



Ecotherapy: Theory, Evidence and Practice

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Problem statement

Individual and community wellness continue to be negatively impacted by human-created climate change, increased immersion in digital media, and accelerated technological change.

Purposes

To introduce counselors to the theory, evidence and practice of ecotherapy. To equip counselors with practical resources that can support therapeutic use of nature in professional counseling relationships.

Negative mental health trends

- Common sense media poll: 50% of teens feel addicted to their smartphones
- From 2010-2013 youth depression increased 1.3%
- Overall serious suicidal thoughts increased 3.89% between 2015-2016
- 1.2 million more Americans reported being depressed in 2016 than in 2015

• *According to Mental Health America*



Definition of Ecotherapy

Proposed general definition:

- The use of nature as a therapeutic agent or setting within a professional healthcare relationship and intervention.

Literature specific definition:

- The “practice” of ecopsychology.
- Rooted in Jungian/depth/transpersonal psychology
- May not be compatible with general definition.

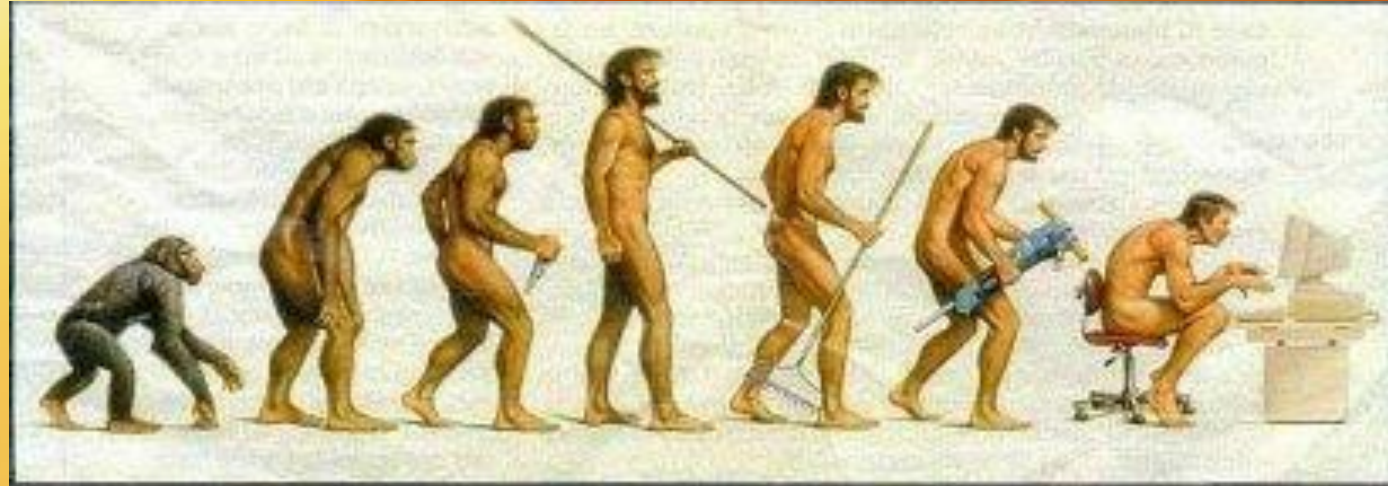
Other concepts related to ecotherapy



- Nature therapy
- Nature connection
- Nature relatedness
- Ecowellness
- Nature relationship
- Sense of place
- Environmental identity

Theory in Psychology

- Health Psychology
- Evolutionary Psychology
- Environmental Psychology
 - Ecopsychology
 - Place Attachment




Somewhere, something went terribly wrong

Health Psychology

- Psychoneuroimmunology
- Stress-Reduction
- Landscape design initiatives
- Park prescription programs

Increase Energy - Lower Stress

 Rx for Health:
Get Up and Get Moving!

Congratulations on deciding to increase your physical activity!
Here is the plan we discussed to start you on your way.

Date: _____

Start with: _____ minutes _____ days per week

Gradually increase to: _____ minutes _____ days per week

Where: _____

We will review this plan at your next visit.

Health Care Provider Signature

Sleep Better *Walk the Dog*

Enjoy the Outdoors

Copyright © 2010 New Mexico Health Care Takes On Diabetes

Health Psychology Research

- Bratman, Hamilton, Hahn, Daily & Gross (2015) – A 90 minute walk in nature vs. a city reduced activity in area of the brain linked with depression. “These findings support the view that natural environments may confer psychological benefits to humans.”
- Hordyk, Dulude & Shem (2014) found that nature experience provided a “holding environment” and promoted attachment behavior.

Evolutionary Psychology

- Explores modern mental life and behavior as evolutionary phenomena
- Mismatch theory
- Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness
- Epigenetic Change



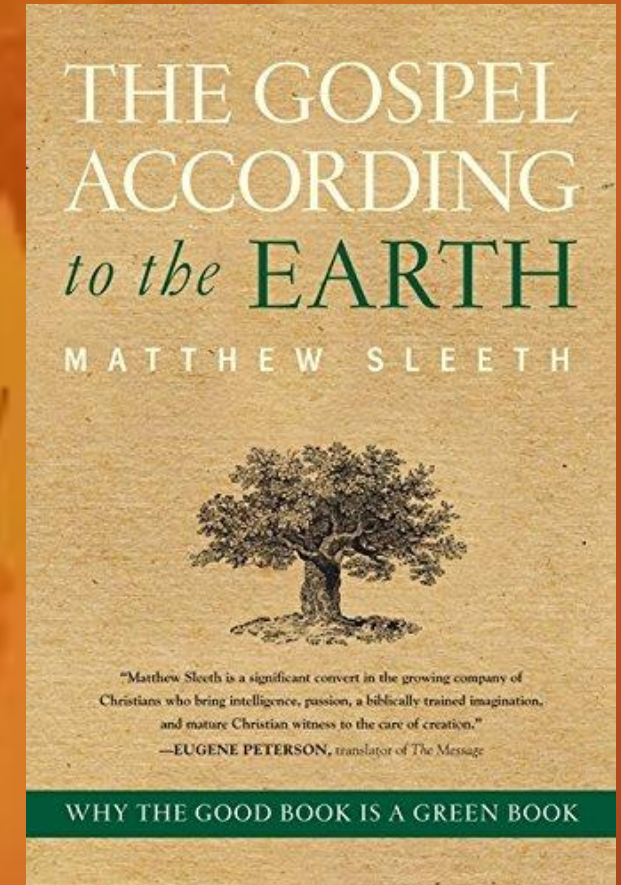
Evolutionary Psychology Research

Richardson, McEwan, Maratos & Sheffield (2016) completed a brief systematic review and meta-analysis of 15 studies of affect regulation and nature.

- Used a three-part model of affect regulation (drive, contentment, threat) as a common framework to compare data from the studies.
- Articulated mechanisms of influence of nature on human affect based on nervous system, neurotransmitters and hormones.
- Found congruence in the results of the studies analyzed.

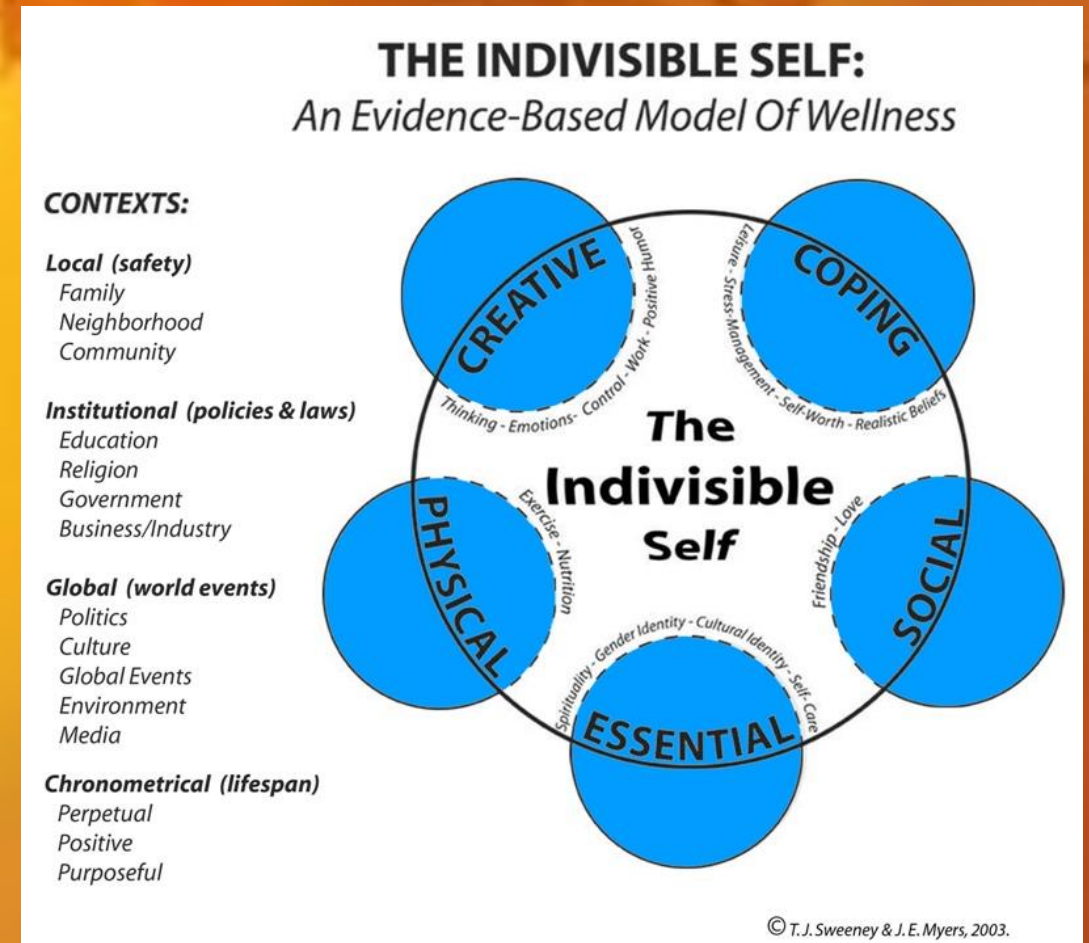
Interdisciplinary Theory

- Mindfulness
- Neuroscience
- Environmental Literature
 - Muir, Thoreau
- Religion & Ethics
 - Christian sources
 - Eastern sources



Theory in Counseling

- Wellness Theory – Myers & Sweeney (2003)
 - EcoWellness - Reese
- Humanistic/Existential
- Expressive/Play Therapy



Reese EcoWellness Inventory

- 1) Complete the short assessment.
 - 2) Score the assessment.
 - 3) Discuss:
 - Was this useful for you? What did you learn about yourself?
 - Would this be useful with clients? How?
- Reese, Myers and Lewis (2015) found that EcoWellness significantly accounted for variation in overall wellness scores of 792 participants.

Ecotherapy Practices

- Horticulture Therapy
- Animal-Assisted Therapy
- Forest-Bathing/Outdoor Exposure
- Outdoor Play Therapy
- Wilderness Therapy
- Jungian Depth/Spiritual/Shamanic activities
- Indigenous Practices (reference a particular tradition)
- Expressive Arts Therapy
- Survival/Thriving Skills
- Outdoor Recreation (hiking, biking, kayaking, camping)
- Naturalist Study (birding, plant and tree study)

Ethical Considerations for Counselors

- C.7.a. Scientific Basis for Treatment
 - When providing services, counselors use techniques/procedures/modalities that are grounded in theory and/or have an empirical or scientific foundation.
- C.7.b. Development and Innovation
 - When counselors use developing or innovative techniques/procedures/ modalities, they explain the potential risks, benefits, and ethical considerations of using such techniques/procedures/ modalities. Counselors work to minimize any potential risks or harm when using these techniques/procedures/modalities.
- A.1.a. Primary Responsibility
- A.2.c. Developmental and Cultural Sensitivity
- A.4.a. Avoiding Harm
- A.4.b. Personal Values

For which populations and diagnoses is ecotherapy most appropriate?

- Any and all
- Anxiety
- Depression
- ADHD
- PTSD
- Attachment Disorders
- May need to adapt for disability
- Socially isolated children
- Clients with an interest in nature



Case Example

- 15 year old male client, significant abuse and neglect history.
- Multiple diagnoses, anxiety, depression, self-harm, signs of psychosis
- Two years of weekly intensive in-home therapy
- Six months truant, juvenile detention, multiple in-patient hospitalizations.
- Initially no sense of connection with nature except fondness for pets in the home.
- Gradual modeling, broaching concepts, demonstrating appreciation.
- Park for fish and duck feeding, pet store visits.



Case Example

- Progressed to regular visits to parks, wilderness.
- Discussed thoughts and feelings about nature during early exposures and throughout.
- Avoided distressing client, kept sessions a safe place physically and mentally.
- Eventually robust exploration of nature, fishing, packing a lunch for longer hike, playing on rocks.
- Integrated nature experiences with social and community exploration, stores, library.



Outcome of Case Example

- Major reduction in psychotic features.
- Improved interpersonal relationships, transformed from shut-in to moderately outgoing.
- Ability to use nature as an emotional resource for self-soothing and regulation.
- Increased repertoire of physical activity through hiking.
- Increased positive connection to places in the community through parks.
- Increased empathy for human and non-human beings.

Break



Ecotherapy Reflection

- One important positive role-model for connecting with nature is _____
- One important negative role-model for connecting with nature is _____
- One thing I like to do in nature is _____
- One fear I have about being in nature is _____
- One way I would like to improve my relationship with nature is _____

Attitude Adjustment

- Be mindful of your thoughts and feelings regarding nature.
- Your attitude determines your experience.
- Many of us carry pain around intimacy with nature.
- Adaptation-level phenomenon.



Shinrin Yoku Research

Lee, et. al. (2011) studied the effects of forest bathing on physiological and psychological responses of young Japanese males, compared forest vs. urban environment.

- Significantly increased parasympathetic nervous responses.
- Significantly depressed sympathetic nervous responses.
- Markedly decreased cortisol levels.
- Increased positive feelings.
- Decreased negative feelings.

Shinrin Yoku Practice

- Video

Extended Ecotherapy Experience

- Lived in a primitive shelter for a year between undergrad and MA.
- Learned survival, tracking and awareness skills.



The Benefits of Skill Development

- Internal locus of control
- Self-control
- Resilience
- Stress reduction
- Coordinated holistic mindfulness practice
- Competence & mastery



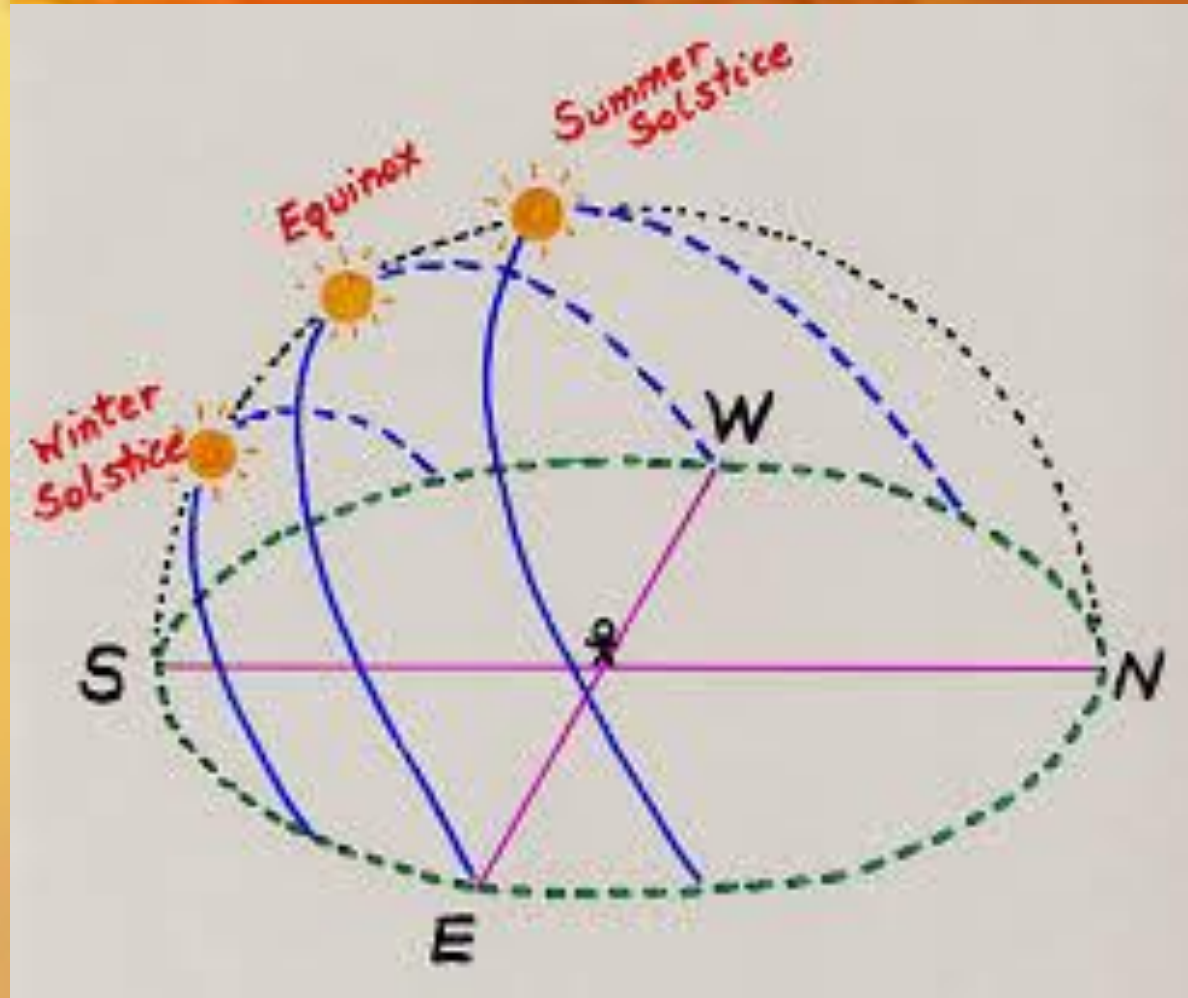
Natural Navigation Skills

- What is “being lost?”
- Dominance and disorientation
- Solar/Stellar orientation
- Navigation techniques
 - Three item sighting
 - Solar compass
 - Songlining
 - Making maps
- Recovering navigation abilities



Solar/Stellar Orientation

- Rise due east, set due west only on the equinoxes.
- Rise and set move toward the south approaching winter solstice
- Rise and set move toward the north in approaching summer solstice
- Sun/moon are south when high



Counseling and ecotherapy: What is the future?

- Many unlicensed and unregulated professionals offer ecotherapy programs.
- A few MFT and psychology programs offer accredited ecotherapy certificates.
- One known CACREP-accredited MA program offers an ecotherapy course.
- Several licensed counselors and counselor educators offer ecotherapy in their private practices.
- Should work be undertaken to articulate ethical ecotherapy practice, comparable to other sub-specialties in substance abuse or career counseling?

Resources

- Counselor's Nature Corner facebook page – friend us!
- Wildrock.org – Ecotherapy collective and training in Charlottesville!
- Contact me directly for consultation and training at earthinsight@gmail.com

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