

making sense



ecotherapy

Making sense of ecotherapy

This booklet is an introduction to ecotherapy, a range of nature-based programmes that can help support your mental wellbeing. It describes the different types of programmes available, their benefits and how to join them.

Note about terminology: the language around ecotherapy is evolving and sometimes different words are used to describe the same thing. People sometimes use the phrases 'green care' or 'green exercise' to generally refer to the whole range of activities covered in this booklet. We use the term 'ecotherapy' to do this. Ecotherapy (in its strict sense) can also be a specific programme that uses nature and formal therapy, such as counselling (see p.5 and p.13).

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Ecominds



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What is ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy is the name given to a wide range of programmes that aim to promote good mental and physical wellbeing through outdoor activity in a green environment.

Being able to connect with nature has positive mental health benefits. And it has been shown that being more active in green environments can boost your mood and self-esteem far more than simply exercising alone.

Ecotherapy sessions may include varying amounts of physical activity, depending on the type of programme. They are usually a group activity and are run by trained professionals.

Programmes may take place in both rural and urban settings, such as parks, farms and woodlands. They can include activities:

- where getting involved with nature is the main focus, e.g. a conservation project or farming.
- that are about experiencing nature, e.g. enjoying the views on a walk or cycling through some woodland.

For many people, ecotherapy can be used to help an existing mental health problem. For some, it has been beneficial in preventing the onset of mental ill-health, e.g. an episode of depression. It can be used alongside other treatments, such as talking therapies or medication, or on its own. Note: it is not advisable to suddenly stop a programme of therapy or come off psychiatric medication you have been taking. Always talk with your GP or psychiatrist about any changes in treatment you are considering, so that you can discuss the best options for you.

Main types of ecotherapy programme

All of the main ecotherapy programmes available aim to improve your mental wellbeing.

- **Green exercise therapy** – physical activities in green spaces, e.g. walking, run by a group leader.
- **Environmental conservation** – taking part in the conservation and protection of natural spaces.
- **Social and therapeutic horticulture (STH)** – spending time gardening or growing food in allotments or gardens.
- **Care farming (on rural or urban farms)** – this can include looking after farm animals, growing crops and woodland management.
- **Nature arts and crafts** – art-based activities in the natural environment, or that use natural materials such as wood, grass and clay. Many ecotherapy projects will include elements of arts and crafts within their programmes.
- **Animal assisted therapy (AAT)** – a formal therapy using guided contact with animals, such as horses or dogs.
- **Animal assisted interventions (AAI)** – being in spaces where you will come into contact with animals for their therapeutic benefits.
- **Wilderness therapy** – allows you to challenge yourself in a wilderness or a remote setting.
- **Ecotherapy (in its strict sense)** – is about building a relationship with nature, so that personal wellbeing is considered equally alongside the health of the environment. Sessions usually include some type of formal therapy, such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) or counselling.

More detail about what's involved in each type of programme, can be found on pp.10-13.

How can ecotherapy improve my mental health?

●● *With nature, with green space, you can re-establish a bond with your own peace of mind.* ●●

People join ecotherapy programmes for all sorts of reasons, and one person can get something completely different out of the same activity as another person. However, there are some common benefits associated with ecotherapy and its combination of outdoor activity and nature. People who have attended ecotherapy programmes have reported that it has:

- reduced their stress levels
- reduced their depression
- improved their self-esteem
- given them the opportunity to meet different people
- provided varied and interesting activities to get involved with
- helped them learn new skills and so boosted their confidence
- improved their mental health without focussing on it
- built up their resilience
- gently boosted their level of physical activity
- allowed them to positively contribute towards the environment
- been really enjoyable and fun.

Reducing stress

●● *I find doing practical outdoor work or spending the day outside helps me to stay grounded. Being indoors is like being trapped in my mind – getting outside allows me to escape from that and be reminded that there is a solid, real earth out there for me to enjoy.* ●●

Stress is something that can affect you physically, psychologically and behaviourally. A lot of people who have taken part in ecotherapy programmes have said that the activities have helped them to reduce many of their stress symptoms.

As your senses start to notice and enjoy the natural environment they will send positive messages to your nervous systems, which in turn, will help you relax physically and mentally. Conservation work or health walks are also great ways to use up excess stress hormones such as adrenalin.

For more information on dealing with stress see Mind's booklet *How to manage stress*.

Reducing depression

Studies suggest that ecotherapy may be a good treatment option if you are someone who experiences mild to moderate depression.

You are more likely to have higher rates of wellbeing and lower rates of depression if you are more physically active. And, as being surrounded by nature can potentially improve your mood too, the combination of both can make a significant difference to how you feel. Environmental conservation programmes and care farms (see p.10 and p.11), in particular, have been shown to reduce anger and depression and improve self-esteem.

When you are depressed you can also feel very isolated and lonely. Joining a group where you can get regular social contact with people can help with this. (See Mind's booklet *Understanding depression*, for more information.)

Connecting with people

Lots of people who experience mental health problems feel isolated or withdrawn. If this is the case for you, an ecotherapy programme can be a safe and satisfying way of being involved in a group and getting to know some new people. Being part of a group can help you feel included and accepted. It can give you a sense of belonging, and so you may find that over time your confidence levels grow. (Also see Minds' booklet *How to cope with loneliness* and *How to increase your self-esteem*.)

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Many people who have taken part in group ecotherapy projects report that it has helped with problems such as anxiety, depression and agoraphobia.

Connecting with nature

●● *Nothing beats lying in a quiet meadow, sun shining, a breeze blowing and the sound of running water.* ●●

As well as offering the chance to strengthen your relationships with people, ecotherapy programmes also give you opportunities to become aware of your wider connections in life, with animals, trees, plants and different landscapes.

Being outside is very stimulating for your senses and you might notice feeling more alive as you experience the strong smells, sounds and colours of the natural world.

From appreciating a beautiful view or doing a more involved activity like gardening or conservation, spending time with nature is a great way to remind yourself that you are very much a part of life.

Learning

If you attend a programme that allows you to learn new skills or be part of a worthwhile project, this can really give your confidence a boost. It can give you a sense of achievement while you are doing and learning.

●● *Now I am part of the team and I feel like I have something to get up for in the morning. I enjoy the fresh air and gardening and I get a real sense of achievement and satisfaction when we finish a garden.* ●●

Many people have also gone on to gain qualifications and work experience through ecotherapy programmes.

Focusing on you and not your diagnosis

👤👤 *You can leave your diagnosis at the gate.* 🍷🍷

People often report that ecotherapy benefits their mental health without having to focus on it or talk about it. Instead there is more space to learn new skills, develop new interests and make new friends. Getting absorbed with looking after animals or creating a piece of artwork in nature offers your mind something else to concentrate on. This can give you some welcome escape from the stresses of life.

Groups can be a mix of people who may or may not have experienced mental health difficulties and your personal history is not relevant to the rest of the team – the main priority of the sessions is getting on with the shared activity.

Boosting your resilience

Lots of people who experience mental health problems have periods of feeling unwell, followed by periods of feeling better. If you are someone who experiences ups and downs in your mental wellbeing, taking part in regular ecotherapy programs can be a way to help prevent future illness when you are feeling well and also boost your resilience in times when you are unwell.

Support for severe mental health conditions

If you are someone who experiences a more serious or long-term mental health condition, such as psychosis or ongoing suicidal feelings, some programmes have been set up in ways that can support you. They are likely to involve a longer commitment and will usually include increased support from psychiatric staff.

👤👤 *Being at a supported gardening project has transformed my life and saved the life of my partner who had attempted suicide four times before she regained hope.* 🍷🍷

What happens in an ecotherapy programme?

Some programmes follow a set structure; others vary depending on the time of year and what work needs doing.

It is usually the role of the programme or group leader to make sure that you understand clearly what you are being asked to do and how your programme works. They should be available throughout the programme to answer any questions you have about the activities and to monitor how things are going for you.

Green exercise therapy

Green exercise therapy sessions can vary, but usually involve gentle physical activity like walking in natural spaces. Walking groups have a trained leader who is responsible for planning and organising each walk.

In a walking programme there is usually a wide range of walks available from gentle strolling to more strenuous hiking, so you can choose one that suits your needs. At the beginning of the session you may be asked to fill out a health questionnaire. For more information on health walks, see *Walking for Health* and *Lets Walk Cymru* in 'Useful contacts' on p.18.

Environmental conservation

Here you will join a group who will be working together to preserve or protect natural habitats or green spaces.

Tasks will vary depending on the location and time of year. For example, if you join one of the Green Gyms run by The Conservation Volunteers (TCV – see 'Useful contacts' on p.18) you could be planting a wildflower meadow one week and hedge laying or planting trees the week after.

Sessions will be run by a trained leader who will give you an overview of the day's activity and how to safely use any specialist tools. The day will start with some gentle warm-up exercises and once you get going with

your task you can work at your own pace. Sessions usually last half a day and include plenty of time for breaks.

Social and therapeutic horticulture (STH)

These are run outdoors at allotments, community gardens and nurseries and, sometimes, indoors (using plants) in places like village halls and libraries. Activities vary according to the season and what needs doing in the garden.

You will be taught by someone who is both experienced and qualified. You will be shown a demonstration of all the work before you are expected to do it and there will be a variety of jobs to choose from. Some groups sell their plants at farmers markets, so there may be an opportunity for work experience, and sometimes there is a chance to study for horticultural qualifications. For more information on these programmes, see Thrive and The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens in 'Useful Contacts'.

Care farming

Sessions on a care farm usually last for half a day and can involve feeding and working with animals, growing crops and vegetables, and helping around the farm. They do not follow typical programmes, because the amount and type of activities will vary from farm to farm.

There are around two hundred care farms in the UK with experienced staff who work with people new to farming. Open days at farms are often held to give a taste of what can be involved and this can be a useful way for you to find out more about the activity before signing up. There is more information from Care Farming UK in 'Useful contacts'.

Nature arts and crafts

These classes follow different programmes depending on the focus of the session. Sometimes you will use the environment or scenery to inspire your artwork ideas, and other times you will work directly with the environment and create permanent installations outside. The groups

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usually focus on improving and caring for the environment as well as enjoying making art.

Arts and crafts sessions are often part of other types of ecotherapy programmes, such as horticulture or environmental conservation programmes.

Animal assisted therapy (AAT) and animal assisted interventions (AAI)

- AAT can take place on a one-to-one basis or in a group. There will be an experienced therapist who will provide formal therapy using guided contact with an animal. The therapy focuses on your interaction or bonding with the animal.
- AAI is less structured and the animal doesn't have such a central role. This approach involves visiting an environment where animals are present for their therapeutic benefits; for example, petting animals or feeding livestock.

For both AAT and AAI the activities can vary – from learning how to handle and care for animals, to exercises that help you understand more about your behaviour and ways that you can reduce stress.

Dogs and horses are the most common animals used in the therapy, but sometimes a very wide range of animals are available.

Wilderness therapy

A session leader will take you to a remote place of nature so you can get away from any negative influences or distractions. Programmes will often include physical activities that involve group work to complete challenging nature-based tasks, e.g. hiking, climbing, fire lighting or shelter building. The aim is to help you to improve your self-awareness, resolve any emotional problems and remove barriers that are holding you back. Programmes usually include individual and group therapy sessions.

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A session led by an ecotherapist will vary depending on the location and time of year. Many of the activities will be similar to those described above. However the group leader will work with you to explore how people experience nature – the aim being to establish a balanced relationship with nature that benefits your wellbeing. There may be some type of therapy as an element of the programme, for example counselling sessions or cognitive behaviour therapy (see *Making sense of talking treatments* for more information).

How do I start a programme?

Most ecotherapy providers have a national website with information and contact details (see 'Useful contacts on p.18). Lots of them have maps so you can check where the nearest programmes to you are held.

But when you first start to find out about different ecotherapy programmes there are lots of things to consider. There is a checklist on p.15 of some useful questions to ask both the programme organisers and yourself.

It may be useful to ask someone to help you find out about local programmes and next steps. This could be a friend or family member, or a professional you trust and have regular contact with, e.g. a social worker or community psychiatric nurse.

How to join

When you first contact a programme they will tell you whether you need to be referred and if there is a particular person that needs to do that for you. Sometimes referrals need to be made by your GP, but for other groups it will be possible to ask someone that you see regularly, such as a social worker, occupational therapist, or community psychiatric nurse. If you attend a day hospital or day centre, you can ask your care coordinator or named worker to help find out all the initial information.

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Programmes like The Conservation Volunteers' Green Gyms (see 'Useful contacts'), health walks and some horticulture groups are offered for free. Others, such as care farms, may charge varying amounts.

It is possible to receive financial help from different places. Sometimes social services can offer financial support and if you receive direct payments it may be possible to use these to cover your costs. This is something to find out when you or your support person first makes contact with the organisation that is offering the programme.

When to join

One of the most important considerations in joining an ecotherapy programme is whether or not now is the right time for you. If you have recently been ill or are dealing with a crisis, it may make more sense to wait until you feel more stable and less overwhelmed.

You can choose to go slowly as you find out what's available. This way you can notice if the idea of joining up is feeling too stressful. It might also be helpful to talk through any plans that you have with someone you trust, so you can become clearer about any concerns or barriers that you may have.

When you decide that you would like to try something, you can make contact with the group to find out when they are next open for new members. With Green Gyms and health walks you can often phone and join immediately. With care farms and horticulture groups there may be a referral process or a waiting list. Also different programmes run at different times through the year.

You might want to think about asking a friend to go with you when you first start a programme. It can feel supportive to have a familiar face among a group of new people and might make the experience more relaxing and less daunting.

Joining an ecotherapy programme: checklist

Before you make a commitment to join an ecotherapy programme, it will be useful to find out what's involved. Groups will have a leader or other member of staff who can answer any questions that you have. Here are some suggestions of things that you or someone on your behalf might like to ask.

Finding out about the sessions

- Can you describe what happens in a session?
- How many people will be in the group?
- Do I need any equipment?
- Will I receive training and if so what will that be?
- What are the travel arrangements?

Support on offer

- What mental health support is offered on the programme?
- Does this change at any stage?
- Will there be anyone I can go to if I need extra support?
- Have people with mental health problems done this programme before?
- What level of physical mobility will I need?

Commitment and joining

- Do I need a referral to join this programme?
- Who can refer me?
- Does it cost anything to do the programme?
- Do you know where I can get financial help?
- How long are the sessions?
- How long does the course last?
- Are all the sessions compulsory or is there a drop-in option?
- What is the next step if I would like to join?

Further opportunities

- Are there opportunities to study for qualifications as part of the programme?
- Will I get any work experience through this programme?

Deciding what to do: questions for myself

When would be a good time for me to join?

What am I hoping to get out of the programme?

Who could help me decide whether to join or not?

Who could come with me?

Can I do ecotherapy myself?

During times when it is not possible to be part of a programme, or if you do not feel ready to join one, it is still possible for you to enjoy some of nature's benefits. Below are some activities you could try. If you can involve friends or family too, this can help to strengthen your connection with them.

- Go for a bike ride – cycling can help to improve your confidence and independence.
- Walk instead of using a car or bus.
- If you take any regular walks, plan the route so that you take in a local park or river.
- Visit your local park as a way to boost your energy levels, improve self-esteem and meet new friends.
- Volunteer at an environmental project.
- Offer to walk a neighbour's dog or look after their pet when they are away
- Visit the coast and go beachcombing.
- Enjoy a picnic.
- Go fruit picking – enjoy the countryside and get tasty food.

👩👧 *I cycle everywhere whatever the weather. It improves my mental state massively. If I cycle to work, I arrive energised and ready for the day. When I cycle home, all the stresses and strains of the day are forgotten in an instant.* 👩👧

How do I get the most out of ecotherapy?

There are generally five accepted ways that people can improve their mental health: connect, be active, keep learning, give to others, and take notice. These can also be applied to getting the most out of ecotherapy.

- **Connect.** Share what you are doing in your programme with your friends and family. Take opportunities to get to know other group members and spend time developing these relationships. In moments when you feel shy or scared, remind yourself that you are all there for the same reasons.
- **Be active in nature.** Take a walk by a river, go cycling or play a game of football in the park. Find an activity that you enjoy, and make it a part of your life. If you exercise indoors, do your workout by a window so that you can see the sky or trees.
- **Keep learning.** Join a programme where you will learn new skills. Try something that you've always wanted to do – like gardening, horse riding or wood carving. Find a course that works for you.
- **Give to others.** There are lots of environmental charities and groups that depend on volunteers. See the organisation Do It, in 'Useful contacts', for opportunities to raise funds, promote causes and campaign to protect the environment.
- **Take notice.** Be more aware of the present moment. Pay attention to the sights, smells and sounds of the natural world. Take time each day to relax your mind and focus on your surroundings.

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)
email: info@mind.org.uk
web: mind.org.uk
Details of local Minds and other local services, and Mind's Legal Advice Line. Language Line is available for talking in a language other than English.

Care Farming UK

web: carefarminguk.org
Online directory of local care farms.

The Conservation Volunteers (TCV)

tel: 01302 388 883
web: tcv.org.uk
UK conservation projects and Green Gyms.

Do It

web: do-it.org.uk
UK volunteering opportunities, including environment and conservation options.

Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens

tel: 0117 923 1800
web: farmgarden.org.uk
Information and directory of city farms that offer therapeutic gardening and farming activities.

Green Exercise

web: greenexercise.org
Research into nature and health from the University of Essex.

Let's Walk Cymru

tel: 029 2064 4308
web: sportwales.org.uk
Network of health-walk schemes in Wales. (Click 'Community sport' tab on website.)

National Trust

tel: 0844 800 1895
web: nationaltrust.org.uk
Lists walks and open gardens, parks and estates that can be visited.

Sustrans

tel: 0117 926 8893
web: sustrans.org.uk
National charity supporting people to cycle, walk and travel more by public transport.

Thrive

tel: 0118 988 5688

web: thrive.org.uk

Charity that runs gardening projects for people with mental health problems.

Walking for Health

tel: 020 7339 8541

web: walkingforhealth.org.uk

Network of health-walk schemes in England.

Worldwide workers on organic farms (WWOOF)

web: wwoof.org.uk

Membership charity that teaches people about organic farming and sustainable living through volunteering opportunities.

Further information

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

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Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

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