

Spending Time in Nature

Coping

Exercise

n/a

Client

Yes

Past research has shown that spending time in nature can have a therapeutic effect. For instance, Ottosson and Grahn (2005) found that the attention of people in an aged care facility who were exposed to nature for one hour a week had improved compared to the older adults who remained indoors. In a completely different context, Kuo and Sullivan (2001) found that young adult residents who had a view of nature scored higher on attentional capacity, and they 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 whether contact with nature could restore attention after mental fatigue. The researcher administered a task that required individuals to sustain attention. 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, whereas 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 of nature is Kaplan's (1995) Attention Restoration Theory (ART). ART explains that nature can renew attention after exerting mental energy, for example, when 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 while intensely focusing attention and ignore the surrounding distractions at the workplace. The secondary attentional system is referred to as "soft fascination." It does not require focus and involves effortless reflection. ART has been proposed to be utilized in natural environments, referred to as therapeutic 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 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 effects of exercise involvement on mood suggest that the focus should be on the frequency of exercise rather than duration or intensity. In other words, clients may benefit more from having regular nature walks, than from having a few long and intense walks. This is especially relevant for clients who are not quite physically fit.
- If clients plan to walk in the genuine wilderness, or 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 and should be discouraged from walking alone after dark.



References

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Instructions

Invite clients to find a quiet, natural area and go for 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 visit the national park.
2. Dress in comfortable clothes and walking shoes.
3. Visit the natural place: the quieter and more 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 the 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 appreciate it fully.
10. Cycle through steps #5-#7 for as long as feels comfortable to you.
11. Walk for as long as you like.