



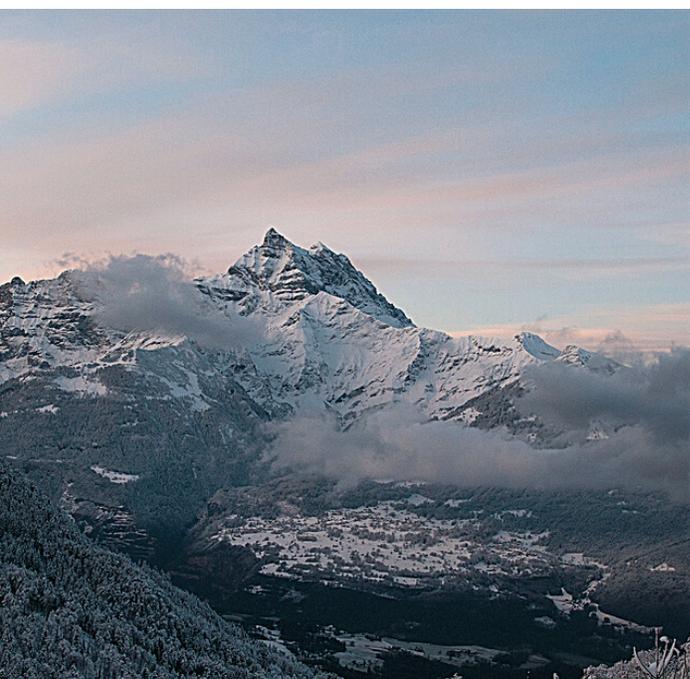
NATURE- INFORMED THERAPY

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We've all felt overwhelmed as therapists, especially during the last few years. Some struggled more than others but most of us found ways to cope. I'd go to the same places: a nook in the forest or a small ocean beach near my apartment, returning home more restored.

How many of you found solace in nature? We're not alone. Nine in ten Canadians say they feel happier when they're connected to nature (Bratman et al. 2015). In fact, research shows that spending as little as 20 minutes a day in nature lowers stress hormones and heart rate (Hunter et al. 2019).



We function more optimally when immersed in natural environments versus artificial ones, so it's no surprise that prolonged exposure to urban environments can have negative physical and psychological effects on our health (Dalgard et al. 1997). That is why nature has been integrated into an evidence-based counselling approach called Nature-Informed Therapy (or nature therapy), which is not only beneficial for our clients but allows for a sustainable practice that can protect us from compassion fatigue. Here's how.

Nature-Informed Therapy (NIT) is a “therapeutic approach that integrates the healing elements of nature into established, evidence-based treatment modalities” (Centre for Nature-Informed Therapy, 2022). The NIT community believes that most mental health issues derive from our disconnection with nature and has evidence treating ADHD (Tillmann et al. 2018), anxiety/stress, burnout, depression (Vujcic et al. 2017), and grief (Cleary et al. 2022).

According to a recent survey, we spend 90% of our time indoors (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2022) and an average of six hours of screen time per day (Statista, 2022). Therefore, when we fully comprehend that the tree outside our window has a lot more in common with us than the computer on our desk, we may return to seeing nature as our friend and something to take care of and learn from. NIT has three main psychoevolutionary underpinnings that help explain why you and your clients may benefit from its therapeutic effects:

Stress Reduction Theory (Ulrich 1984) proposes that when we’re immersed in nature, our parasympathetic nervous system activates, and we give our minds and bodies a chance to restore. His study on post-operative care looked at two groups of hospital patients in recovery; one group had a room with a window view of

the outdoors and the other group had a windowless room with their beds facing a wall. Results showed that the group with a window needed less analgesic and spent less days in the hospital (Ulrich, 1984). These results suggest that our natural environment has positive effects on public health, indicating that nature therapy can be used to prevent and treat certain illnesses.

For instance, the Japanese government started noticing the increase in high-blood pressure,

heart disease, anxiety and depression in the 1980’s and identified the need for new methods in tackling the epidemic. In turn, shinrin-yoku (forest bathing) was developed and is now practised around the world with 40 years of research supporting this body of work (Kotera et al., 2022).

Since then, forest bathing has been used in Japan to prevent and treat stress-related illnesses and improve immune-functioning (Li, Q., 2010), and represents a great example of an evidence-based, natural intervention.

Another reason why the outdoors has such a powerful effect on our nervous system is that certain active ingredients exist in nature that contain stress-reducing components such as soil bacteria, fractals, and phytoncide - which is an essential oil secreted by trees as a defence against disease and insects (People, Y., 2022).

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A study by the department of psychiatry in Japan, involving participants who suffered from depression, showed that the phytoncide D-limonene was more effective than antidepressants in improving their mood (Komori et al., 1995).

Attention Restoration Theory suggests that humans focus involuntarily and automatically on natural stimuli and experience something called “soft fascination” (Basu et al., 2019). Birding is considered a form of soft fascination because it elicits concentration but not to the point where your cognitive functioning is wired into overdrive. We spend much of our days hyper-focused at work or overwhelmed with processing sensory information in urban settings that we aren’t left with much room to introspect or recharge. Kaplan (1995), states that we recover cognitively a lot more quickly after time spent outdoors, allowing for better creative thinking and problem solving.

E. Wilson’s **Biophilia hypothesis**, which means “love of life and the living world”, explains that we have a biological need to connect to our primitive roots by being in direct contact with nature. We process the colour green more easily because humans co-evolved in green spaces and had to detect the shades of rot or ripeness in vegetation (Grinde et al., 2009). We instinctively feel more relaxed with open landscapes and developed a preference for them because we can identify potential dangers when we can see across a horizon or an open field (Falk et al., 2010). Biophilic design aims to employ these concepts into office and home settings, especially since people experience increased mood and productivity when natural features (ex. nature pictures, sounds of tweeting birds, sunlight) exist in the workplace (Kellert et al., 2015).

Research around the health benefits of nature is being recognized. Licensed healthcare workers in Canada can now prescribe parks through the PaRX Prescription program, which aims to promote public accessibility to nature and raise awareness around the positive health impact of spending time outside (some prescriptions even come with a free Parks Canada pass for those who cannot afford it). I offer PaRX prescriptions when it makes sense and I’ve found this to be a creative way for clients to connect with well-needed resources. Unless someone is not a fit due to a phobia or a traumatic experience related to the outdoors, most of my clients appreciate the opportunity to get outside between sessions and experience symptom relief with burnout or stress.

But we can’t assume nature therapy is appropriate for all and that’s why it’s important to do a proper eco-assessment that explores our clients’ identity with nature and any concerns they (or we) may have around engaging with this type of work. As a therapist who specialises in career counselling, occupational burnout, and anxiety, I use an eclectic approach that includes elements of mindfulness, ACT and CBT and have found NIT to be conducive to my framework virtually and in-person.

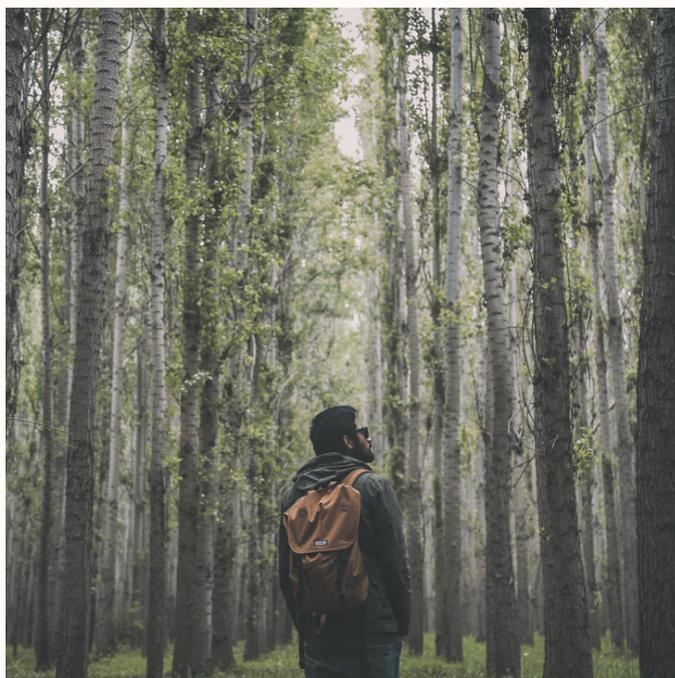
But NIT disrupts structured frameworks by shifting the dynamic and forcing one to rely on the variability of the outdoors where there are less boundaries. In non-traditional settings like open pastures, coastal hikes and lakeside spots, boundaries need to be negotiated and navigated differently than in an office, especially where safety may be a concern. As indigenous social work scholar and author Catherine Richardson (2021) writes in *Facing the Mountain*, “counselling doesn’t have to be

about a goal, (...) or outcome measured engagement, it can be a form of accompaniment, of witnessing, of revolutionary love and care for another human being.”(p.30) As a Nature-Informed therapist, I have been challenged and brought out of my comfort zone with NIT but unlike “walk and talk therapy”, it’s an integrative and immersive experience that aims to partner with nature as a “co-therapist” and relies on psycho-spiritual moment-to-moment experiences. We also use a range of interventions that, ultimately, have its roots in indigenous practices.

It’s good practice for us therapists to acknowledge the intersection between clinical mental health and decolonizing land-based healing especially if we’re partnering directly with the land and waters for our work. In NIT, it’s important to not just take from nature but to give back and foster a reciprocal relationship with nature. I, myself, am still learning and finding my own way as a professional on the NIT journey.

But like any approach or therapeutic orientation, we can all benefit from further training, supervision, and skill-building for the sake of our clients but also our own

mental health. We often focus on client benefits, but I think there’s an equal need for examining what can help prevent burnout for us therapists. Because NIT is so restorative and usually accessible (it can take place inside!), it’s an alternative approach to self-preservation. For NIT certification and resources please refer to this list:



Nature-based therapy TRAINING AND RESOURCES :

- Centre for Nature Informed Therapy: <https://www.natureinformedtherapy.com>
- Human Nature Counselling Society: <https://humannaturecounselling.ca/who-we-are>
- Outdoor Behavioural Healthcare Council (OBHC): <http://www.obhcouncil.com>
- The Nature Fix by William Brown
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Laura Cohen in Black Hole Falls near Kijipuktuk/Halifax, Nova Scotia



High Head Trail in coastal Nova Scotia

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