment.
- **Wilderness therapy** is defined as immersing someone in nature in order for them to develop personally and improve their sense of well-being.
- **Green gyms** are the implementation of different practical conservation projects in the natural environment, offering benefits for both the individual and the natural environment.
- **Horticultural therapy** involves the active use of plants and gardening to bring about improvements in well-being.
- **Nature-assisted therapy** is broadly the use of nature or the natural environment to aid recovery from an illness.

Ecopsychology in practice at Penny Brohn Cancer Care

Here at Penny Brohn Cancer Care, the underlying values of ecopsychology are used within many of our courses and as the foundation for the nature-based transformation retreat. Within this retreat, nature is used in the form of the 4 acre garden as a place of journey, to explore your inner resources in order to support you further. This involves walks, meditations, sharing in nature and with nature.

What are the providers' claims?

(Please note that these are not the claims of Penny Brohn Cancer Care)

The therapeutic applications of ecopsychology are offered to help people to access some of the benefits that are found when we connect with nature. It is claimed that benefits include an improved sense of well-being, a sense of release from stress and anxiety, mental health benefits, and improved concentration.

What do people who have experienced ecopsychology say about it?

Research studies known as qualitative studies ask people about their experiences. They can tell us what having a therapy was like for the people involved in the study, but can't tell us if a therapy is likely to work for everyone (this is dealt with in the section "What is the evidence?").

In studies that have looked at perceptions of green exercise, people reported benefits including improvements in well-being and self-confidence¹⁰, a reduction in perceived stress, an increased sense of coping, a sense of achievement and reported improvements in mood¹¹. Similarly, a study that looked at ecotherapy noted the calming and relaxing effects of nature¹².



Is it safe?

The principles of ecopsychology are considered safe to follow for people with cancer.

How much does it cost?

The application of ecopsychology can be as simple as spending time in freely accessible natural surroundings. The cost of related therapies is dependent upon the type of therapy and the provider.

What is the evidence on ecopsychology?

Ecopsychology is difficult to quantify and measure, therefore evidence in this field has focused on the impact of nature or therapies which stem from this idea. Research suggests that access to green space is linked to reduced stress and positively related to a number of health indicators. Initial studies into green exercise suggest physical and psychological benefits. Research into horticultural therapy, wilderness therapy and nature-assisted therapy has so far proved inconclusive. There is currently little good quality research available and more research needs to be done to understand ecopsychology further. This is a summary of research findings. A full list of references and an extended summary of the research literature is available upon request from our Helpline.

Other sources of information

Organisations that offer support and information for people with cancer	More information on complementary therapies	Organisations that represent ecopsychology
Cancer Research UK Tel: 0808 800 4040 www.cancerresearchuk.org	NHS Evidence www.evidence.nhs.uk	Natural England www.naturalengland.org.uk
Macmillan Cancer Support Tel: 0808 808 0000 www.macmillan.org.uk	CAMLIS www.cam.nhs.uk	Green Space www.green-space.org.uk
NHS Direct Tel: 0845 46 47 www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk		

Contact us:

Helpline **0845 123 23 10** (Weekdays 9.30am to 5.00pm, 24-hour answerphone)

Email: helpline@pennybrohn.org

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Statement

Our information and research is designed to help you make informed choices about the services that we provide. From time to time, for illustrative purposes, we may make reference to commonly available products (such as relaxation CDs and popular self-help books). We do not endorse or advertise the use of any specific product.

Disclaimer:

While we make every effort to use up-to-date and reliable sources, we cannot accept liability for errors in the sources that we use and also cannot guarantee to find all the information relevant to your enquiry or request. All responsibility for interpretation of and action upon that information rests with you. This information and advice is offered on the understanding that if you intend to support your treatment with complementary or alternative approaches then it is advisable to consult your medical team to ensure that they have a complete understanding of your situation and the complementary or alternative approach that you are considering.

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Extra information to support: “What is the evidence on ecopsychology?”

Ecopsychology itself is a difficult concept to quantify and measure, therefore much of the evidence in this field has focused either on the impact of nature on health and well-being or it has sought to investigate specific therapies which stem from ecopsychology. Much of the research has focussed on elderly people, those with mental health issues, or young people with Attention Deficit Disorder. There are a few indications that researchers have begun to link these therapies to cancer^{5,6}. As studies have found links between nature, health and well-being, further work is needed to establish whether this effect is transferable to cancer patients.

Green spaces

A number of studies used a correlational design; this is where researchers look for a link between variables. Here studies have looked to see whether there was a link between green space, well-being and health. One such large study found a significant correlation between the amount of time that people spent in green spaces and their level of stress, such that people who were more stressed had spent less time in green spaces¹³. Another very large population study used national statistics to establish whether access to green space had an impact on health. It found that green spaces buffered the effect of socio-economic status on general mortality rates. However when divided into subgroups, looking specifically at those with lung cancer, this effect was not significant¹⁴. A further study looking at the correlation between access to green space and health outcomes, found that access to green space was positively linked to 3 health indicators¹⁵. Moreover a further study found that access to green spaces, such as parks and tree lined streets significantly affected survival in elderly people¹⁶.

This research has shown encouraging results and many of these studies were conducted on a very large scale. However these results must be interpreted with caution as correlational research only indicates similar patterns in data and cannot conclusively imply causation.

Restorative effect of the natural environment

One classic study found significant effects of nature on post-surgical recovery in hospital. The study found that patients who had a view of trees, compared to those who viewed a wall had significantly less days in hospital, fewer negative notes from the nurse and used fewer analgesics¹⁷. It is important to note that this study was not a randomised control trial but it shows encouraging signs as to the effect of nature on health.

Another study used a complex randomised control trial to look at how different environments served to help people recover from stress. They found that walking in nature improved attention, positively affected mood and there were some indicators to suggest that it reduced stress compared to an urban environment¹⁸.

Green exercise

An area of currently expanding research has sought to investigate the impact of doing exercise, such as going for a walk, in a natural environment. These pieces of research have tended to look at people who have mental health difficulties and the impact of these therapies on their well-being.

One moderate quality review looked at studies which examined the effect of green exercise on physical and mental well-being. Studies generally showed that walking outdoors had a greater positive effect on mood than walking indoors. However the studies compared were generally methodologically weak and too diverse to draw direct comparisons¹⁹.

One randomised control trial looked at the impact of the scene viewed when exercising. They viewed rural and urban scenes, both pleasant and unpleasant. Rural pleasant scenes were the only ones to elicit a significant reduction on all measures of blood pressure. They also found a significant improvement in self-esteem when viewing any pleasant scene²⁰.

A number of green exercise programmes have been set up and studies have sought to explore their impact. Natural England's programme evaluation indicated that people gained a sense of improved well-being and it raised their sense of self-confidence. However this was just a pilot study and was not conducted with scientific rigour, with methods varying across groups¹⁰.

Two small studies looked at the impact of green exercise on mental well-being through groups set up by the charity MIND. These green exercise groups were a variety of garden projects, conservation activities and walking groups. Again, these studies were not conducted with scientific rigour. Qualitative responses indicated that participants found that these groups helped them to feel relaxed and less stressed as well as improving their confidence¹¹. A third study of MIND mental health groups compared green exercise, exercise and a social activity group. The greatest change in self-esteem was shown in the green exercise group, whereas the social activity group showed the greatest improvement in mood scores²¹.

Nature-assisted therapy / horticultural therapy

One review looked at the evidence for horticultural therapy, wilderness therapy and nature assisted therapy. Divergent results were found for the effectiveness of horticulture therapy. Of the studies that looked at interventions that were purely designed as horticulture, one found no effect and the other found that it significantly improved mood. Studies looking at wilderness therapy were mostly looking at behaviour changes in young people. The results were very mixed and no clear findings emerged. Mixed results were also found for nature-assisted interventions. One study of garden walks showed no effect on mood, whereas another study of 'home-based exposure to nature' showed that this significantly improved people's ability to direct attention²².

Summary of the evidence base for ecopsychology

Although there is some encouraging evidence as to the impact of nature on health and well-being, the evidence base is incomplete and many of the research studies are methodologically weak. Randomised control trials are considered the best level of evidence but these are not possible with research into these areas as it is not possible to control individual access to nature and it is not possible in trials to blind participants as to whether they are spending time in nature. The research into ecopsychology needs to be interpreted with caution and more, high quality research is needed.

This is a reference list of sources of information used to prepare Penny Brohn Cancer Care's evidence-based information sheet.

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