

Nature Therapy: Incorporating Nature Into Arts Therapy

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Abstract

This article presents Nature Therapy, a creative method that takes place in nature, and which regard nature as a partner in the therapeutic process. It introduces the basic concepts of Nature Therapy and provides illustrations of their implementation in practice. the article treats Nature Therapy as an independent framework as well as a model that can be utilized in Arts Therapy in general and in Drama Therapy in particular.

Keywords

nature, ritual, Nature Therapy, Drama Therapy

Introduction

This article presents the basic theory and concepts of the Nature Therapy therapeutic method. It presents basic notions such as “touching nature,” “the triangular relationship: therapist–client–nature,” and “choosing the right space” with detailed examples from practice. The article discusses the ways in which Nature Therapy can be used with different clients, for varied purposes, and in varied natural environments.

The unique contribution of nature is discussed as well as the ways in which it relates to Art Therapy concepts and processes. How to integrate indoor and outdoor work and the use of Nature Therapy as a model in Drama Therapy are discussed. Given space limitations, the specific methods and

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ethical code are not discussed. This article also does not go into many of the concepts that underpin the theory or the interventions chose by the therapist in the examples. The interested reader can consult Berger (2009, 2015, 2016a) and Berger and Lahad (2013).

Nature Therapy: A Theoretical and Applied Framework

Nature Therapy is a creative therapy method that takes place in nature, and perceives nature as a partner in constructing a therapeutic setting and process (Berger, 2009; Berger & Lahad, 2013; Berger & McLeod, 2006; Berger & Tiry, 2012). It is used with different populations and for varied needs, such as children and adolescents with learning disabilities (Berger, 2008), children and adults who have experienced trauma and loss (Berger, 2016b; Berger & Lahad, 2010, 2013), individuals who are dealing with psychiatric issues (Berger & Tiry, 2012), and the elderly (Berger, 2009).

The method integrates elements from creative postmodern therapies, such as Play Therapy, Drama Therapy, narrative approaches and Gestalt, along with elements from traditional rituals, and from nature-oriented theories and practices such as Ecotherapy, Deep Ecology, Vision Quests, and Adventure and Wilderness Therapies. The author conceptualized and developed this integrative method of this article as part of his PhD in psychotherapy (Berger, 2009) and in subsequent work. It relates to the work of individuals such as Burns (1998), Jordan and Hinds (2016), Whitaker (2010), Chown (2014), Kellen-Taylor (1998), and Kopytin and Rugh (2016), but adds unique concepts, methods, and an ethical code. Nature Therapy, as it was developed and presented here, relates to specific concepts and ways of doing therapy in nature and not to all forms of nature-oriented therapy. Due to space limitations, this article will not deal with the differences between Nature Therapy and other nature-oriented therapeutic practices, such as Wilderness and Adventure Therapies, an issue that was presented elsewhere (Berger, 2009).

Like other postmodern approaches that have developed societal theories to explain the rise of psychological distress in such forms as depression, anxiety, and trauma (Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1991; Jordan & Hinds, 2016; McLeod, 1997; West, 2000), Nature Therapy views the process from a psychoecosocial perspective. It is based on the assumption that people's estrangement from nature is linked to broad spectrum of psychosocial distress and manifestations such as loss of self-esteem and meaning, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and alienation (Berger, 2009; Berger & Lahad, 2013). Thus, the intervention approaches and methods are grounded in an environmental–social framework that aims to strengthen mind–body and interpersonal relationships.

Nature Therapy considers the relationship with nature as the main axis in a process that involves the use of creative methods to explore this relationship in a metaphorical and symbolic way. It is thus akin to the work of other art therapists who have developed methods implemented in nature (Chown, 2014; Kellen-Taylor, 1998; Kopytin & Rugh, 2016; Whitaker, 2010). A distinction should be made, however, between these art-based approaches and Adventure Therapy or Wilderness Therapy that tend to emphasize the concrete and verbal and have a task-oriented perspective (Berger, 2009; Garst, Scheider, & Baker, 2001). Note that the term “nature” as used in this article relates to nature as a therapeutic setting and solely in this context.

This article presents the key concepts in Nature Therapy in a way that can broaden perspectives and provide practical tools to be used in therapy. The presentation of each concept is followed by an example from practice that highlights its meaning and demonstrates its possible implementation with clients.

Touching Nature

The core of Nature Therapy, consistent with the fundamental assumptions of ecopsychology and deep ecology, is the claim that by reconnecting with nature, people can connect to their strengths and healing forces (Jordan & Hinds, 2016; McGeeney, 2016; Roszak, 2001; Totton, 2003). “Touching Nature” is a basic term suggesting that direct contact with nature can deepen a person’s connection with his or her own nature. In other words, it can connect clients to a feeling of inner power and authenticity thus enabling them to develop and express important personal qualities. It can also cultivate the well-being of the more-than-human natural world and help educate for nature conservation and development from a personal perspective. This can be a rare experience, given the intensity and fast tempo of modern life and people’s shared intrinsic relationship with nature (Berger, 2009).

Going on a Journey: Example 1. Ruth, in her 40s, married, successful businesswoman and mother of two started therapy due to a growing feeling of stress and problems in her family life. At our first meeting, during the intake, Ruth said,

My working environment is very demanding. When I come home, I really need time for myself and therefore I avoid my partner and kids. Even when I manage to take time off my head is always full of stressful thoughts and I cannot relax. I have been having difficulty sleeping and have anxiety attacks. I have tried yoga and a year of psychotherapy but nothing has helped. When I’m in nature I feel calmer and this is the reason that I chose to do Nature therapy.

Ruth and I met in the Banias Nature Reserve in the north of Israel, where I do most of my private work, not far from Ruth's home. The sessions started by walking along different trails in the reserve, getting to know the area, as we built up trust between us. In the first sessions, Ruth talked about everyday issues. Her tone was high and the tempo was fast. There was hardly any space for me to say anything or respond; it seemed like my main role was to be a listener, container, and mediator of nature. As Ruth developed more confidence in me and the environment she began to stop at peaceful places near the water. There, she talked less and became quieter. She said,

At home it is hard for me to find peace and quiet. Here I am able to stop and listen to the sounds of nature and to my inner voices. No one here tells me what to do, or needs anything from me. I can simply be.

In the next sessions, I taught Ruth a few Chi-Kong exercises to extend her breathing and vitality and her capacity to be in the here and now. We stood barefoot on a cliff facing the valley. Ruth enjoyed exercising and said that although she had done similar activities in the past such as indoor yoga, it felt better in nature. She said, "The fresh air connects me to the moment. The sensation of the earth beneath my feet deepens my sense of grounding and the connection to my body and breath." I next suggested that Ruth could go for a walk and practice the Chi-Kong exercises in the reserve one day without me. She said that it would be difficult for her to take the time for herself and to come alone. I reminded her why she had come to therapy and asked her to make the effort.

Next time we met, Ruth told me excitedly that she had gone alone to the reserve.

Not only did I manage to find time to come, I even enjoyed it. I went to the places we had been and practiced the exercises on my own. I felt free and happy and came back home with space for my partner and kids.

In the next sessions, when we got to our special place by the river, to help Ruth develop her ability to be more self-contained and to find peace within herself, I invited her to undertake a writing experience. I asked her to write a letter to herself, from Ruth who is present near the river to Ruth in everyday reality. She sat under a big tree near the water, while I sat a few meters away. She took her time, gazed at the water and threw stones into the river, and then started writing. When she finished she asked me to come closer so she could read to me some of what she had written. She did not write a letter to Ruth of today but to the girl she once was.

In the next session, after completing our Chi-Kong exercises and getting to our place by the river, we talked about the letter she wrote in the previous session and on memories and feeling related to it.

It's been a long time since I thought about those days. It was nice to remember them now and also painful. I saw how that attractive girl is still present within me today, running and managing so many aspects of my life.

I then invited Ruth to create a sculpture of a safe place. Using mud, sand, stones, sticks, and water Ruth created a fortress on the riverbank. She said:

This is the palace. It is the princess' home . . . it looks like a safe place, surrounded by walls and a moat and looks strong and protected from the outside, but within it is very fragile. If the princess misbehaves the walls can tumble down on her and on everyone who lives in the palace. From the outside it seems like the princess has all she could wish for, it seems like she is happy and protected, but in fact she is not. She is responsible for the happiness of the whole kingdom. If she makes one mistake or fails, everything collapses.

Ruth then told me about the home she grew up in and about the complex relationship between her parents. She told me of the constant pressure she felt "to be good and successful" so that they would not have any reason to fight or argue.

The next session at the river triggered a dramatic response from Ruth. The tide and the rain had destroyed most of the fortress and left only a few remains. She stood quietly and gaped at the sight. After a few moments, she took off her shoes and sat down by the remains. She took a stone that was part of the fortress and while playing with it, she shared her thoughts with me:

This is what happened to the palace after the war . . . after my parents got divorced. For many years I did not look back, thinking that by avoiding my past I could overcome the fear that it would happen again, to my marriage and family. I tried to fill the pain of the loss of my home and family with my career, and with money, being a successful and independent business woman, but in fact, I was frightened of intimacy and real contact with my family. It's good that I see it now. There is still time, space and materials to re-build it. I no longer need a fortress or a palace, a home will be enough . . .

In the next 6 months, Ruth made significant changes in her life. She changed her working hours and her diet, and made time to be with her kids and partner. She returned to yoga and spent time in nature. Her whole family started going to family counseling, which helped them strengthen their

relationships. Our work also continued, and was aimed at helping Ruth gain strength, connect to her inner self, and rebuild her sense of a safe place within.

Back From a Journey: Conceptualization. Ruth's story illustrates how direct contact with nature can help people connect with their strengths, deepen their feelings, as well as explore and express feelings in creative and nonverbal ways. The example highlights the significance and value of a nonverbal, physical–sensory encounter with nature, and the way the creative encounter can revive repressed memories and give them space. Through benevolent witnessing and mediation on the part of the therapist, the memories can be given renewed meaning, thus helping clients make desirable changes in their lives. This story also shows the relationship between Nature Therapy and Drama Therapy, and, in particular, the way the concept of distancing (Landy, 1983, 1996) can be used via storytelling, guided imagination, and artwork. This concept relates to the way that Drama Therapy invites clients to work and/or talk about the issue they are dealing with via art, movement, role-play, story, and metaphor. This process can help bypass cognitive defiance mechanisms, as well as widen perspectives and meanings. Nature Therapy does not only use natural materials for art making but also relates to changes made by nature as part of the process, which can trigger metaphors, feelings, and memories that can deepen and enrich the process.

The Triangular Relationship: Therapist–Client–Nature

The triangular “therapist–client–nature” relationship is a central concept in Nature Therapy, which seeks to broaden the classical therapeutic relationship between therapist and client by introducing nature as the third factor. Although similar to artistic form and artistic product, which can be regarded as the third element in Art Therapy work, nature is a living, independent entity that gives this triangular relationship a unique meaning in the context of Nature Therapy. The triangular relationship prompts the therapist to relate to nature as an active partner in the process that affects the design of the therapeutic setting as well as the therapeutic process itself. In this way, it differs from the perception of the artistic product as a third medium in Arts Therapy, because in Nature Therapy, nature plays an active role and has a dynamic and a life of its own.

This concept of a triangular relationship helps the therapist decide what role to take within the therapeutic relationship. Therapists can take a central and dominant role in the interaction with the client with nature as a backdrop as a supplier of materials, an approach that can also be regarded as therapy in nature. Alternatively, the therapist can take a secondary position as a mediator

between the client and nature by being a witness to a process occurring directly with nature, an approach that can be regarded as therapy with nature. In general, when the client or group is involved in investigating processes connected with relationships and interpersonal communication such as questions of trust and control, the therapist can focus on interpersonal interactions and relate to nature as a setting or as a supplier of material. On the other hand, when the client is concerned with broader issues of identity and meaning, the therapist can invite the client to interact directly with nature, its cyclicity, and its perennial sequences, and remains a witness whose function is to intensify the individual's encounter with nature. Clearly, in many cases, as the dynamics and the issues being examined evolve, the role of the therapist can also change. Changes in position and attitude, which can occur several times during the same session, also enable the client to move along the axis between the interpersonal and the transpersonal, and thus extend the framework and perspectives on the issues at hand (Berger, 2008, 2016a; Berger & Tiry, 2012).

I Have a Voice: Example 2. A nature workshop was held as part of a training program that took place in a forest located above Tel Hai College, Israel. In the opening ritual that took place in a circle we had marked off with pine needles, I invited the group members to listen to the sounds of the forest, to be aware of its smells, to experience the taste of the air, and to feel the encounter of the earth and the wind with their bodies. My aim was to heighten their awareness of themselves, their mind–body relationship, and to think about the idea of “home” and what it meant to them. I invited each of them to take something from their bags which symbolized home to them, to place it in the circle, and say something about it.

After this sharing, I invited them to take a walk in the forest and find a place that suited each of them and build a home in nature. The guidelines remained flexible, in that the home could be any size or shape, it could be built in any place, and could be constructed from any type of material they found and wanted to use. Sharon, a woman in her 50s, returned after a few minutes and sat down on a partly hollow stump of a fallen tree not far from the circle. She asked me, “What do you mean build a home?” “That depends on your interpretation,” I answered. “You have time to figure it out,” I said, and walked away, giving Sharon space to ponder this in nature. After about half an hour, I went back to Sharon and I saw that she had created an area by encircling the tree stump with pine needles and was sitting on the tree stump while energetically writing in her notebook. When I got closer, she told me what she felt. “It’s great,” she said. “All my life, I have wanted a small house, but my former husband insisted on having a big one. I hated it.” When I asked Sharon to say something about her artistic choices, her choice of materials and the shape of the home she had created, she said,

This tree tells my story. During my marriage, I shrank and retreated within myself. I put my dreams aside and I ate myself up from within. I became vulnerable, embittered and small, trying not to take up too much space.

Another participant talked about what she experienced while building her home in nature, including the feelings and thoughts it had elicited about her divorce, and the breakup of the home she had loved so much. Sharon identified strongly with the story and, in tears, told her own story to the group. After the group had listened and digested the stories, I asked Sharon if she would like us to conduct a spontaneous ritual which would allow her to have another encounter, which perhaps would even be healing and developing. She agreed. I invited her to join the circle that was marked by leaves and by the members of the group, and to stand in its center. I asked Sharon to close her eyes and to listen to the wind and to the sounds of the birds in the forest, to be attentive to her breathing, the beating of her heart, and the movement taking place within her. At the same time, I asked the group to come closer to her, to be witnesses to her breathing and movement, and also to allow themselves to gently put a hand on her. Sharon began to move in the circle, at first silently and then, making sounds. I asked her not to stop her movement and sound making and even to let them grow and intensify. While she was moving, I asked her to tell the group something about the home she was living in. Sharon said,

At the moment I feel that my body is my home. After a long time feeling that I could not really breathe, my breath is coming back, and I have space. The sounds of the birds and the smell of the pines remind me of the home where I grew up, my mother and father and the love that tied us together. Maybe I will bring my granddaughters here and show them these trees. After all, being a grandmother is also being a kind of home.

Making Meaning: Conceptualization. Sharon's story highlights how the concept of the triangular relationship linking the therapist, the client, and nature can help therapist choose his or her position within the therapeutic relationship and adapt it according to circumstances and needs. At times, this can be done by letting the client work directly with nature, while the therapist (and group and the relationship to its dynamics) takes a position in the background, and, at other times, by using the human relationship between therapist and client and between group members as the main focus while relating to nature as the background. The use of the triangular relationship was also evident in the first example and can be seen in any kind of Nature Therapy work. Sharon's story is another example of the use of distancing in Nature Therapy. It also

highlights one way that rituals can be integrated into Nature Therapy and the unique contribution of the incorporation of nature on the process.

Nature Therapy as a Model in Drama Therapy

Both Nature Therapy and Drama Therapy can involve a ritualistic perception that relates to the concept of a sacred space and the role of the shaman (Berger & McLeod, 2006; Grainger, 1995; Jennings, 1998; Jones, 1996). Both Nature Therapy and Drama Therapy integrate play, drama, movement, visual arts, music, and stories, and thus constitute a type of intermodal experience (Berger & Lahad, 2013; Lahad, 1995). Both operate in a fantastic/dramatic space (Penzik, 2006), using dramatic distancing (Landy, 1983, 1996). They work with concepts such as “the hero’s journey” (Campbell, 1998, 2008; Lahad, 1992) and the “healing metaphor” (Berger & Lahad, 2013) to develop resilience and bridge between languages (Berger & Lahad, 2013). Nature Therapy can be viewed as an application of Drama Therapy in nature, where nature is the stage for dramatic–creative activity. Similarly, Nature Therapy can be a model for Drama Therapy that expands it and enables it to exist outside of the room, and in nature. Nature Therapy can thus provide arts therapists with additional concepts and methods to expand the therapeutic process and its spiritual dimensions as well as cope with uncertainty.

The Healing Forest: Example 3. Since 2006, the Safe Place program in Nature Therapy has involved more than 12,000 kindergarten and schoolchildren in both regular and special education frameworks in Jewish, Arab, and Druze schools in the northern Israel. It is officially recognized by the Ministry of Education, received a recommendation from the Educational Psychological Services and has won prizes (Berger & Lahad, 2010). The program is aimed at developing resilience and coping resources in young children. It is based on the metaphorical relationship between the damage to the forest caused by fires during the second Lebanon war, the forest’s recovery, and the parallel processes experienced by the children. It builds on the idea of the hero’s journey and uses healing metaphors from the healing forest book (Berger & Lahad, 2013; the forest watchmen as authority figures, the power and the ability to help the trees and animals) played and acted by the children. The program enables children to cope with their frightening and dangerous experiences. Using dramatic distancing, the program invites the children to act out the story of their own coping, express their fears, and connect to their strengths within a secure, fantasy setting (Berger & Lahad, 2013).

The program begins in the classroom, by reading the story to the children and inviting them to choose one of the characters and draw him or her

or the forest. Then, through ritual, makeup, and other accessories, the children take on the role of forest protectors as they leave the classroom and go outside into nature around them. They build the forest protectors' camp, prepare power symbols, and conduct activities which enable them to tell their stories and connect to their strengths. Consistent with the framework narrative, after the fire has been extinguished and when the forest is again secure, including the animals that fled, the children plant trees, build and set up feeding stations for birds, and, if possible, nesting boxes. In this way, the children do not just connect with their strengths via metaphors and forest protector role-play, but also give their strengths to others, by helping nature and the environment. Thus, the ecological–social activity aids them in creating a link to the sense of cyclicity, meaningfulness and values of attachment to the community and to nature, and to what is larger than themselves.

This program is based on the components of Drama Therapy and thus constitutes an example of Nature Therapy as a model for Drama Therapy. However, independent dynamics in nature are not emphasized; rather, the approach relates to nature more as a backdrop or a stage for a story written in advance. In this context, there is less flexibility and movement in the triangular relationship and fewer references to spontaneous events in nature. A more flexible approach that integrates the dynamics of nature in the process were presented in the previous examples. They also showed how Nature Therapy can be used as a model and an extension of Drama Therapy and other creative–expressive therapies combining various aspects of art.

“Opening the Door”: A Combination of Work Indoors and in Nature

Most of this article has presented Nature Therapy as a method that unfolds in nature throughout all the therapeutic stages. However, therapeutic work inside can be combined with work outside, in nature. For example, I worked with a group of people coping with posttraumatic stress disorder that included sessions in nature and in the clinic. During these meetings, we also dealt with issues of uncertainty and lack of control over the environment in encounters with nature, which we examined in the next meeting in the clinic. The setting alternated between the clinic and nature. For example, a group of mothers and children at risk met in a similar combined setting. The sessions in nature included mothers and children, and took place experientially. It involved playing, creating, cooking, and eating together. These encounters were aimed at practicing and developing mother–child communication skills and improving mother–child relationships. The subsequent meetings in the clinic were

held separately for the mothers and the children. In the sessions with the mothers, we considered the dynamics, the behavior, and the interactions that had taken place with the children in the natural setting and tried to learn from them, as a form of parental guidance. In the children's group, we used play to process content that had come up during the session in nature regarding relationships with their mothers as well as with brothers, sisters, and fathers (who were not at the session but who were present nevertheless).

The last example is taken from individual therapy during which I accompanied a woman whose husband had passed away. Some of the sessions took place in a room and included talking and artistic work connected to processing and dealing with the loss. Another part of the process included walks in nature adjacent to the village to locations where she used to walk with her husband. She had stopped walking there after her husband's death because encountering the landscape rekindled her feelings of loss and loneliness. Later in the process, we conducted rituals in which we integrated creative projects prepared during the sessions in the clinic. For example, we released gifts that the woman had prepared for her husband into the waters of the stream in a ritual that was part of the way she processed the loss and served as a symbol of her release. In the clinic, we created a collage of photographs we had taken together in nature of the places where she had spent time with her husband. Part of the collage included drawings in the empty spaces between the pictures and then in the photographs. In this way, we created a dialogue with emptiness and loss, as well as with the acceptance and fulfillment that the woman was experiencing at that stage of her life.

Although all of the examples in this article are taken from my work in the Upper Galilee, where untrammelled natural settings are relatively accessible, it is important to point out that even in urban settings, therapy can take place in nature, for instance, in a park or a garden near the clinic/institution. For the past few years, I have been leading therapeutic groups of kindergarten children in the nearby town of Kiryat Shmona. The activities take place in the school garden, or in the neighborhood park, in which there are four pine trees, or at times, even under a tree near the neighborhood dump: a true treasure trove of recycled, creative materials that are excellent for "building a home in nature" activities, or constructing a camp or a pirate ship and other worlds that can form the basis of our work. This is also true for the Encounters in Nature program which was run by the Special Education Department of the Ministry of Education for many years, as well as the Safe Place program which was held in nature adjacent to the school or kindergarten, which in certain cases was only a tree and a small patch of grass. It is clear that this type of nature affects therapy, as does the time of day and the season. These elements are part of choosing the right setting (Berger & Lahad, 2013) which

is not detailed in this article. However, any form of nature can provide the setting for Nature Therapy, with the appropriate reference to nature and the triangular relationship. In cases where there are few open spaces, it may serve more as a background and a stage for the therapy, and function less as an independent therapeutic resource. But even then, there are independent processes that nature both comprises and proposes, such as the cyclicity of the year and encounters with animals, and these can be referenced and combined with the therapeutic process.

Provisions for the Journey: Discussion and Conclusion

This article presented the theoretical cornerstones and central concepts of Nature Therapy, and illustrated its applications with different populations in various constellations. By examining the self-healing value of nature, and concepts such as ritual, dramatic reality, and distancing, this article showed how Nature Therapy can enhance Drama Therapy by extending it to the realm of nature. It also briefly showed how Nature Therapy can be used to help reestablish and develop the connection and relationship with nature. The third example, the Healing Forest program, also showed how Nature Therapy work can help people develop their relationship, care, and nourish it. In this example, the children planted trees, built feeding stations and nesting boxes for birds, and saw how their contribution helped nature, thus making it a healing space for them.

This article also discussed the possibility of combining indoor work and work in nature, as well as the alternative of working in a natural, urban environment. Space limitations prevented my dealing with important concepts such as choosing the right space (Berger, 2009) and the concept of connecting to universal truths or cyclicity in nature, as well as ethical issues related to this approach (for more details, see Berger, 2009, 2016b). It also did not deal with applications (Berger, 2009; Berger & Lahad, 2013) or the diagnostic model based on the building a home in nature model (Berger, 2008). These can be found in earlier publications. Despite the vast amounts of activity that have taken place in the field of Nature Therapy, the academic recognition it has achieved, the training programs and the many articles and books about it, it is important to note that it is still a young and developing discipline and further research is needed for its continued development. My hope is that more practitioners will incorporate nature into their work and use these encounters to benefit both people and nature.

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Author Biography



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