

WELLBEING WITH NATURE

INTRODUCTION

The need for nature connection reaches back far into human ancestry to a time when our relationship with nature was far more symbiotic than is sadly the case today.

The Biophilia hypothesis suggested by Edward Wilson in 1984 proposes man has an innate desire and a predisposition to seek connection with nature. Scientific study suggests that regular immersion in nature, of just 2 hours per week, provides the dose of nature connection required to benefit wellbeing and to boost levels of satisfaction with life.

WHERE BEST TO CONNECT WITH NATURE?

Researchers have tried to quantify the benefits to wellbeing and happiness that different environments can deliver. A study from 2011 indicated that coastal environments are most potent, followed by coniferous woodlands, then mountains, moorlands and heathlands, followed by broadleaved/mixed woodland, with wetlands, semi-natural grasslands and then suburban/rural developments also being considered beneficial to promoting wellbeing outcomes.

WHAT WOULD THE GROUP DO?

Spend 2 hours in nature, ideally once a week, exploring connection with nature, involving practical, creative and reflective activities.

To explain the process a little more, consider how nature can make you feel. Using your senses to smell a beautiful rose, discover a wild flower or just taking in the sight and sound of birds flying overhead; all can deliver feel-good experiences; an endorphin boost (“feel-good” chemicals).

The model for Wellbeing With Nature involves the group learning techniques to build focus and attention on nature, slowing down to be able to savour the experience.

Starting points for groups can be quite simple, for example, going for a walk can make you feel better and more energised, but the wellbeing potency is increased if you slow the pace down, taking time to tune in and really notice nature using your senses, e.g. sight, smell and sound.

Focusing attention on something that fascinates and engages the senses takes very little mental effort, even if the focus is only for a short period of time. The wellbeing

benefits from practicing nature connection can be restorative and can actually, over time, lead to a improved awareness of and connection with self.

SUGGESTED MEETING FORMAT

This is just an example, perhaps to get you started?

In a group situation you could decide to have an initial discussion about what's planned, followed by engaging in the activity, then gathering together to share feedback, encouraging people to share what they noticed, which could be about the activity or themselves. The group could be guided to use drawing, painting, crafts with natural materials or creative writing to as a way for personal expression of their nature connection experience.

Focussing on the activity being engaged with, whether walking slowly through a natural environment, bramble snipping, weeding, sketching a plant or a butterfly, or taking time to enjoy a view can all contribute to bathe the senses through nature connection.

The process is less about providing distraction and more about encouraging calming of the mind and relaxation of the body through nature connection. Practicing wellbeing with nature can deliver physiological and psychological benefits that last well beyond the end of the session.

Based on 5 ways to wellbeing, see below, a Wellbeing With Nature group should ideally try to bear in the mind the need for encouraging group members to:

1. Get Physical - encourage mild to moderate exercise
2. Get Social - encourage social interaction
3. Care for the Environment - build knowledge and experience of caring for nature
4. Notice - encouraging connection with nature can promote relaxation of mind and body
5. Give - contribute to own wellbeing through 'giving' to something bigger than oneself

You don't have to feel you need to achieve all of the above in every session, apart from No. 2 perhaps, which is the 'fresh air, flasks and friendship' element that's so important for building feelings of being part of a supportive community.

RUNNING THE GROUP

GROUP LEADER

If you enjoy spending time outdoors and have an interest in the wellbeing benefits to be gained through nature connection, this could be a very rewarding group to run.

Some basic knowledge of the natural environment you will be taking people into is important, in relation to keeping people safe. Basic medical information for each person, including yourself, is also useful to have recorded - just in case.

The basic principle is to get people outside for a minimum of 2 hours at a time, involving them in activities that encourage focus, fascination and “savouring” (enjoy, appreciate, relish, delight). To achieve this you need to find ways to encourage group members to slow down and engage/connect with nature.

The leader can support people to experience nature connection via activities such as practical working in the outdoors, arts and crafts projects using natural materials, slow walking to really ‘notice’ things, or even through photography. There are simple exercises you can introduce to help people heighten their senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch (see suggested activities section below).

As a group leader your role could be defined as being to communicate and facilitate others to experience wellbeing with nature benefits through nature connection.

GROUP MEETING ARRANGEMENTS

Before you start the group you’ll need to identify where the meeting will take place. You’ll need to obtain necessary permissions from land owners, if appropriate, to find out what is and is not allowed in relation to activities. For example, pruning or even picking of plants may be acceptable in one location but not another.

There are a number of approaches you could use to run a group, but your starting point is most likely to relate to the type of nature location, available resources and the experience/interest of the group leader.

FIRST MEETING

The first meeting can be used to explore what your Wellbeing With Nature group is going to be all about and the sort of activities that members will be involved with.

Perhaps an important aspect to communicate is the need for group members to be willing to engage in some reflective practice as they engage with activities, whatever they may be. This doesn’t mean there need to be a lot of silence but there ideally needs

to be an appreciation that the benefits of nature connection are best experienced though making some time for some quiet time!

ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

- Light practical work in the nature environment - e.g. habitat management, path clearance, dead-heading
- Arts and crafts using natural materials
- Taking time to observe something closely that 'speaks' to you, followed by opportunity for drawing, painting, photography, poetry etc.
- A slow walk through the nature environment, pausing to savour sights, sounds, scents etc along the way.
- Sit spots, closing eyes and focussing on what's around for a period using the sense of hearing
- Tuning into the smells of the natural environment through getting close up to soil, to trees, to plants (draw attention to any plants that should be avoided)
- Touching nature - exploring textures of bark and plants (draw attention to any plants that should be avoided)
- Hearing nature - cup your hands around the back of your ears and hear the difference in the quality of sounds.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

If you intend to use tools for environmental management you are advised to stick to simple ones that people have experience of using (demonstrating good practice is a good idea). I'd also advise completing risk assessments for activities, especially in relation to tool use (RA templates can be provided, please ask if you need to).

Please be wary of using any inwardly reflective practices, such as mindfulness, unless you have experience/qualifications in this field. A possible issue, if you include activities that specifically guide people to connect with themselves through guided meditative practices, is that internal distress can 'come up'. Please be aware of the potential for emotional release being effected in some group members during sessions.

My advice is to keep things simple. Start with a discussion about what you're going to be doing during the session, checking that everyone feels comfortable with what is being proposed. Facilitate people opting out of any activity that they don't feel comfortable with doing (they can always get the refreshments ready). End with a group sharing session so you have an opportunity to check-in with everyone, as best you can, to make sure they do not require emotional support; sign-posting to relevant agencies if

necessary. Just bear in mind, as a group leader you should adopt a duty of care in relation to supporting the wellbeing of your group members.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND SAFEGUARDING

A group leader needs to have awareness of the possibility that group members may, at some point, open up about distress they are experiencing in their lives, which can occur when people feel relaxed, comfortable and safe.

This is nothing to be overly worried about as it is a normal part of living and what 'friends are for'. However, it is highly recommended that group leaders familiarise themselves with confidentiality and safeguarding in relation to how they handle information that may be disclosed. (see Age UK web page - listed below).

SOME SUGGESTED READING

You may find something here that inspires you. There are also a wide variety of articles and research papers about the wellbeing benefits of nature connection available, via Google.

Online:

What happens when we reconnect with nature

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_happens_when_we_reconnect_with_nature

Two hours a week in nature is linked to better health and wellbeing

<https://theconversation.com/spending-two-hours-a-week-in-nature-is-linked-to-better-health-and-well-being-118653>

Woodlands provide a natural health service

<https://www.outdoortribe.co.uk/experiencing-woodland-wellbeing/>

Benefits of woodlands on human health and wellbeing

https://bfw.ac.at/cms_stamm/050/PDF/GPH_englisch_gesamt.pdf

Nature connection - Feeling good and functioning well

<https://findingnature.org.uk/2019/05/17/feeling-good-and-functioning-well/>

Safeguarding

https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/factsheets/fs78_safeguarding_older_people_from_abuse_fcs.pdf

Books:

Vitamin N - Richard Louv

The Biophilia Effect - Clemens G Arvay

Shinrin-Yoku: The Art and Science of Forest Bathing – Dr. Qing Li