

EXPERIENTIAL NATURE-THERAPY IN PERSONAL OPTIMISATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Nature had been a constant presence in humans' lives since ancestral times even if the modern urban societies influenced humans' experience of natural environment. Researches from multiple disciplines have established strong connections between direct contact with nature and enhanced health and well-being in people of all ages. Moreover, the experience of nature can serve as a preventive and therapeutic modality with huge potential for practice and research in the field of counseling and psychotherapy. In the past years, new forms of therapies have emerged based on using resources from nature in assisting clients in personal development or optimization as well as in clinical issues. This study will explore the model of nature therapy or nature-based therapy, a complex and holistic perspective based on a postmodern experiential theory. A case example and implications for practice are presented.

Keywords: holistic interventions, nature, case study.

1.THEORETICAL AND RESEARCH BASIS FOR EXPERIENTIAL NATURE-BASED THERAPY

There is a growing interest in the field of psychotherapy for the development of new, holistic interventions to incorporate nature and natural elements in the process of personal change (Hansen et al, 2017; Hofman et al, 2018; Raban-Motounu, 2019; Vitalia, 2017).

From Erickson's experiential encounter with nature to modern adventure therapy and eco-psychology, all the researchers have claimed that reconnection with nature is vital for the health and well-being in people of all ages (Bowler et al, 2010; Bratman et al, 2015; Brymer et al, 2010). The therapeutic aspects of nature and contact with nature have been integrated in new forms of therapies, such as Nature based-therapy, a postmodern experiential approach developed by Berger. Beside eco-psychology and adventure therapy, Nature Therapy integrates elements from art and drama therapy, Gestalt, narrative, transpersonal psychology, shamanism, and body-mind practices. The present article will explore the model of Nature Therapy. A case study will be presented to illustrate ways it can be used in constructing and developing a therapeutic process.

As described by Berger (2006, 2008, 2009), the principles of this approach are: it operates in the living, open environment; natural environment is included as a dynamic partner in the shaping of the setting and process; the therapist relates to nature as an active partner (perhaps a kind of co-therapist), influencing not only the setting, but the entire therapeutic process; nature is used to

connect mind, body and spirit; the direct, yet creative encounter with natural elements can provoke the client to a conscious physical journey in nature that can parallel psychological and spiritual quests; memories, relationships difficulties, feelings, beliefs, needs, resources can emerge from the sensorial experience in nature, and they will be discussed in therapy; nature is incorporated in the creation of rituals and it offers collective symbols of the cycle of life and death. Nature therapy has been implemented with different kinds of clients (e.g., older people, children with learning difficulties) and it continues to develop from Israel in many countries from Europe.

Using these core principles of Nature therapy, this article aims to develop and to implement an experiential personal optimization and development program. We selected a few elements from Nature therapy and incorporated them into humanistic-experiential approaches. The main objectives of the program are: to develop the openness to experience dimension, to decrease the anxiety, to increase the acceptance and present moment awareness. We hypothesized that the experiential nature-based program represents an efficient method to develop the openness to experience dimension, to decrease the anxiety, to increase the acceptance and present moment awareness.

2. CASE STUDY

Case introduction. The following case seeks to illustrate the efficiency of using resources from nature in assisting a young client in the process of personal optimization and development.

Presenting complaints. D is a 19 years old young man who seeks for psychological support for personal optimization and development. D describes experiencing longstanding personal and social difficulties, which has been exacerbated by recent psychosocial stressors (parental divorce, moving with his mother in another home, social difficulties). He also describes being alone, experiencing negative feelings and beliefs (unpleasant memories, emotional confusion, guilt, shame, sadness, and anxiety). His social life is limited, he has a few friends, mostly girls and he has no interest in meeting other people and developing new friendships. Recently, he developed sleeping (difficulties falling asleep), and eating problems (a very chaotic appetite) so he feels more sad and nervous. He reports a self-injury behavior (i.e., cutting) a year ago.

Life history. D was born in a disorganized and conflictual family. His parents got divorced and he had to move in a new home. He lives with his mother and grandmother. His father is diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and alcohol use disorder, and D fears that he would develop a borderline disorder in the future. The relation with both his parents is very distant and rigid.

D is a pleasant young man, with a reserved attitude, evasive glare, expressive mimic and gesture, a good memory, present centered, he answers promptly to psychologist's questions, his speech is coherent but less detailed. He is very attached to his mother and he becomes sad and tensed when speaking about their relation. He expresses his need to talk to a specialist about his present difficulties.

Assessment. Before starting the experiential nature based program, D underwent an assessment, including The Openness to Experience Questionnaire, Philadelphia Mindfulness Scale, State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). At the end of the program he filled in the same instruments again.

The Openness to Experience Questionnaire addresses to the openness to experience of the regular subject, and could be used to identify psychotherapeutic change mechanisms. The construct of openness to experience is meant to be related to a general resource that helps maintain and promote health (Cucu-Ciuhan, Raban-Motounu, 2012).

Philadelphia Mindfulness Scale measures the present moment awareness and it consists of two subscales (acceptance and present moment awareness).

State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) is a validated 20 item self report assessment instrument with separate measures of state and trait anxiety.

Procedure: presentation of experiential nature-based program. D presented for a 13 session experiential nature-based program, scheduled weekly for 60 min each session. The first three sessions were dedicated to a comprehensive intake consisting of clinical interview, assessment, establishment of psychotherapeutically client-centered alliance. The rest of 10 sessions were held in the natural environment (in the forest). This location was choose by D, and it allowed him to set out from his familiar territory of the school and his house to the forest, where he could encounter and construct a personal therapeutic space (Berger, 2009), using the natural resources surrounding him. The following techniques were used: expressive-creative techniques based on natural elements (leaves, small tree branches, chestnut, acorn) that facilitated client's awareness of interior and exterior experiences, his needs and resources; the metaphoric exercises The Wall and Representing the personal space facilitated inner exploration, and inner conflict solving, the awareness of personal and social issues, such as the need for exterior support for clearer and more adequate decisions, negative self-image, low ability to plan, organize, and goal accomplishment; NLP techniques: conflict resolution, and the integration of opposite parts, collapse anchors, as well as the objective coaching technique were used to help client to better formulate personal realistic goals that can reasonably be achieved taking into account his abilities, knowledge, interests, values.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results from clinical assessment before and after the experiential nature-based program are presented in the following table.

Table 1

	Before	After
Openness to personal emotions	24	53
Openness to personal thoughts	26	36
Openness to personal needs	24	42
The capacity to live "here and now", to be involved in personal feelings, emotions	42	80
The capacity of making a decision acting in the present, free from evaluations and preconceptions	28	50
The desire to evolve, to discover, to know oneself better keeping in touch with others and the universe	70	90
The capacity to experiment ("play") new roles accessing unknown or less used parts of a person's Self	44	83
Consciousness	15	32
Acceptance	7	28
State anxiety	55	35
Trait anxiety	55	31

These results confirmed the hypothesis so we concluded that the proposed nature based program was an efficient intervention to challenge the personal and social difficulties, and to facilitate a more direct yet delicate, non-intrusive access to self-awareness and self-experiencing. From the beginning of the personal optimization and development program, the forest was considered an active partner, and in some sessions the therapist worked directly with the client with nature as a tool provider, while in other sessions he acted more as a mediator or a container allowing the client to work directly with nature (Berger, 2009). In the live, dynamic, and free natural environment, every element from the forest that client worked with, had a specific resonance on him, inviting to a inner journey to his personal experience. It was created a mind-body-spirit experience that involved

the sensed experience, the feelings, and beliefs, into a more complex process of awareness. The client became more calm and relaxed, and he felt secure to explore different emotions, to become aware of his and others' needs, to experiment new roles as a result of accepting unknown or less used parts of himself, to decide and to establish reasonable goals, according to personal interests, values, needs and using his resources to accomplish it. He became more optimistic, more self-confident, and he is more interested in establishing emotional ties with other people. Another interesting outcome of the program is the change that took place in the client's attitude towards nature, changing from alienation and fear into one of familiarity, belonging and caring, a result supported by other studies as well (Berger, 2009).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The present study confirmed the efficiency of nature based interventions. The proposed experiential nature based program combined elements from several therapeutic approaches (Nature Therapy, Gestalt, NLP, and Experiential Unification Therapy) in an efficient intervention with profound effects on self-development. The free, open, dynamic and alive natural environment creates a framework for therapeutic relation and process that can help young people expand their perspectives, connect with strength and resources, develop their self-image while gaining a wider sense of acceptance and completion in life. Our results support the ideas developed by Berger (2009) referring to the need for more complex research on the effectiveness of such programs with different groups and in various natural settings, both on community and clinical levels.

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