

Wilderness Therapy: A Holistic Approach to Healing

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Abstract

This paper discusses the practicality that wilderness therapy and other nature-based therapies are an effective, justifiable and viable form of therapeutic treatment for people of all age groups with an abundance of diagnoses. It will also define the process and application of wilderness therapy in both traditional and expanded explanations so that an audience less familiar to the treatment can understand its practice. The critical components of wilderness therapy that advocate healing will be discussed as well as the aspects of nature that have been clinically proven to affect the brain and body. The negative effects from the developing technological age will be examined to back the claim that nature heals. Personal stories from a survivor of sexual assault, a teacher of emotionally disturbed boys and an alcoholic with mental disorders of depression and anxiety will reveal the success of this treatment modality.

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“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to the body and soul” (Muir, n.d., p. 64).

Introduction

Nature includes the physical world, as it exists without humans, human development, and synthetic environments. Within nature one will not find skyscrapers lining the horizon or populated cities flooded with manufactured electricity that brighten the sky in the dark of the night. However, if looked in the right places one might find a redwood tree forest standing 250 feet above the ground, a mountain range with layers of different natural colors blanketing its surface, or trillions of twinkling stars dusting a black sky. Nature, inside its most secluded areas, deep in the wilderness is a place of calm and tranquil beauty, the setting to which God’s animate beings can freely form a connection with the earth. In today’s age of the twenty first century more and more individuals are becoming attracted to the man-made world filled with cities, electronics, material belongings, and an endless connection to information found through the Internet. As these man-made contributions to life advance, the relationships between humans and nature continue to dwindle at a disproportionately large amount. Humans are becoming trapped within the confines of the concrete jungle and “are more distanced from the natural world than ever before” (Selhub & Logan, 2012, p. 2). This detachment from nature should generate some concern regarding the future of human health on the grounds that natural environments offer incredible health advantages (Selhub &

Logan, 2012, p. 2). Since man has evolved from the natural world one can only wonder how this disconnection is affecting our mental and physical health. How can a reconnection to nature through various nature-based therapies begin to heal the human body? More importantly, how can society begin to recognize the advantages and assets of nature-based therapies such as wilderness therapy, horticulture therapy, equine and other animal assisted therapy, and ecotherapy? All of these remedies offer continuous healing abilities. Wilderness therapy and other nature-based therapies are an effective, justifiable and viable form of therapeutic treatment for people of all ages with an abundance of diagnosis.

Wilderness Therapy Defined

Before one can entirely understand the healing benefits of wilderness therapy, one must conceptualize the foundation upon which wilderness therapy is, and consist of. The term wilderness is illustrated through the word nature. Nature, as explained above, involves anything that exist completely from the earth and that isn't man-made. Therapy can be described as any significant action, task, procedure or program that relieves tension and physical or mental ailment.

Traditional Definition

Most evidence-based research reveals the description of wilderness therapy in a confined perception. According to Russell, wilderness therapy is tailored to suit solely the adolescent and young adult population (2001, p.76). His definition suggests that the mass diagnoses treated through wilderness therapy include substance addiction, depression and other various clinical disorders. Most adolescent clientele have experienced behavioral problems to which other

conventional forms of treatment and medication could not alleviate. This lack of success through traditional therapy leads most clientele to wilderness therapy.

Alternative terms have been used to discuss the treatment of wilderness therapy, such as, adventure therapy and outdoor experiential therapy. All of these conditionings use outdoor activities that involve physical and emotional challenges. The physical challenges can consist of mountain expeditions, rock-climbing, white-water river rafting, hiking and backpacking. All of these endeavors are usually preformed over an extended period of time: thirty, sixty or ninety day expeditions. They are conducted usually within a group setting – a certain number of participants – overseen by highly trained leaders, and the therapy aspect facilitated by clinically licensed therapist. The emotional challenges within this treatment modality can include: being away from home in a secluded area for an extended period of time, carrying all day-to-day necessities in a backpack, and spending dedicated time alone on wilderness solos. (A wilderness solo can be described as a client spending a specific period of time alone in nature; without peers, therapist or guides (Russell, 2001, p.74).) Additionally, most participants who suffer from addiction, depression and anxiety already experience emotional challenges within their day-to-day activities.

Although Russell is an expert within the wilderness therapy field and his contribution of evidence-based research has provided sound evidence to the prosperity of the industry, his definition is limited to the adolescent population. Additionally, according to Russell the diagnoses best suited for wilderness therapy are restricted to behavioral disorders illustrated through depression and substance

abuse. A more expanded definition of wilderness therapy is not found in published research. However, Piranian, the director of the wilderness therapy educational program at Naropa University, presented an expanded definition during a personal interview.

Expanded Definition

Piranian's interpretation of wilderness therapy involves all the aspects of the traditional definition; nonetheless, it is not limited to these circumstances. The expanded definition concludes that all age groups: youth, adolescent, young adult, middle aged and elderly can experience health benefits from wilderness therapy. This characterization of wilderness therapy can be more conveniently used on a regular basis in customary practices. Instead of departing on week long expeditions to experience mind altering changes, one can experience these developments through short walks in nature, brief encounters with animals, physical interactions with plants and dirt, or by simply interacting with natural made objects. Rather than the wilderness acting as the location of where healing takes place, a connection represented between humans and nature can provide healing: physically, mentally, and emotionally. A more expanded definition of wilderness therapy voiced through Piranian is "consciously incorporating the nature world into our human existence on a routine basis" (Personal Interview, October 16, 2013). This portrayal of wilderness therapy is based from the ecotherapy model.

The study of ecopsychology focuses on the relationship between humans and nature and it also suggests that humans are interconnected to the natural world. The belief supporting ecopsychology is that humans are derivatives of nature.

Although the modern mind has been influenced from contemporary, social, and humanized impacts, it evolved and adapted from natural environments. “This perspective addresses the critical fact that people are intimately connected with, embedded in, and inseparable from the rest of nature. Grasping this fact shifts our understanding of how to heal the human psyche...” (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009, p. 18). A deeper awareness and understanding of the bond between the human mind and body along with nature – as it exists in the form of trees, plants, animals, mountains, rivers, ocean, and rocks – will allow a new, unconventional, integrative form of healing for the human character.

How Wilderness Therapy Heals

Some people may find it hard to believe that such techniques like backpacking and mountaineering could alleviate symptoms of stress, depression and anxiety. Or those struggling to get clean and sober due to substance abuse from drugs and alcohol would find comfort within the seclusion of the wilderness. As humans have evolved into an age where materialistic tendencies dominate peoples households and transportation means of vehicles, planes, and trains provide more convenient travel than walking, it is easy to recognize the inconvenient, uncomfortable and awkward aspects that hiking, backpacking, and mountaineering portray. On the other hand, these difficult and weary tasks may be seen by others as a peaceful and spiritual way to quiet the racing mind that is influenced by psychological disorders. Although wilderness therapy is a relatively new form of therapeutic treatment and its research is limited, encouraging evidence reveals this practice to be an effective form of treatment (Becker, 2010, p. 51).

Referring back to the traditional definition of wilderness therapy, the elements contributing to the success of this practice include: spending time in nature, while at the same time being removed from primary living situations that can promote unhealthy circumstances. Other significant influences are, a unique relationship built between staff and clients as well as group dynamics and support.

The initial goal of wilderness treatment is to address client “presenting issues” and chemical dependencies by removing clients from the destructive environments that perpetuate their behavior and addictions. The cleansing begins with a minimal but healthy diet, intense physical exercise, and the teaching of basic survival and self-care skills (Russell, 2001, p. 75).

Russell credibly presents the introductory course of wilderness therapy. This beginning process is used to strengthen clients for more intense and in-depth work done later in the program. Interaction with other peers and guides provides an awareness of personal and communal responsibilities. This atmosphere and communication between clients and staff provide a safe environment to properly express anger and other emotions. The emotional and physical challenges presented in wilderness therapy programs are used to enhance personal and interpersonal growth (Kimball & Bacon, 1993). Being in nature while physically exerting the body presents healing techniques. Depressed individuals can observe that happiness can be achievable. The direct experience with outdoor tasks advocates the development and enhancement of clients’ physical, social and psychological wellbeing (Norton, 2010, p. 232). Reflections on current life issues are used to give inspiration on how

to continue with healing and recovery while still engaged in wilderness therapy treatment as well after care treatment.

Concerning clients suffering from alcoholism or addiction, experiences in wilderness therapy programs can create an environment that influences fun, sober, group activities. For many alcoholics and addicts the idea of clean sober fun is a foreign concept. These individuals are also introduced to the first few steps in the common twelve-step model of recovery, which is the most effective form of addictions recovery being practiced today. This design utilized a *Higher Power* or *God, as we understand Him* to alleviate addiction and promote recovery. For some, a concept of God can be very hard to grasp, but being in natural environments in a wilderness therapy setting can help to open a door to the conceptualization of a *Higher Power*.

Negative Effects from the Technological Age

The industrial age, filled with technology, has caused the medical world to advance at the same time as doctors and scientists are finding abundant new ways to cure diseases. Simultaneously, cities and urban areas are monopolizing natural environments. "Projections indicate that in less than 20 years, 75 percent of the world's population will be living in urban settings" (Selhub & Logan, 2012, p. 24). With a pill or a medication for every illness known to man, in addition to the comforts and conveniences presented from urban settings, it might appear that the simplicity of nature is losing its importance in the developing world. It seems as if the prosperity of cities and their convenient attributes are more important than the preservation of nature. This view of nature – or lack of concern towards nature's

preservation – creates a monumental problem. If we refer back to the expanded definition of wilderness therapy, which states that a conscience incorporation of nature provides an awareness of the bond between humans and nature, the only obvious truth is that nature has positive effects on the mind and body. If the human race continues to dismantle natural environments in order to make room for the developing world the main thing we will be hurting is our own self.

A study was done in 2011 by Korean researchers to show how the effects of viewing nature scenes as opposed to urban scenes impact the brain. The subjects of this study viewed nature-based scenery and/or urban scenery while fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) measured the different patterns in brain activity. The results determined that looking at urban scenes caused heightened activity within the amygdala. Overstimulation of the amygdala has been linked to anxiety, chronic stress, and negative emotions. On the other side of the spectrum, the results from the nature scenes showed arousal from the basal ganglia part of the brain. This area is known to experience heightened activity when confronted with happy faces, smiles and in recollection of happy memories (Selhub & Logan, 2012, p. 30-31).

A different survey was conducted to show that people who spend a considerable amount of time in front of screens (televisions, computers, and smart phones) show more profound signs of unhappiness and depression than people who spend more time in nature (Bongiorno, Licinio, & Murray, 2010, p. 180). These participants indicated that watching television, cruising the Internet, or playing video games was a way to cope with depressive symptoms. Other evidence also

indicates that screen technology declines IQ levels, while creating stress, tension, fatigue and tremendous levels of ADHA (Selhub & Logan, 2012, p. 42). There is little uncertainty that the evolution of screens and the human interaction with them has caused a disconnection and lack of concern towards nature. This illusion that technology can provide happiness is pulling humans away from the very thing we emerged from, nature. As a consequence of this, the benefits of nature are being hidden by the whirlwind of technology.

Components of Nature and their Physical Effects on the Body

There are many aspects of nature that create health attributes, boost our immune system and create a positive feeling of wellbeing. By just taking a walk outdoors all five senses – sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch – can be stimulated. The human nose can usually pick up the sent of a flower, contrarily it may not be able to detect the various aromatic producing chemicals from trees and other plants. However, these aromatic chemicals are there. Furthermore, they have been scientifically proven to “lower the production of stress hormones, reduce anxiety, increase pain threshold, ... and increase the antioxidant defense system in the human body” (Selhub & Logan, 2012, p. 83). Higher concentrations of these particular aromatic chemicals have also been shown to produce more anticancer proteins in the blood (Bongiorno, Licinio, & Murray, 2010, p. 231). A greater amount of time spent in the forest and in vegetated areas compared to on sidewalks, streets and around building can improve immune function. Just the same as the body picks up healthy and natural air born particles, it can easily pick up synthetically made

chemicals from man-made environments. It is no secret that a great deal of these pollutants have been linked to depression, anxiety, aggression, pain, etc.

One other huge difference from nature and urban areas are the sounds composed in each environment. In the wilderness one can hear birds singing, a rushing river or a trickling creek, and the wind rustling through trees. These sounds are the complete opposite of what is heard in urban settings, such as cars honking in traffic, helicopters, planes, construction equipment and other machines. The human brain handles these contrasting sounds in completely different ways. The noise generated from developed areas promotes depressive and anxious thoughts, stress, and contributes to insomnia; while natural sounds produce the opposite. Studies have even demonstrated that blood flow activity while listening to nature-based sounds indicates a state of relaxation (Selhub & Logan, 2012, p. 103).

Alternative characteristics of nature that vitalize the other senses of sight and touch include natural lighting, fresh water and salt-water oceans, and the color green produced from chlorophyll containing pigments. The normal reaction to natural light produced from the sun shining during the day is increased mental activity, and as the sun disappears into the night sky this activity lessens to create a desire for sleep (Bongiorno, Licinio, & Murray, 2010, p. 174). With the invention of electricity man found a way to extend the hours of light to a bottomless measure and artificially illuminate the night sky. The health consequences from artificial light can include insomnia, depression, cancers, irritable bowel syndrome and many other symptoms, at the same time natural light can enhance cognitive performance (Selhub & Logan, 2012, p. 91). Because of the certainty that the human body

requires fresh water to survive it shouldn't be an unfamiliar concept to believe that water also has healing attributes. The touch of water on the skin, the submersion of the body amidst it, or even observing bodies of water through the eyes has been noted to improve emotional state (Selhub & Logan, 2012, p. 101). Just as these natural elements of light and water create positive effects on the brain so does viewing the color green produced in plants and trees.

Personal Success Stories

Plenty of published works exist that reveals the success and benefits of wilderness therapy. However, these narratives are told from the angle of the analyzer and are geared for the development of research within the field. They may show the health benefits and changes from wilderness therapy but they do not depict the deep emotions or heart felt descriptions of triumph and success. Be that as is may, not many stories are more powerful or compelling than the ones voiced from the individuals transformed though wilderness therapy. Here are a few instances of wilderness therapy's' prosperity.

A middle-aged women grew up in a sexually abusive household. From an early age she developed a long strand of mental disorders including depression, poor self-esteem, and interpersonal complications. In her thirties, after a long period of trying to heal from her awful childhood, she experienced another traumatic episode of sexual assault in the form of rape. She tried numerous remedies to ease her pain, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder before joining a wilderness therapy program. Here her isolation was counteracted as she began to entrust in other women and men experiencing the same disarray. She began to build trust

within other people by working in groups to accomplish physical enduring tasks. She built a healthy and trusting relationship with her own body. Instead of her body being looked down upon as a vessel of violation it became a vessel of power and joy (Piranian, Personal Interview, October 16, 2013).

A teacher, Joseph, at a treatment center for boys with emotional disturbances and learning difficulties describes the changes he witnesses in the boys characters after education with natural materials and animals in the classroom. Most of his students were residents at the school because their homes were unsafe. They came from such a violent place that their own anger, or abuse towards other people or even animals was a natural emotion and occurrence to them. Joseph brought natural made elements to his classroom to cultivate a safe environment for the boys. Eventually after the boys could practice self-restraint and nonviolence Joseph brought domestic, and wild animals to the classroom. Through this type of wilderness therapy the boys felt like they were worthwhile and that they had the power to have a positive impact on the earth and the earth's creatures (Reynolds, 1995, p. 19).

Being the author of this paper and holding a strong view of the benefits of nature-based therapies, it would be unfitting of me to not share a small piece of my success story. I too have healed because of wilderness therapy and nature. As a child I grew up in close proximity with nature. Being a resident in a very rural area, nature was at my fingertips, it was my playground, and the heart of the wilderness was only a short journey from my home. I had a relationship with nature from the very beginning of my existence, before I was even conscience of how important this

relationship is. As I developed into an adolescent, my excursions outdoors became secondary; instead I became immersed in unhealthy behaviors, which would lead me to the discovery of my addiction to alcohol and a collection of painful mental disorders. When I left home as a young adult my connection to a relationship with nature grew due to a move to the most populated area in the United States, New York City. Although I accomplished a slight sense of success here in New York through a degree in Culinary Arts my mental health was declining rapidly. My episodes of depression, suicidal tendencies, and anxiety attacks were being heightened as I self-medicated with alcohol and drugs. Despite the fact I was constantly surrounded by people, my heart and soul felt as lonely as they could possibly be. Eventually I moved back to my home state of Colorado (as far as I could from the town I grew up in) to the urbanized area of Denver. Things got worse for me before they got better, but lucky for me, I finally made my way to recovery. My early recovery was influenced by a twenty-eight day wilderness therapy course – which would be my first conscious experience of nature-based therapies. Although I continued with conventional therapies and medication to treat my mental disorders I rekindled my lost relationship with nature. The power of nature assisted my growth in sobriety. Amidst nature my body began to heal from the destruction I had put it through. However, not long into my recovery I would become engulfed in the worst depression of my life accompanied by a heavy, dark blanket of grief due to my father's sudden and tragic suicide. I knew if I didn't stay close to nature my diseases would take me down and probably kill me. It was a long trudge out of the darkness, and I can now credit my happiness and good health to the healing

powers of nature and wilderness therapy. My story along with many others is a testament to effectiveness and healing attributes generated from wilderness therapy and other nature-based therapies.

Conclusion

To bring this discussion to a close, an integrative definition of wilderness therapy is the conscience incorporation of nature into everyday human practices and the awareness that the human body and nature are interconnected. Wilderness therapy involves a diverse amount of methods to promote healing. These methods can include physically and technically challenging tasks such as backpacking, mountaineering, rock-climbing, and white-water river rafting. On the contrary, the healing attributes from wilderness therapy can be found from much more tame tasks than the ones just listed. Short walks in nature done on a routine basis, gardening, or engaging in the company of animals can also promote similar healing characteristics. The critical components of wilderness therapy that advocate healing include group dynamics, individual solitude, reflection and contemplation. The attributes of nature that have been proven to impact the brain and the body in positive respects include aromatic chemicals, bright natural light, pure acoustic sounds, water, green pigmentation in plants and trees, and the empathy created from a connection to animals. These components of wilderness therapy and nature have been confirmed to reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety, and countless other diseases and mental disorders. Nature heals because of the simple truth that the human brain evolved alongside of nature.

The technological breakthroughs of the industrial age have certainly created advancements and education opportunities in the human population but with these improvements a new era of sickness, diseases and mental disorders have been established. The human mind is becoming disconnected from its creation with nature, but it is a consequence of nature and through a connection with the earth that we will heal the human body and mind as well as the planet. John Muir, an outdoor enthusiast and writer from the early 1900's, puts it quite simply "when one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world" (Muir, n.d., p. 41). Every function produced by the human mind is a repercussion of nature. If we protect nature we also protect the health and longevity of the human body, but if we destroy nature beyond repair we will also destroy ourselves.

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