



Walking and talking

Is it easier to open up – and heal – in nature? A growing number of therapists believe so, and are moving their services outdoors. Alice Wright tries an ecotherapy session to find out

It's a bright February morning when I meet Malachy Dunne on the shores of Argal Lake, which nestles in a valley near the Cornish town of Penryn. The sun has just come up as we set off to walk around the water, passing through woodland, wetland and meadows. This is one of Dunne's favourite spots for conducting walk-and-talk therapy sessions, also known as ecotherapy, and I'm here to experience the benefits of outdoor counselling first-hand.

The benefits of ecotherapy are becoming more widely recognised, and a growing number of counsellors offer outdoor sessions. This is backed up by numerous studies highlighting the healing power of nature. For example, researchers at the University of Essex found that, of a group of people suffering from depression, 90 per cent felt a higher level of self-esteem after taking a walk through a country park, and almost three quarters of the group felt less dispirited after the walk. Last year, GPs on

the Shetland Islands began issuing 'nature prescriptions', which instruct patients with chronic conditions to take strolls on beaches and moors, with a list of bird and plant species to look out for as they wander.

For Dunne, the benefits are clear. Outside, he says, clients start to speak about their feelings in a more meaningful way. There are also times when people don't want to converse much at all. Often, being quiet in the company of someone else is a crucial part of the therapeutic process, and Dunne says clients find silence more comfortable and, ultimately healing, when they're walking with their therapist in nature.

A nurturing environment

As we set off around the lake, I feel less apprehensive than I would have in the more formal setting of a consulting room. Like many people, I'm self-conscious when talking about my feelings or personal issues, except with people I am very close to – and even then it can be challenging. >>>



Sitting across from someone I barely know and attempting to express my emotions is painful for me, but talking while we walk feels more natural. Making our way side by side also means I feel less exposed, as eye contact between us is only fleeting.

Argal Lake is stunning in the morning sun and it would be almost impossible not to feel uplifted just by being here. Against this backdrop, it doesn't feel too difficult to start opening up to Dunne about my struggle with a lack of confidence, particularly around my professional life; often feeling that I am falling short or not achieving everything I should be. I know that some of this has to do with wanting to please my parents and, while I am certain they are proud of me as a daughter and a mother to my children, I'm not always sure how they view or value my accomplishments at work.

Focusing on the views around me as I speak gives me the mental space to try to connect with exactly what it is I want to say but, even so, it all comes out in a bit of a jumble. Dunne carefully unpicks what I am trying to express and reflects it back to me. Just knowing that he has understood and can empathise with what I am feeling is hugely helpful. Because this topic is not something I would usually talk about, I worry that it might

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sound silly or confused. But, hearing Dunne's recognition and compassion gives a legitimacy to my emotions that is both supportive and reassuring.

Encouraging whispers

At one point, I become a little tearful, which I would find uncomfortable if sitting in a confined space with a stranger. Here by the lake, I can look away across the water and listen to the birdsong as I compose myself. Later, there are moments when I'm not sure what to say, or need time to gather my thoughts, so we simply walk quietly together. The silence does not feel awkward and I do not feel vulnerable because the setting provides so much else to fill the gap.

Dunne believes that connecting with the sights and sounds of nature enhances people's ability to connect with their feelings, and can lead to a more positive mood or mindset. During the session, we stop to listen to the sound of water lapping against stones, and I become calmer. Dunne believes observing nature and connecting with it like this helps us access inner space and peace. 'If we spend time listening to the water hitting the shore, it's difficult for our mind to do anything else,' he says. 'For me, that's mindfulness.'

Dunne suggests that being outdoors is beneficial for our mental health



because it, quite literally, returns us to our natural environment. 'As a species, we've spent a lot more time walking outdoors, hunting and gathering, than we have either growing crops or making machines,' he explains. 'So we are reconnecting with an ancient memory.'

The landscape is a constant presence and, pausing to notice the sunlight slanting through the trees, the stillness of the water and a robin hopping ahead of us brings another dimension to our conversation.

Ever-present solace

Reflecting on our session afterwards I find that, as well as drawing strength and support from the experience, I can also plug into



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the sense of calm and acceptance that being in nature with Dunne brought me. While walking to an appointment that afternoon, I again listen to the birds sing in the sunshine, which returns me to the healing state of mind centered during ecotherapy.

The simple beauty of embracing

the therapeutic power of nature is that it is always ready and waiting for us whenever we choose to immerse ourselves in it.

I recall Dunne telling me about a recent ecotherapy session he had with a client through local woodland, where they had an encounter with a fox, just a few yards away on the other side of a stream. Little, special moments like that can remind us that, whatever else may be going on in our lives, the world is still full of wonder and magic, he says. ‘It’s about feeling part of those moments of privilege – when this world that we ignore so much lets us in. It’s there, and it will welcome us at any time.’ lifetimetherapy.co.uk

Prescribe yourself a dose of nature

Anyone can tap into the healing power of nature right now. Here are a few tips from ecotherapist Malachy Dunne

● **Slow down.** Walking outside is an opportunity to take down the pace a few notches. Stroll, pause, breathe... Use all your senses to appreciate the beauty of the natural world around you.

● **If possible, head for running water.** Fresh, flowing water creates an abundance of negative ions, which are said to have a natural antidepressant effect on human beings.

● **Listen properly.** If you are walking with someone else, let them know that you are really listening to them, rather than just battling conversation back and forth. Practise listening skills, such as clarifying a complex point, or repeating words back to them. ‘That might sound a little contrived,’ says Dunne. ‘But, the more we do it, the more we will hear what people have to say – rather than simply responding to what they have said. Learning this valuable skill is great for our companion, and it’s beneficial for us, too.’

● **Turn off your phone.** If this is a step too far, at least put it in your pocket and leave it there. This should be a time to be truly present in the moment, so don’t be tempted to post pictures to Instagram or check WhatsApp!

● **Make it a habit.** Just like exercise, if you start making a conscious effort to go out into green spaces regularly, you will quickly see the benefits. And the more you do it, the more you will want to do it.