

# Nature Therapy

## Selected Articles

By

Ronen Berger (PhD)



**Theory & Methods**

**Application in Practice (Case Studies)**

**Ethical Considerations**

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**This book is dedicated to Prof John McLeod who taught me to express myself through the written word. He taught me to enjoy it as a form of art – as a dance....**

**The framework of this book and the practice of Nature Therapy itself could never have been created and been brought to light without him.**

**Thank you John**

**Acknowledgments:**

I would like to thank and acknowledge three women without whose ongoing support this collection of articles, and the work it represents, would not have come to be:

My mother - Meira Berger

My partner - Lilach Glick

My teacher and colleague - Michal Doron

I would also like to acknowledge all my students for the ongoing dialogue, arguments and debates that constantly challenge me to question what Nature Therapy really means...

**Thank you**

**About the Author**

Ronen Berger is the founder and head of the Nature Therapy Center, Israel. The creation and practice of Nature Therapy integrates his former occupations in the fields of ecology and nature conservation, drama and body-therapy, dance and performance. He established and runs Nature Therapy programs for children with learning difficulties and late development for the Israeli Ministry of Education as well as programs for populations who have experienced trauma. He established and runs postgraduate Nature Therapy courses at Tel Aviv University, Sapir College and Haifa University – Shiluv Center, Israel. His research covers a wide range of topics relating to Nature Therapy. It challenges the place of touch, spirituality and spontaneity in psychotherapy, developing issues relating to ecopsychology and the relationships between human beings and nature. His working style in therapy, teaching and supervising is creative and holistic. Ronen is the father of two children and lives on Kibbutz Snir in northern Israel.

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**This book was published by the Nature Therapy Center in September 2009  
It can be found on the Internet and downloaded free of charge.**

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## INTRODUCTION

This collection of articles includes highlights of the work I have done developing Nature Therapy's framework and practice over the past seven years. It has been edited with a practical orientation that seeks to provide practitioners with tools that can help them incorporate Nature Therapy into their daily work and use it within their therapeutic-educational-environmental practice. The articles include examples from practice, highlighting ways in which Nature Therapy can be employed with different clients for their varied needs.

The first section of the reader includes articles that present the Nature Therapy framework: theory, concepts and methods. The second section focuses on the application of Nature Therapy to practice, illustrating how it can be used with different client groups. As the first unit includes mainly work done with adults during various workshops and short interventions, the case studies in the second section address work with children, within school or kindergarten settings. The third and last section addresses some of the limitations that this framework may have, and ways in which they may be bypassed and converted into growth and resilience. It includes an article highlighting various ethical issues that concern this unique framework; particularly issues dealing with the relationship with nature.

I hope that this collection of articles supports your work and further development of the field.

Ronen Berger (PhD)

More articles, as well as my PhD. can be found at: [www.naturetherapy.org](http://www.naturetherapy.org)

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**Coming soon – More books about Nature Therapy**

I hope three additional books will be published in the coming year:

**1. "Safe Place – Nature Therapy with Children who have been Exposed to Trauma"**. Written with Prof. Lahad, this book includes a new theory involving creative methods of working with children who have been exposed to trauma. It presents the many ways in which nature therapy can assist in their healing. It details the protocol of the "safe place" program, including a manual of twelve encounters with children in kindergartens and schools. As such, it provides practitioners with powerful knowledge that can facilitate their work with children.

The Hebrew edition was published in October 2009 and is now being translated into English.

**2. "Nature Therapy – The Handbook"**. This book details the Nature Therapy framework – theory and methods. It includes examples that demonstrate its application to different clients and highlights its operation in practice.

**3. "The Cycle of Life - Nature Therapy from Childhood to the Golden Age"**. This book includes articles written by therapists and counselors who have completed Nature Therapy training. The collected articles highlight ways in which Nature Therapy can be used at various stages of the cycle of life – from children in early childhood through the elderly. Each case study relates to a specific implementation used with these populations, including aspects such as children-at-risk; children with learning difficulties; families at risk; people coping with chronic illness or psychiatric difficulty, and old people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

The Hebrew edition can be found free of charge on the internet as of September 2009. Its translation and distribution remain pending until the receipt of sufficient funding.

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**INCORPORATING NATURE INTO THERAPY:  
A FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICE**

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*In most cases, therapy is addressed as an indoor, verbal, and cognitive activity, with the relationship between therapist and client at its center (McLeod, 2003). This article presents an alternative approach to therapy, conducted in creative ways in nature, addressing the environment not merely as a setting but as a partner in the process. The article includes examples of work that took place with different clients, in varied settings. It aims at presenting basic concepts from this young framework that will inspire other practitioners to “open the doors” and explore these ideas with their clients in nature.*

The concept of conducting transformative and healing work in nature is not new; it can be traced back to ancient times when people lived in communities in nature. In those days, shamans would incorporate nature's healing powers into the performance of rituals and into the overall framework of traditional medicine. These rituals, which can be viewed as an ancient form of therapy (Al-Krena, 1999; Grainer, 1995; Jennings, 1995; Jerome, 1993; Jones, 1996; Pendzik, 1994; West, 2004), were used to help people recover from illness, cope with the unknown, and make the transition from one status to another (Eliade, 1959; Evans, 1997; Hazan, 1992; Jennings, 1995; Meged, 1998; Turner, 1986).

After the scientific revolution and the development of modern therapy, Erickson, one of Freud's leading students and an important theoretician in his own right, used the experiential encounter with nature not only for his own healing but also for his clients; he would send them to the mountains as part of the process (Kinder, 2002). Years later, adventure therapy was developed by working outdoors with youth and adults having difficulties coping with boundaries and with authority (Garst, Scheider, & Baker, 2001; Kaly & Hessacker, 2003; Neill & Heubeck, 1998; Price & DeBever, 1998; Simpson & Gillis, 1998). It was also used in caring for children with special needs, families, anorexic women, and people suffering from psychiatric illness (Bandoroff, 2003; Burg, 2001; Crisp & O'Donnell, 1998; Richards, Peel, Smith, & Owen, 2001; Roberts, Horwood, Aunger, & Wong, 1998). Adventure therapy usually approaches nature as a setting (location) and as a provider of

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challenges in what constitutes a concrete and task-oriented process (Beringer & Martin, 2003; Itin, 1998; Richards & Smith, 2003; Ringer, 2003). In most cases adventure therapy does not emphasize the emotional, metaphysical, and spiritual aspects of nature (Berger, 2003; Beringer & Martin, 2003).

In recent years, however, due to the negative effects of some aspects of technological development upon various social and environmental processes, the relationship between human beings and nature has received more and more recognition (Roszak, 2001; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995; Totton, 2003). Many writers have suggested that the rupture between human communities and the natural world contributes to a lack of psychological well-being and ultimately to emotional problems and ill-health (Kuhn, 2001; Pilisuk & Joy, 2001; Roszak, 2001; Roszak et al., 1995). The growing field of eco-psychology reflects this attitude in its developing social-therapeutic-environmental philosophy, claiming that reconnection with nature is essential not only for the maintenance of the physical world (habitats, animals, plants, landscape, and cultures) but also for people's well-being and happiness (Roszak, 2001; Roszak et al., 1995; Totton, 2003). Many writers have written about the therapeutic aspects of nature and contact with nature (Abram, 1996; Berger, 2004; Beringer & Martin, 2003; Davis, 1998; Naor, 1999; Roszak, 2001; Totton, 2003). Few have tried to reconstruct the knowledge gained through practice and intuition into creating a therapeutic framework using the relationship with nature as the key reference point for therapy.

#### NATURE THERAPY: DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICE

Within therapeutic practice, a nature-informed approach has been employed as a specific model of therapy, titled Nature Therapy (Berger, 2003, 2004, 2005), and as a source of concepts and practices that can be integrated into any therapeutic model. Nature Therapy broadens the classical concept of "setting" as static, permanent, and under the control and ownership of the therapist (Barkan, 2002; Bleger, 1967). Rather, Nature Therapy relates to the environment as a live and dynamic partner in the shaping of the setting and the process (Berger, 2004). Nature Therapy develops concepts and methods that assist its operation in nature, while addressing ways that the unique characteristics of this independent environment not only can influence the therapeutic act but also can be used by the therapist to open it up to additional dimensions. Nature Therapy is a postmodern experiential approach based on the integration of elements from art and drama therapy, Gestalt, narrative, eco-psychology, transpersonal psychology, adventure therapy, shamanism, and body-mind practices. The approach was developed in the doctoral program of the first author of this article, under the supervision of the second author. It has been implemented with individuals, groups, and families in the private, educational, and health sectors in Israel. Training is provided in a few academic institutions in Israel and currently developing in Europe.

The aim of this paper is to examine some of the core principles involved in incorporating

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a relationship with nature as the key reference point in constructing and developing a therapeutic process. We use case studies that highlight the theory to illustrate ways it can be used with different clients and in different settings. All of the examples used in the article have been implemented by the first author of the article, during his work with Jewish clients living in Israel.

#### NATURE AS A THERAPEUTIC SETTING

One of the basic concepts of Nature Therapy relates to the issue of nature as a therapeutic setting. Nature is a live and dynamic environment that is not under the control or ownership of either therapist or client. It is an open and independent space, which has existed before their arrival in it and will remain long after they depart from it (Berger, 2003). This characteristic is quite different from an indoor setting which is usually owned by the therapist who has furnished it for the purpose of seeing clients and doing therapy (Barkan, 2002). Choosing to relate to nature as a place in which to conduct therapy prods the therapist into relating to these issues and creating a framework that will not only take these characteristics into account but will incorporate them into the therapist's therapeutic rationale. The building-a-home-in-nature method (Berger, 2004) implements the concept of nature as a therapeutic setting in a concrete embodied way, addressing it as a key point of reference in an essentially nonverbal therapeutic process.

Joseph was a 12-year-old boy whose life was complicated by communication problems and social difficulties. From the onset of therapy, which took place at the school he attended for children with special needs, Joseph made it clear that he was not comfortable in the counseling room. Instead, he invited his therapist for walks near his classroom. In time, the boundaries of these walks expanded from inside the well-known area of the institution to a nearby, yet unfamiliar, riverbank. As time went by, the boy chose a specific place on the riverbank, under a willow tree, hidden from passers-by. As the therapeutic goal of these sessions was to help Joseph expand his social and communication skills, the encounters began with concrete actions such as brewing tea over a fire. As time progressed, it became evident that he was paying careful attention to maintaining the exact location, manner, and order of the activities. In addition, it became clear that he was busily collecting sticks and stones from the riverbank to construct a small barrier around the area in which the "tea ceremony" took place, making sure it was performed precisely in the center. Little by little a relationship between Joseph and his therapist was created through the construction of the barrier, the direct physical encounter in nature, and the repetition of activities and ceremonies conducted in a specific place. A crucial turning point occurred when the construction of the barrier surrounding the "tea place" was completed. Joseph dramatically expanded his use of language and his desire to connect with the therapist and to tell his own story. Later on, as winter began, sessions moved indoors to the clinic and the work continued through story making and drawing. When difficult, conflict-riddled situations arose, Joseph would once again lead his therapist to the place on the riverbank, which by then had been named the "Home-in-Nature." It was as though Joseph needed to check that the safe sacred space



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that he and his therapist had physically built together, a space that also symbolized their therapeutic alliance was still there. It seemed like he wanted to see what had changed during the season and what needed to be reconstructed.

### Choosing and Maintaining Therapeutic Space

In Joseph's story, the process of choosing a location and later building a home-in-nature was central to his therapy. The process began from the therapist's allowing Joseph to take authority over the physical location of the encounters, inviting Joseph to choose not only what to do with the location but also where it would be. This choice allowed Joseph to set out from the familiar educational territory of the school to a distant riverbank, where he could encounter and construct a personal therapeutic space. On the site of his choice, Joseph picked a hidden place under a willow tree in which he created a circle of stones, forming a separate, enclosed territory in which fire could be made, relationships built, and stories told. In this respect, building a home-in-nature relates to the ancient concept of "sacred space." This concept goes back to the beginning of civilization and can be found in most cultures. Its main function in shamanistic and traditional medicine was to create a space that was protected from the intrusion of evil forces (spirits) and to allow the performances of transformative rituals. In this respect "sacred spaces" can be addressed as healing space par excellence (Eliade, 1959; Pendzik, 1994; Turner, 1986). This example illustrates the potential that lies in the very action of choosing and maintaining the therapeutic space. This is a key concept that can be implemented in any form of therapy, especially those forms that take into consideration the issue of space and the option of working outside clinic settings.

### Working in the Intermediate Zone: Between Fantasy and Reality

The concept of working in an environment which is qualitatively different from that of one's ordinary "everyday" rests on the basic drama therapy concepts of working in the "as if reality" (Jennings, 1998; Lanndy, 1996). This concept seeks to use this distancing to allow participants to experience roles and situations which might be difficult for them to cope with in the everyday life. In this aspect, the building-a-home-in-nature method helps to link the fantasy world with the concrete world by extending the isolated and protected "laboratory space" of the clinic into the "real" and less controlled natural world. Conscious transition between the two spaces can help a person explore the gap between the home he or she imagined and the home he or she really lives in. This knowledge can be transferred back and forth, addressing the changes nature makes (in the home-in-nature) as a chance to address the unexpected and uncontrollable. In this aspect, the concepts of "between the spaces" can be used to help a person integrate fantasy and the concrete, the things he or she dreams of and wishes for in his or her everyday "real" life.

### Building a Home-in-Nature: A Practical Method

As choosing, constructing, and maintaining therapeutic space are key elements in nature-informed therapy, the activity of building a home-in-nature can be used as a nonverbal

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method to invoke a wide range of issues, such as the location of the home, what it contains, the materials used to build it, its state of permanence or mobility, the nature of its borders, and so on. This intervention invites the client to reflect on the qualities of the home in the city where the person has spent his or her life. On a more profound level it probes the question of whether the person feels he or she has or does not have a sufficiently secure base, a coherent sense of self or a sense of definitive boundaries (Berger, 2004). Another important aspect of the concept of nature as a therapeutic setting, which is directly implemented in the building a home-in-nature method, refers to the therapist's standpoint as it relates to issues such as hierarchies and responsibility. This attitude relates to White and Epston's narrative ideas and to some Gestalt principles (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Kepner, 1987; White & Epston, 1990), inviting the therapist to flatten hierarchies as he or she takes part in physically constructing the site of encounter together with the client. This approach can be used to beckon the client to shoulder responsibility and ownership over the client's own process as well as for the creation of the therapeutic alliance. This concrete doing can be used to send a message about the options that the client has of reconstructing reality from elements that can be found in the here and now, expanding personal narratives and life possibilities.

#### INCORPORATING NATURE IN THE CREATION OF RITUALS

One of the central principles underlying Nature Therapy is the intentional creation of rituals. This mode of working relates to times when people lived in communities in nature. In those days, life was powerfully connected to nature, as people depended directly on it for their physical, social, and spiritual existence. The attitude toward life was embedded in a strong sense of collectivity: the individual was part of a family, which was part of the tribe, which was part of nature, which was part of the universe. Each of these elements was connected to, embedded in, and interdependent on the other. A change in one spelled a change in all (Eliade, 1959; Meged, 1998; Turner, 1986). Religion was central to the maintenance of these communities as it anchored beliefs and held moral and social systems in place (Hazan, 1992; Meged, 1998; Turner, 1986). Rituals played a strong role and were extremely important in giving people a sense of order and security, fostering a feeling of togetherness and providing a sense of control over the uncertainties of life. Ritual also had an essential social function in helping individuals move from one social stage to another (Eliade, 1959; Evans, 1997; Hazan, 1992; Jennings, 1995; Meged, 1998; Turner, 1986). The shaman was the person responsible for the performance of these rituals, which not only aimed at helping individuals and the group but also were important in protecting values, beliefs, and the lifestyles of the entire collective (Eliade, 1959; Meged, 1998). In this sense the shaman can be viewed as an ancient form of therapist (Grainer, 1995; Jennings, 1995, 1998; Jones, 1996; West, 2000).

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### Seeking Integration in a World of Many Choices

In the current urban, scientific, secular, and individualistic society we live in, it appears that we deal with the same basic and universal issues that faced our predecessors, though rituals are losing their function as verbal therapy takes the place of religion (Jerome, 1993; McLeod, 1997). Many have written about the important role that ritual plays in modern therapy and about ways in which traditional ceremonies can be incorporated therein (Al-Krena, 1999; Grainer, 1995; Jennings, 1995, 1998; Jerome, 1993; Jones, 1996; West, 2000, 2004). Several disciplines, such as drama therapy, even relate to shamanic rituals as their precursor as they adjust the principles of performance and the concept of the sacred space into their framework (Grainger, 1995; Jennings, 1998; Jones, 1996; Pendzik, 1994). De-spite the existing option of performing traditional rituals in therapy groups; it would appear that the secular, multicultural, and individualistic background which most clients come from do not necessarily include a religious, spiritual, or ritualistic basis that can provide a common ground for their conduct in therapy. Further-more, there are not necessarily the common symbolic language and belief systems essential for the creation of rituals within multicultural and multi needs groups (Meged, 1998; Moore & Myerhoff, 1997; Turner, 1967, 1986). In fact, with the growing concept of individualism and variegated lifestyles present in the post-modern decade, it is no longer abundantly clear what kind of "higher truths" or values can bring people together in general and a group of clients in particular. Many writers have written about the challenges that this poses in the postmodern therapeutic arena, which must provide a space that can hold different parts of the personality and prevent the development of a "fragmented or saturated self" (Gergen, 1991; McLeod, 1997; West, 2000). Therefore, at a time of separation between religious rituals and therapy, or when many people find it difficult to relate to rituals on a spiritual and emotionally transformative level (West, 2000), what should be the place of the therapist in providing a space for the creation of (secular) rituals? In what ways can the relationship with nature assist this process?

A training workshop took place on a full moon's night on the beach. It was the last encounter of a group that had participated in Nature Therapy postgraduate training. The workshop began several hours before sunset and continued on through-out the night. After midnight, as the group shared personal stories around the fire, David, a man in his late twenties, shared his reflections about the year's process. He expressed appreciation that it had helped him separate from his parents and move into a new home with his girlfriend. As dawn rose, several hours later, participants were asked to set off on individual journeys, picturing each step in the sand like a step in their lives. An hour later, upon their return, they were asked to pick a space on the beach and create a figure or statue in the sand that symbolized the process they had gone through during the year's training. Using his body, David dug two funnel-shaped channels in the sand at the dividing line between the sand and the water. The narrow side of the funnel was directed at the sunrise while its wide side faced the sea. As the group traveled between the personal spaces witnessing people's work and developing their stories, David invited the group to gather around his creation. "Before, when I was playing with the sand I had no idea what I was constructing; now that I am standing here with you it seems to be some kind of a birth canal." Accepting the therapist's invitation to undergo a spontaneous (made-up)

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ritual, David removed his shirt and sat down at the entrance of the funnel as the other participants formed a tight human canal around the channel in the sand. Minutes later, amidst much pushing, shouting, and crawling David made his way out of the narrow channels into the open beach. A few seconds later, lying breathless on the sand, a big wave washed him from behind. "I am alive," he shouted, "reborn." The participants gathered around him in group, wrapping his wet body with blankets as spontaneous songs emerged; lullabies and birthday songs, and prayers mingled with tears and laughter.

### Working with Universal Truth

The above example begins with the therapist's choice of conducting a separation workshop on the seashore, under moonlight. This choice of the liminal time between sunset and sunrise matched his desire to induce separation and birth stories and to nurture group members into making the transition from students to counselors. The choice of setting is related to the concept of the universal truth inherent in the cycles of nature that can connect people to the large cycle we are all part of: the cycle of life and death, past, present, and future (Berger, 2005, 2006). In this sense, the cycle of sunset and sunrise, high and low tide can be used as collective symbols of the cycle of life and death. This not only allows complex stories to be told, it can also normalize them as they are present in the cycles of all living beings.

### Working with the Concept of Therapy as a Journey

This approach is based on the belief that a conscious physical journey in nature can trigger parallel psychological and spiritual quests that can open a channel for mind-body work. In this respect, each part of the nature—the landscape, the elements, the weather, animals, and so forth—has a specific resonance on the client, inviting the client into an inner process.

In David's story, this concept was used by the facilitator who asked participants to set off for individual journeys on the beach. Upon their return, they were asked to embody the metaphors, stories, sensations, and feelings they had encountered on the sand. Then, correlating David's story (which was not new for the facilitator and group), the concrete metaphor of the birth canal and the figure he had created on the beach, the idea for the ritual was created and later performed. A cathartic experience occurred with the breaking wave, which completed the ritual and further expanded its entire meaning. This example not only presents the way in which an encounter with nature can address universal truth and act as a bridge between people, but also shows the way that an uncontrollable (yet not totally surprising) natural element can be incorporated into the creation of rituals, sending a message about people's ability to engage in dialogue with the uncontrollable. In this sense, Nature Therapy's rituals resemble shamanic rituals. They take account of nature as active participants in their making. They also utilize nature as a nonhuman medium that can help people bestow meaning and help guide them through change.

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## USING NATURE AS A SOURCE TO RECONNECT BODY, SPIRIT, AND MIND

Another key concept is expanding the therapist–client therapeutic relationship by the addition of nature as a third party. As such, this concept is designed to help the therapist relate to nature as an active partner (perhaps a kind of co-therapist), influencing not only the setting, but the entire therapeutic process (Berger, 2004, 2005). In relation to this concept, the therapist is encouraged to develop a specific standpoint. The therapist may take a central position, working directly with the client and relating to nature as a backdrop or tool provider. The therapist may also take a quieter role, remaining in the background, allowing the client to work directly with nature while the therapist acts as a witness, container, and mediator.

Ran, a man in his mid-30s, a successful and busy health professional, was experiencing difficulties in coping with the stresses of a demanding career combined with family needs. He developed intestinal symptoms that could not be controlled by medical treatment and turned to psychotherapy. During his first two sessions with his therapist, Ran described his stomach as a “hot, wet sponge” which was “not so nice to touch.” Asked to say more, he described the exact location of his physical symptoms as “wet soil,” quite revolting and unpleasant to be in. He said that when he had been in counseling in the past, he had always stopped when talk of this “soil” became intense. “I avoid that place at all costs; it feels like I am being invaded.” Seeking a way to bypass this verbal obstacle, the therapist asked Ran if he would be interested in experiencing some real wet soil and offered to conduct the work in nature. After Ran agreed to try out this idea they spent the next sessions at a quiet place by the riverbank. The therapist invited Ran to take his time and get to know the ground as he remained in the background as a silent witness. Then he encouraged him to explore the sensations of the dry warm sand by digging his hands into it. Later, Ran moved toward the river and began to play with the wet sand and the mud. At first he hated touching the stuff, but as the seasons changed he relaxed and even began to enjoy the childlike appeal of this activity and the spontaneous play in the mud. Sessions were held at the end of day; a time when daylight was shifting into darkness and the voices of morning animals were changing into night voices. As Ran found a place where he felt safe enough to touch and enter the “wet soil” he began to talk about painful memories from his childhood and about the ways they were impacting his relationship with his children today. Then, staying attentive to the way the voices and sights of nature changed, he began to reflect upon the ways he could relate to these early memories as an adult and father, turning the vulnerability of the child he has been into the strength of the father he is now. Several months later Ran came to therapy accompanied by his two young children. In the first session that took place on the same riverbank he said, “It was through the spontaneous play on the riverbank that I understood just how much I miss my childhood and how much my kids miss me. Nature helped me to reconnect to myself, to appreciate the value of ‘non-doing time.’ Now I hope it will help me to reconnect to my kids.”

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### Working within the Three-Way Relationship: Client-Therapist-nature

The example given illuminates the way in which the Three-way relationship of client–therapist–nature can be utilized to expand a person’s patterns and help him or her reconnect to his or her body, spirit, mind, creativity, and authenticity. The example illustrates the unique standpoint taken by the therapist as he chose to shift attention from the person-to-person (therapist-client) relationship to the client-nature relationship, remaining the mediator between them. It also highlights the therapist’s identification of the benefit this concept can have for the specific client, working with the image that was given verbally by the client in sessions in the indoors clinic and extending its embodied and creative use in nature. Once the client “had sufficient play time” without the interruption of an adult (the therapist), a shift within the “triangle” was made. Painful memories and relationship difficulties could then emerge, unfold, and be discussed within the interpersonal relationship.

### TOUCHING NATURE—TOUCHING THE SOUL

A direct encounter with natural elements can trigger strong emotions and sensations that were not previously touched or shared (Berger, 2004, 2005). The concept of touching nature is based on the belief that through direct physical, emotional, and spiritual encounter with nature one can touch upon deep parts of one’s personality, receive profound insights, and sense a strong connection to the universe. This opportunity can help a person to develop qualities which might otherwise be difficult to access in an intensely modern lifestyle (Berger, 2004, 2005).

### Using Therapy to Reconnect People and Nature

This article began with an eco-psychological saying relating to the importance of the equilibrium between people and nature. It claimed that the rupture between the two contributes to a lack of personal well-being as well as the destruction of natural habitats and landscapes. Neass and other eco-physiologists who adhere to the Deep Ecology movement claim that this attitude toward nature stands up to the modern capitalistic lifestyle in which the individual is perceived as a separate entity and not as part of a larger creation (Seed, Macy, Fleming, & Naess, 1988; Totton, 2003). Relating to this standpoint, it seems that Nature Therapy joins eco-psychology’s philosophy as it offers a practical framework that can help reconnect people and nature and hone the importance of this ancient human-nature alliance.

### Finding Personal Meaning through Engaging the Natural Environment

Traditionally, psychotherapeutic discourse makes it seem as if the therapeutic process takes place in a vacuum. There is hardly any reference to the environment in which the process occurs (Pendzik, 1994). Over the last few decades, with the emergence of environmental psychology and other postmodern disciplines, more and more writers have become aware of the different influences that the environment has upon therapist-client transactions (Hall, 1976; Lecomte & Pendzik, 1996). It has become increasingly evident

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that the aesthetics of the surroundings affect the person's display of emotions (Maslow & Mintz, 1956) as well as an individual's social behavior (Barker, 1976; Hall, 1976; Orzek, 1987; Pendzik, 1994). Yet much of this evidence relates to indoor settings in urban environments, mainly built and controlled by human hands. This characteristic of nature-informed therapy may provide yet another powerful element as it broadens the perspective of the relationship with space and opens that relationship up to a much larger cosmic dialogue.

Linda, in her forties, attended a three-day, nature-based therapy group. At the first session of the group, which took place in an indoor setting, near the river, participants were invited to construct an imaginary story that expressed the personal issues, needs, and wishes they had brought to the group. Linda spun a story about a lonely starfish living in the ocean with a soul mate that accompanied him in the sky. The second day of the workshop began with a silent, meditative walk along the river. On arriving at a narrow bridge crossing the river, participants were asked to find a physical element from the surroundings that symbolized a sensation, feeling, or thought from which they would like to depart, say something about it, and throw it into the river. At this point, which produced strong feelings for most group members, Linda shared her grief with losing a loved one with the group. After crossing the bridge, the group arrived at a peaceful and quiet part of the river, where they were invited to create a representation of the story they had told the previous day as a sculpture, picture, or drama using natural elements. Linda created a sculpture in the space on the banks of the river where the water meets the shore. She gathered colorful flowers and placed them on two stones, which she later connected with a stick. She named her sculpture "the couple." The following day, on returning to the same location, Linda was surprised to discover that the live flowers she had picked and used to create her sculpture had dried out and "lost their joy." The change created by nature allowed Linda to connect with her feelings of grief and reflect on her current family relationships. This observation made her realize that perhaps she was grieving not only for the one who had gone but also for those meaningful aspects of her marriage that were in need of revival. Returning to the sculpture on the third day expanded Linda's perspective even further by drawing her attention to the clear running water flowing constantly around her creation and to the changing colors of the surrounding river. This simple intervention enacted at a time of grief helped Linda connect to concepts of continuity and cycling. She was able to realize that her story is part of a much larger cosmic tale. This nonverbal dialogue between Linda and the river filled her with hope. She said that it was allowing her to return home a stronger person, taking "some clean, running water" back to her family.

Working with the Renewing Environment to Reconnect  
Personal Strength and Hope

This example illustrates the way in which the connection between a client's story of grief and loss embedded in a larger natural story of life can help the client extract new meanings out of a difficult episode and study his or her story from additional perspectives. In addition to this strength and narrative attitude that can be found in most postmodern approaches (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Jennings, 1998; Lahad, 1992; Landy, 1996; Rubin, 1984; White & Epston, 1990), the story also highlights the way in which working

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with a renewing environment can help a person regain hope and engage their sense of the capacity to make changes in life. Another powerful element of this work, also touched upon in the previous examples, relates to transpersonal and spiritual dimensions (Davis, 1998; Taylor, 1992). Connecting personal and universal cycles can help a person get in touch with his or her larger self and explore dimensions which extend far beyond the person-to-person relationship.

#### CONCLUSIONS: PROVISIONS FOR A JOURNEY

The article has presented the insistence of Nature Therapy on viewing and addressing the client as part of a macrocosm; in relation not only with his or her inner self but also with other people, cultures, landscapes, animals, and plants. In so doing, this article has illustrated an alternative approach to systemic therapies involving the incorporation of nature into the therapeutic alliance. In this sense nature-informed therapy can allow the therapeutic encounter to work as a vehicle for engendering ecological or nature conservation awareness and expand individual points of view to encompass social and collective perspectives. This article has also illustrated a way in which the incorporation of nature into therapy can expand verbal and cognitive modes of working, diminish hierarchies, and help the clients widen their mind-body connection.

At the present time there is very little research evidence concerning Nature Therapy and only a few training programs. We are currently involved in carrying out research to evaluate the effectiveness of therapeutic and educational programs with different populations in various natural settings and to explore the issues involved in designing further professional training. In developing this approach, our basic assumptions are that nature contains resources that can support emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical personal well-being, which in turn can be used for psychotherapeutic purposes. We believe that the intentional use of nature as a resource can be effectively integrated into any kind of population that seeks therapy. Our hope is that as more of our colleagues develop and disseminate their own ways of conducting therapy in nature, a broader set of case examples and research studies will emerge and subsequently a more completely articulated theoretical framework can be constructed and presented.

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## **BUILDING A HOME IN NATURE: AN INNOVATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICE**

**RONEN BERGER**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents an innovative framework that uses the natural environment as a partner in a creative and nonverbal therapeutic process. Integrating examples from practice, this article illustrates the ways in which the concepts and methods of "Nature Therapy" can be implemented with different clients and different settings.

**Key words:** space, creativity, Nature Therapy, ritual, nature

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### ***THE ISSUE OF SPACE***

In most cases the psychotherapeutic discourse makes it appear as if the therapeutic process takes place in a vacuum with scarcely a reference to the environment in which the process occurs (Barkan, 2002; Pendzik, 1994). Over the last few decades, with the emergence of environmental psychology and other post-modern disciplines, writers have become increasingly aware of different influences of the environment on the individual's general social behavior and counselor–client transactions (Anthony & Watkins, 2002; Barker, 1976; Baron, Rea, & Daniels, 1992; Chaikin & Derlega, 1974; Gifford, 1988; Gross, Sasson, Zarhy, & Zohar, 1998; Hall, 1976; Lecomte, Berstin, & Dumont, 1981; Miwa & Hanyu, 2006; Morrow & McElroy, 1981; Orzek, 1987; Pendzik, 1994; Pilisuk & Joy, 2001; Pressly & Heesacker, 2001; Ulrich, 1983; Ulrich, Dimberg, & Driver, 1991). It has also become increasingly evident that the aesthetics of the surroundings affect people's display of emotions (Maslow & Mintz, 1956) and their overall levels of stress (Miwa & Hanyu, 2006). In addition to the growing evidence of the considerable impacts of urban and indoor environment upon the therapeutic process, more and more writers have begun to explore the impact of natural spaces on parallel processes (Berger, 2005; Berger & McLoed, 2006; Hartig, Mang, & Evans, 1991; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Totton, 2003). Alongside these developments, together with the introduction of ecopsychology, adventure therapy, and Nature Therapy, researchers have begun to write about the ways in which nature and the contact with nature can support the therapeutic process (Berger, 2005; Berger & McLoed, 2006; Beringer, 2003; Beringer & Martin, 2003; Burns, 1998;

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Davis, 1998, 2004; Hartig, Mang, & Evans, 1991; Totton, 2003; Roszak, 2001; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner 1995). However, despite this growing interest, only a few theorists have articulated the aforementioned into a therapeutic framework that incorporates the relationship with natural space as the key reference for therapy.

This article aims to illustrate an innovative framework based on and developed from these ideas. Integrating examples from practice, it presents ways in which the new framework – theory, concepts, and methods – can be implemented with different clients and in different settings.

### **Nature Therapy: An Innovative Therapeutic Approach**

Nature Therapy is an innovative experiential therapeutic approach that takes place in nature. It seeks to broaden the classical concept of setting as a static, permanent place under the control and ownership of the therapist (Barkan, 2002; Bleger, 1967), so that it includes the dynamic natural environment as a partner in the shaping of the setting and process (Berger, 2005; Berger & McLoed, 2006). Nature Therapy develops a framework--theory, concepts, and methods--that help it operate in a live and open environment while using that environment's healing elements (Berger, 2005; Berger & McLoed, 2006) to support therapeutic processes and develop in new directions. Nature Therapy is an integrative and postmodern approach combining elements from art and drama therapy, gestalt, the narrative approach, eco-psychology, transpersonal psychology, adventure therapy, shamanism, and mind-body practices. The approach also includes an environmental educational aspect, using the process with nature as a bridge between people and nature and to foster love and care for the environment (Berger, 2005; 2006). The conceptualization, analysis, and development of the framework is based on the author's action research oriented doctoral thesis (Berger 2007). Nature Therapy has been implemented with different types of clients, in individual, group, and family settings in the private, educational, and health sectors in Israel. Postgraduate training is offered in academic institutions in Israel and additional programs are currently being developed in Europe.

#### *NATURE AS A THERAPEUTIC SETTING*

One of the basic concepts of Nature Therapy is the view of nature as a therapeutic setting. Nature is a live and dynamic environment that is not under the control or ownership of either therapist or client. It is an open and independent space, which was there before their arrival and will remain there long after they depart (Berger & McLoed, 2006). This characteristic is quite different from the indoor setting, which is usually owned by the therapist, who has furnished it for the purpose of seeing clients and doing therapy (Barkan, 2002).

This situation, in which the therapist does not control the location in which the work takes place, creates some basic assumptions that influence important aspects of the process, such as the therapeutic alliance, hierarchy, authority, and contract. As Nature

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Therapy chooses to relate to nature as a partner in process, it invites the therapist to relate to these issues while using a framework that not only takes these characteristics in account, but incorporates them into its rationale.

#### *BUILDING A HOME IN NATURE – EXAMPLE # 1*

*Joseph was a 12-year old boy, whose life was complicated by communication problems and social difficulties. From the onset of therapy, which took place at the school he attended for children with special needs, Joseph made it clear that he was not comfortable in the counseling room. Instead, he invited his therapist for walks near his classroom. In time, the range of these walks expanded from inside the well-known area of the institution to a nearby, yet unfamiliar, riverbank. As time went by, the boy chose a specific place on the riverbank, under a willow tree, hidden from passers-by. As the therapeutic goal of these sessions was to help Joseph expand his social and communication skills, the encounters began with concrete actions such as brewing tea over a fire. As time progressed, it became evident that he was paying careful attention to maintaining the exact location, manner, and order of the activities. In addition, it was evident that he was busily collecting sticks and stones from the riverbank to construct a small barrier around the area in which the “tea ceremony” took place, making sure it was performed precisely in the center. Little by little a relationship between Joseph and his therapist was created through the construction of the barrier, the direct physical encounter in nature, and the repetition of activities and ceremonies conducted in a specific place. A crucial turning point occurred when the construction of the barrier surrounding the “tea place” was completed. Joseph dramatically expanded his use of language, his desire to connect with the therapist and to tell his own story. Later on, as winter began, the sessions moved indoors to the clinic and the work continued through story making and drawing. When difficult, conflict-riddled situations arose, Joseph would once again lead his therapist to the place on the riverbank, which by then had been named the “Home in Nature.” It was as though Joseph needed to check and see that the safe sacred space that he and his therapist had physically built together, a space that also symbolized their therapeutic alliance, was still there. It seemed that he wanted to see what had changed during the season and what needed to be reconstructed.*

Choosing to relate to nature as a place in which to conduct therapy beckons the therapist to relate to its unique characteristics and choose a framework that will not only take them into account but will incorporate them into the therapeutic rationale. In Joseph’s story, the process of choosing a location and later building a “home in nature” was central to his therapy. It began from the moment the therapist allowed him to take authority over the physical location of the encounters, inviting him to choose not only what to do with it but also where it would be located. This “step back” by the therapist allowed Joseph to step away from the familiar educational territory of the school to a distant riverbank, where he could encounter and construct a personal therapeutic space. On the site of his choice, he selected a hidden place under a willow tree, in which he created a circle of stones; forming a separate, enclosed territory where fire could be made, relationships built and stories told.

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This way of working is consistent with White and Epston's narrative concept of hierarchy flattening (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990), developing it further by inviting therapist and client to construct the space for their encounter together, using natural materials that they find in the "here and now." This mode of working also combines elements from Gestalt and the narrative approach by beckoning the clients to shoulder responsibility and ownership over their own processes. It sends a non-verbal message about the options they have for reconstructing reality from elements that can be found in the "here and now" (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Kepner, 1987; White & Epston, 1990).

### **Expanding the Alliance**

Adventure therapy uses nature to expose the client to a controlled level of physical risk and challenge, for example, canoeing down rapids or hiking through the wilderness. Through this confrontation with nature clients encounter their fears and expand their coping skills. It is hoped that in this way they will discover new and more efficient ways of coping, for example, by making better use of group support (Beringer and Martin, 2003; Gillis and Ringer, 1999). However, other ways of working with the physical presence of the natural world can also be incorporated into nature-based therapy, thus extending it to additional dimensions.

The three-way relationship between client-therapist-nature is another key concept of Nature Therapy that can be applied to this process, expanding the classic therapist-client relationship by the addition of "nature" as a third partner. As such, it is designed to help the therapist relate to nature as an active partner (perhaps a kind of co-therapist), influencing not only the setting, but the entire therapeutic process (Berger, 2004, 2005; Berger & McLoed, 2006). With respect to this concept, therapists are encouraged to develop specific standpoints. They may take a central position and work directly with the client, relating to nature as a backdrop or tool provider. Alternatively, they may take a quieter role, remaining in the background and allowing the client to work directly with "nature," with the therapist as human witness, container, and mediator. The following is an example of how this concept can be incorporated into nature-informed therapy and can be used to achieve specific therapeutic and educational goals. It also demonstrates a way in which a year-long psycho-educational program can be operated within the limited space of a schoolyard.

#### **WORKING WITHIN THE THREE-WAY RELATIONSHIP: CLIENT-THERAPIST-NATURE – EXAMPLE # 2**

*A class of seven children, aged 8 to 10 studying in a school for children with special needs participated in a year-long Nature Therapy program. Two-hour sessions were conducted on a weekly basis, facilitated in conjunction by a therapist and a teacher who had participated in Nature Therapy training and was receiving ongoing supervision. The aim of the program was to broaden the children's communication skills, to build their self-esteem and self-confidence, and to help establish their integration as a group. As the children were not accustomed to the concept of experiential therapy or to the option of working*

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*outdoors, the program began in the familiar classroom by inviting the children to look through the windows and observe the changes of autumn. This process was then used as a metaphor to present the new concept of doing experiential work in nature and working with the collaboration of the teacher and the therapist. Having established a safe foundation in a familiar environment, the sessions were gradually moved outdoors, into a remote and unused territory in the backyard of the school. After two months, it became clear that the group was dealing with issues such as independence, behavioral problems, personal boundaries, self-confidence, and self-expression. At this time, the facilitators decided to expand their original aims and address these issues, while remaining open to additional issues that might emerge. As most of the participants had communication and verbalization difficulties, it appeared that the active and creative Building a Home in Nature method (Berger, 2004) would be a good vehicle to support this work and to help the individuation process of the participants. The children did not need many explanations, as they happily joined in this playful and active task. The symbolism that emerged from the "home building" process was amazing: the home of a child who lived in a chaotic family had no boundaries, whereas that of the child with an aggressive and invasive mother was surrounded by a wide wall. The home of a new child, who had just joined the class, was built on the edge of the group territory, and the home of the dominant one was built at its center. The "concrete symbolism" that emerged from this creative work in nature allowed the participants to express basic issues in a non-verbal and creative way, utilizing nature as a mediator.*

*As winter intervened, the environment changed. Rain and mud took over, plants sprouted, and animals such as migrating birds appeared. These elements intrigued group members who were not accustomed to such direct contact with nature. The blooming of plants and the discovery of earthworms triggered the children to voice questions about the permanency and fluidity of life and about changes they go through as they grow up. In one session, after a particularly stormy day, it became evident that most of the "homes" were flooded and the ground was soaked through and through.*

*This encounter with the natural elements triggered participants to talk about their fears of the uncontrollable, including the fear of losing parents in a car accident or terrorist attack. In this sense, nature summoned an event that allowed the group to talk about taboo issues and to touch upon elements not usually addressed in the everyday reality of school. This simple sharing seemed to help participants normalize their fears; acknowledging that their personal fear is also a collective one. As time went by, each child found a specific interest and something to do in his home or in the territory near it. Dan was engaged by the sprouting and growth of a small plant that had emerged from the rock he used to build the boundaries of his "home." He was as excited by his discovery as he was overwhelmed by the strength and persistence of the plant as it pushed its way through the hard rock. Dan was worried that the plant's roots would not have enough space to develop and that it would lack the nourishment it needs to grow. Using story-making techniques (Gersie, 1997; Lahad, 1992), it became evident that the "plant coping story" referred to a traumatic experience in Dan's own life – his separation from his biological parents and moves from one home to another. The encounter with the plant seemed to trigger Dan's reflection on basic questions regarding his own roots and belonging. Along this line, aiming to expand*



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*Dan's sense of capability, the "plant coping story" was used to extend his personal story, focusing on the coping mechanisms and strength Dan found in complex moments of his life. This mode of working combines elements from Lahad's (1992) and White's (2004) approaches of working with traumatic episodes, using the story of the plant to connect the child with his own strength and abilities. Connecting to this real and natural story, present in the here and now, helped the child connect to a primal sense of continuity and a cycle he shared not only with the other group members but also with the surrounding nature – the animals, the plants, and the landscape.*

*As winter came to an end and spring arrived, temperatures rose and the soft grass turned into yellow thorns. This independent dynamic of nature triggered the participants to air their discomfort and voice their desire to move from the present location into a new, shadier one. Relating to this uncontrolled and unexpected dynamic of natural space by using the concept of the three-way relationship, facilitators asked participants to reflect upon the seven-month long journey, while acknowledging the possibility of choosing a new territory. During this process it became clear that the participants wanted to design and build a new common "home" in a different location in the schoolyard. As the participants' responsibility and involvement increased, the group debated their different wishes and the conversation shifted to the consideration of important questions: How large should it be? Should it be open or closed? Should it remain in the periphery of the school or move to a more central location? Should it be protected from other children and if so, how should this be done? The choice of a new home, this time constructed as a group camp in a small grove at the center of the school grounds, emphasizes the relevance of the last question. Several of the children insisted upon surrounding the camp with a small barrier and symbolic traps to protect it and prevent the other schoolchildren from vandalizing or harming it. As the school was located in a poor and remote area of the city, it seemed like its history of thefts and vandalism had had a strong emotional impact over some of the kids; this action strengthened their sense of capability and security. During the design and building of the camp, the group process was highly evident; even when children expressed different wishes, there no physical fights were witnessed. It appeared that the ability to self-restrain and communicate had been significantly developed, thus providing space for positive verbal communication. It was also clear that a sense of partnership and togetherness had been formed as the scattered group united in one space. As the academic year drew to an end, the facilitators looked for a way to conclude and separate from the process, the therapist, and the space. The concept of "therapy as a journey" (Berger & McLoed, 2006) seemed like a good idea to work with; it could offer a creative way to reflect upon and make meaning out of the entire process. The children accepted this invitation and took the time to wander back and forth between the first location, where they had built their individual homes and the present location with the group "home." During this journey meaningful moments were shared and relevant stories were told. This process seemed to take on a special meaning, as the separation included not only a departure from the group members and the therapist – its "human commonness of (potential) space" – but also from a live and physical home – nature. Although this separation process was not simple, triggering the sharing of uncompleted separation*

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*stories between the children and their parents or brothers and sisters, it was concluded with faith and hope. Sprouting plants and migrating birds became the dominant image, reminding participants of the connection between human and natural cycles (Berger, 2003, 2004).*

This story, borrowed from a larger case study (Berger, 2007), presents a way in which nature and the relationship with nature can be addressed as partners in shaping a significant therapeutic-educational process. It highlights moments in which nature expanded the process and opened the door to additional dimensions, which would probably not have been reached without its active presence. The example illustrates a way in which nature can be used as a medium in a creative and nonverbal process. As such, it offers a mode of work that can be used at times when words and cognition may not be the most efficient or useful channels.

This example illustrates the way in which the Building a Home in Nature method can be used not only as an intervention technique, but also as a diagnostic tools (Berger 2007). It uses the embodied and concrete figure of the home in nature as a symbol of the clients' respective personalities and the issues that they are dealing with. Applying this concept, the therapist can observe the basic choices the client makes, such as the location of the home, what it contains, the materials used to build it, its state of permanence or mobility, the nature of its borders, its relationship to other homes and the surroundings and so forth. This knowledge can be incorporated with the inherent symbolism into a more profound, overall understanding of the person.

### **Nature as Sacred Space**

The two previous examples presented above demonstrate the concept of nature as therapeutic space. An examination of anthropological literature reveals that the concept of transformative and healing work in nature is not new; it can be traced back to the beginnings of civilization in cultures where people lived in communities in nature. In these ancient times, shamans incorporated nature's healing powers into the performance of rituals and the context of traditional medicine. These rituals, which can be viewed as an ancient form of therapy (Al-Krena, 1999; Grainer, 1995; Jennings, 1995; Jerome, 1993; Jones, 1996; Pendzik, 1994; West, 2004), were used to help people recover from illness, cope with the unknown, and make the transition from one status to another (Eliade, 1959; Evans, 1997; Hazan, 1992; Jennings, 1995; Meged, 1998; Turner, 1986). A specific location was staked out within a larger territory, in order to create an enclosed healing place, protected from the intrusion of evil forces (spirits). The ritualistic space created by detaching a territory from its surrounding milieu and marking it as qualitatively different led to the shamanic concept of sacred space; a healing space par excellence (Eliade, 1959). Various applications of the Building a Home in Nature method highlight the potential that lies in the intentional act of detaching a territory from its surroundings and designating it for a special and unique purpose (Pendzik, 1994; Turner, 1986). Choosing, constructing and maintaining "sacred" therapeutic space can be regarded as a key element in nature-informed therapy. The act of building a home in nature can be used as a non-verbal

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method that invokes a wide range of issues and invites clients to use the time spent there to reflect on their homes in the city during the course of their daily life.

### *BETWEEN THE SPACES – EXAMPLE # 3*

*A training workshop took place in the forest near the college. At the opening ritual, people were invited to listen to the sounds of nature surrounding the circle as they reflected upon the concept of "home." Then participants were invited to share short stories about their homes by presenting relevant objects from their bags and saying something about them to the other participants in the circle. As the training was intended to present the Building a Home in Nature method, it was then suggested that people go wandering off on their own and choose a place in the forest in which to build a home. Sharon, a woman at her late fifties, a teacher by profession, returned soon afterwards and sat down on an uprooted tree trunk not far from the circle in which the opening activity had been held. "What do you mean – to build a home?" she asked the facilitator. "I don't know," he said "but you have time to find out..." Sharon remained sitting there, doing nothing. After a while as the facilitator visited the scenes of people's work, it was evident that Sharon had shaped a square figure in the pine leaves around the tree trunk she was sitting on. Then she took out her notebook and began to write intensively. After a while, when the facilitator visited Sharon's home for the second time she told him "it is amazing, all my life I wanted a small, square house but my ex-husband insisted on building a big round one. I hate it." When the facilitator asked her to say something about the position and location she had chosen to sit on in the house she said "this tree tells my story; this is what happened to me during our marriage, I shrunk myself and put my dreams in the corner. The complex relationship with my ex-husband managed to chop off many of my live parts; I have become a small, vulnerable woman sitting in the corner of my own life". Then the facilitator suggested that Sharon use this time in nature to write a letter to the Sharon she had been five years ago, before she got divorced, put it in an envelope, seal it, write her current address and give it to him to mail in a few days time. Sharon said that she did not feel she needed this exercise, as she had already understood quite a lot. The facilitator replied: "I am leaving you with the envelope and you can decide what to do with the time you have left..." A few minutes later, he returned and found Sharon crying. "Thank you," she said, "I have never allowed myself to tell him how angry I am at him (relating to her husband); I have always tried to be polite and nice, so that the children wouldn't hear. This is the first time I have allowed myself to express these feeling towards him, as I wrote him the letter. It remains to be seen whether I should send it to him, send it to myself, or settle for what has just happened." Later on, in the circle, another woman shared the story of her recent divorce when she had moved out of her beloved home. At this point Sharon could not hold back her tears and shared her pain with the group. Using basic drama therapy and psychodrama principles (Chesner, 1995; Jennings, 1998), the facilitator asked Sharon to stand at the center of the circle, close her eyes, breathe, and listen to the sounds of the wind and the song of the birds. Then he asked the group members to tighten the circle and be aware of Sharon's breathing. Shortly afterwards, as Sharon began to move inside the enclosed space, he asked her to tell the group something about the home in which she now*

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*lives. "At this moment I feel that my body is my home. After a long time during which I could hardly breathe properly, I feel I am regaining my breath. I feel like the trunk of one of these trees; my roots are drinking water from the ground, my head seeks the sun and I am breathing. The sounds of the birds and the smell of pine leaves remind me of the home I grew up in as a child. I had a beautiful childhood. Maybe I will bring my grandchildren to this place and show them these trees; after all, being a grandmother is also a form of being a home."*

This example describes one way in which a Building a Home in Nature exercise can be incorporated into the creation and performance of rituals. This ritualistic way of working, another major Nature Therapy concept (Berger, 2005; Berger & McLoed, 2006), relates to the basic drama therapy concept of "theatrical distance" and the principle of the two realities – the fantastic and the concrete (Jennings, 1998; Lahad, 2002; Landy, 1996; Pendzik, 1994). According to these concepts, therapeutic work takes place in the fantastic-dramatic zone, which is qualitatively different from the client's mundane life. The entrance into this fantastic space, physically represented by the stage, allows the client to experience and explore behaviors and roles that may have been hard to explore in his or her "real life." The shift between the two realities helps transfer the learning gained from the fantastic zone into the person's concrete life and helps the person make the changes he or she wishes to implement (Jennings, 1998; Lahad, 2002; Landy, 1996; Pendzik, 1994). Sharon's story illustrates a way in which this drama therapy concept can be integrated into the Building a Home in Nature exercise using the distance and separation created to help the person touch and reflect upon painfully "close" issues. Furthermore, it can help the client link the two spaces, as this fantastic world is simultaneously a real and concrete one (Berger, 2005). In the context of this metaphoric approach to therapy, the example also sheds light on how nature can provide clients with many opportunities for identification; beckoning them to project personal stories upon it. Identification with a natural phenomenon, animal, landscape or plant helps people emotionally engage with nature and re-establish an ancient connection (Roszak, 2001; Seed, Macy, Fleming, & Naess, 1988) that has been severed. In this respect, Nature Therapy joins eco-psychology in offering a practical framework that can be used to broaden people's "ecological selves" (Totton, 2003) and hone the importance of this basic human-nature alliance.

Last but not least, the example highlights Nature Therapy's ritualistic mode of working, illustrating its potential in integrating mind-body processes (Berger & McLoed, 2006).

### **Towards a Conclusion**

This presentation of the innovative and integrative Building a Home in Nature method has illustrated a framework in which nature can be incorporated into therapy.

Integrating examples from fieldwork with new concepts and theory, it has demonstrated ways in which this method can be implemented with different clients and in different settings. The article challenges cognitive and verbal ways of working, which may miss

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important nuances embedded in creative and embodied processes, as well as leaving out populations with cognitive or verbal difficulties (Lahad 2002). In addition it has posed several questions regarding the use of therapeutic space, the concept of relationship, and issues of hierarchy, authority, and knowledge within therapy. The article has also illustrated the way in which nature-informed therapy can be used as a vehicle for engendering ecological awareness and expanding individual points of view to encompass social and collective perspectives.

At the present time there is little research evidence concerning Nature Therapy and only a few academic training programs. I am currently engaged in evaluative research on the effectiveness of such therapeutic and educational programs with children, adults, elderly, and families taking into account their different therapeutic characteristics and needs. Acknowledging nature's impact the study also relates to the different applications of the natural settings, using this data for the further design of professional training programs and interventions (Berger 2007). It seems like one of the issues that yet needs to be explored relates to the framework's limitations including client groups or phases within the therapeutic process that its operation might be in-suitable or need's special adjustments.

In developing the Nature Therapy framework and the Building a Home in Nature method, my basic assumption is that nature contains resources that can support emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical well-being, which in turn can be used for psychotherapeutic purposes. I believe that the intentional use of nature as a resource can be effectively integrated into work with any kind of client that seeks therapy. My hope is that as more counselors, psychotherapists, and educators develop and disseminate their own ways of incorporating nature into therapy, a broader set of cases studies and other research will emerge. Ultimately, this will lead to the construction and presentation of a more thoroughly articulated theoretical framework.

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## BEING IN NATURE

### An Innovative Framework for Incorporating Nature in Therapy with Older Adults

Ronen Berger, PhD

This article describes a creative framework in which nature is incorporated in therapy with older adults. Using an example from practice, it illustrates how the integration of concepts from the narrative approach and the innovative Nature Therapy framework can help older people expand their perspectives, connect with strength and expand their coping strategies while gaining a wider sense of acceptance and completion in life.

**Keywords:** Nature Therapy, narrative, older adults, psychological time, creativity, nature

The medical definitions of health in older age refer mainly to physical symptoms, giving only little attention to the emotional and psychological aspects of the personality (Bar-Tur, 2005; Danhauer & Carlson, 2005; Ryff & Singer, 2000). This attitude is also expressed in practice: Only a few training programs for counselors focus on this growing population and health maintenance organizations that work with older adults generally offer few psychological services (Bar-Tur, 2005). In most cases, when psychotherapy is offered to older adults, it takes the form of verbal and cognitive activity held indoors, involving little contact with nature (Bar-Tur, 2005; McLeod, 2003).

A review of the literature in psychology suggests that older adults possess unique characteristics and needs, and therefore, a specific therapeutic approach is needed when working with this group. The psychological literature on older age indicates that one of the major challenges in this field is to help the clients accept the past and make choices for the future, while constantly adapting their perspective to the changing reality (Bar-Tur, 2005; Kling, Seltzer, & Ryff, 1997; Shmotkin & Eyal, 2003). This is consistent with Shmotkin and Eyal's (2003) concept of "psychological time," which reflects the construction of the self and therefore influences the older person's perspective of life, older person's perspective on life, experience, and function, and constitutes a key element in any psychological framework that seeks to work with older adults.

Another element of such a framework should relate to the physical and social aspects of aging, as these shed light on other perspectives that are perhaps less crucial when working with younger populations (Bar-Tur, 2005; Kovacs, 2005). The increasing recognition of this aspect is expressed in the growing number of mind-body group activities (chi-kong, tai-chi, walking, and drama) that are offered in centers for older adults and being incorporated in rehabilitation, nursing, and prevention programs (Bar-Tur, 2005).

All these factors are consistent with the concept of positive health, which claims that the involvement of older people in their own lives and their sense of competence strongly

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affect their well-being, functioning, and happiness (Bar-Tur, 2005; Danhauer & Carlson, 2005; Ryff & Singer, 1998, 2000; Ryff, Singer, Love, & Essex, 1998). This holistic concept is founded on the belief in the strength of older adults and their ability to make choices, develop, and change (Bar-Tur, 2005; Shmotkin & Eyal, 2003).

Based on the relevant literature, it seems that the above approach corresponds with the holistic and mind–body–spirit orientation of the holistic nursing practice (Frisch, 2003; Zahourek, 2005). Thus, the present article describes an innovative therapeutic framework that uses creativity and incorporates the therapeutic potential of nature in practice (Abram, 1996; Berger, 2006; Berger, 2007a; Berger & McLeod, 2006; Beringer & Martin, 2003; Burns, 1998; Davis, 1998, 2004; Hartig, Mang, & Evans, 1991; Roszak, 2001; Totton, 2003). It highlights a mode of work that can be integrated in nursing and healing processes in general and with the older population in particular.

The article draws on concepts from the narrative approach (Freedman & Combs, 1996) and from the innovative nature-therapy approach (Berger & McLeod, 2006) in applying the concept of psycho-logical time (Shmotkin & Eyal, 2003) as a key reference point in therapy with older people. By means of an example from practice with this innovative theory, the article suggests concepts and methods that practitioners can incorporate and further develop in their work with clients. As the framework presented here is very new and not fully articulated, the article also aims to open a dialogue on the issues, inviting others to add and further develop its basic concepts.

### **The Narrative Approach**

Narratives, or life stories, provide a meaningful integration of the events, actions, and experiences that have happened to people in the course of their lives (Shmotkin & Eyal, 2003). Listening to the narratives of older adults helps them bridge the past, present, and future and develop an identity and purpose in life (McAdams, 1993; Shmotkin & Eyal, 2003). This article refers to a specific narrative approach developed by White and Epston in Australia (Freedman & Combs, 1996; McLeod, 1997; White & Epston, 1990). The underlying assumption of the approach is that the life of each person is led and constructed by a dominant narrative, which is an integration of stories that individuals tell themselves and social and cultural stories that are told by people and communities around them (meta-stories). According to this perspective, the dominant narratives help people find meaning and locate themselves within the larger social contexts. At the same time, the tension that may exist between the individuals and the meta-stories can cause conflicts and psychological stress and prevent them from living authentic and full lives. The framework based on the approach seeks to extend the variety of the stories (so-called realities) that people tell themselves while seeking to select preferred and alternative ones (Freedman & Combs, 1996; McLeod, 1997; White &

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Epston, 1990). Based on this postmodern approach, concepts such as constructivism and choice, belief in the ability of people to make choices and change their attitudes toward life, the narrative approach helps individuals extend their ability to make new choices and navigate their personal lives within the larger social matrix.

### **Nature Therapy: An Innovative Therapeutic Framework**

Nature Therapy, which takes place in nature, is based on an innovative experiential approach. It seeks to broaden the classical concept of setting as a static, permanent place under the control and ownership of the therapist (Barkan, 2002; Bleger, 1967) to include the dynamic natural environment as a partner in the shaping of the setting and process (Berger, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Berger & McLeod, 2006). The developing theory, concepts, and methods of this approach to therapy help it operate in the living, open environment and take advantage of its healing elements (Berger, 2006; Berger & McLeod, 2006) to support therapeutic processes and develop in new directions. Nature Therapy is a holistic framework integrating elements from art and drama therapy, Gestalt, the narrative approach, ecopsychology, transpersonal psychology, adventure therapy, Shamanism, and mind–body practices. Its development is based on the personal and professional experience of the author, as well as his research devoted to its conceptualization, analysis, and development as a therapeutic framework and practice (Berger 2007a). It has been implemented with different kinds of clients in individual, group, and family settings in the private, educational, and health sectors in Israel. Trainings are offered in academic institutions in Israel, and additional programs are currently being developed in Europe.

The research that examined Nature Therapy's impact on different populations shows that its creative operation within nature can significantly support people's healing. It seems like the way it relates to the natural elements within this uncontrollable environment can help people develop flexibility and expand their ability to connect to their imagination and body (Berger, 2007a). These important coping mechanisms may not only help older people deal with the uncontrollable changes that are embedded in their aging process, but also increase their positive health and support their personal development (Bar-Tur, 2005; Danhauer & Carlson, 2005; Ryff & Singer, 1998, 2000). In addition, the connection to the cycle of nature fosters a sense of acceptance and completion, as it links the individual life cycle with the larger universal natural one (Berger, 2007a; Berger & McLeod, 2006).

### **Nature, Narrative, and Therapy with Older People**

In combining narrative and nature-therapy concepts, therapists will seek to include nature in the therapeutic process in a way that enables the older person not only to voice "quiet stories" but also to connect them with stories of natural phenomena and the nature around us (Berger & McLeod, 2006).

In this sense, the case study illustrates a way in which the incorporation of nature in

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therapy and the connection to the cycle of nature can help older people gain a sense of continuity and completion of life while associating the personal, limited, and linear lifetime with universal and endless time. The article also presents a creative, nonverbal therapeutic form in which the uncontrolled dynamics of nature can be used as a means to develop flexibility and acceptance that can help older people deal with changes in a more satisfying way. Because these elements relate to the holistic aspects of health and care, they can be integrated into the practice of the holistic nursing while expanding its relationship with the environment and widening its existing spiritual dimension (Frisch, 2003).

### **Between Hope and Desperation, Low and High Tide—Brian's Story**

Brian, a 65-year-old social worker, participated in a nature-therapy workshop designed for professionals held in Scotland. The opening session was set between a forest and the beach. The participants stood in a circle, listening to their breathing, the wind, and the waves. When people were invited to say something about themselves and their reasons for coming to the workshop, Brian shared his feelings of sadness, fear, and queries about the future:

*Now that my children have left home and are parents themselves and I have retired, it is difficult for me to find purpose and value in my life. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and do not know what to do. I wonder if this is the time to depart and die.*

The next day on the beach, after some mind–body activities using elements from tai-chi, chi-kong, and guided imagery and connecting the participants with the wave-whisper and sand movement, I suggested to Brian that he take a meditative-walk imagining each step he took in the sand as a chapter in his ongoing voyage through life. I did not limit this journey in time or space, trusting Brian's ability to navigate this journey in nature in the most worthwhile and supportive manner. When he returned from his walk, Brian had a calm expression on his face as he told the group that he had reached the conclusion that he was not yet ready to depart. When other group participants asked him about his tear-filled eyes, he said that he was sad to realize that a few important cycles of his life had been completed and he did not know how to continue or what to do. To explore the subject in a creative, non-cognitive fashion, I offered Brian to continue his earlier work by finding a suitable space within the larger group space that had been formed on the sand, and composing a two-faced sculpture: one side relating to the past, and the other symbolizing the future. I asked him to start by closing his eyes and listening to the mantra of the waves, while letting his imagination take the lead. An hour later, as we walked among the participants' creations, listening to their stories, Brian said:

*I really enjoyed this exercise, as I totally lost sense of time. At first, I did not like it since the image of a memorial came up, but then it changed into images from my childhood, when we were playing on the beach and building castles on the sand.*

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When I asked about his creation, he said:

*I did not compose anything as I could not control the sand. I tried to build a castle but the sand kept slipping. I stopped and sat down, being present and looking at two sea gulls fighting, watching the tide coming in, and the last rays of the sun. It seems this is the first time in many years that I took the time to be—to stop and observe all of this; life is beautiful.*

### **Using Practice to Illustrate Theory**

Brian's story presents an example of a nature-therapy work with an older person, incorporating creativity and contact with nature to support and enrich the process. The present section aims to share some of the theory that underpinned the therapist's choice of interventions, highlighting the ways in which it incorporated concepts of narrative and Nature Therapy. The first choice that was made prior to the workshop concerned the location of the first group circle. This choice was guided by the nature-therapy concept of nature as a therapeutic setting using the intermediate zone (Berger, 2007a; Berger & McLeod, 2006), a territory between the forest and the beach, to evoke the concept of transitions in life and the narrative concept of constructing continuity between its different phases (Shmotkin & Eyal, 2003). It illustrates a way in which Nature Therapy incorporates elements from the environment and landscape to trigger specific therapeutic issues. In this context, the therapist used Brian's narrative to transfer his psychological understanding to the active intervention, the "life span journey."

This choice relates to the concept of the three-way relationship of client–therapist–nature (Berger, 2006; Berger & McLeod, 2006), another basic Nature Therapy concept, which calls on the therapist to extend the classic therapist–client relationship (McLeod, 2003) to include nature as a third partner. This is illustrated by the therapist's choice of taking a step back while inviting the client to use the journey in nature as a time for self-reflection. In this sense, the therapist related to the coastline as a symbol of Brian's life span and to his footprints as symbols of meaningful episodes in its course. Then, seeking ways to use the impact of the journey to further develop Brian's sense of continuity, trusting the potential of creative and embodied modes of working (Kepner, 1987; Lahad, 2002), the therapist asked Brian to choose a location on the beach and construct a sculpture representing his life journey. The spontaneous play that developed with the sand evoked memories and feelings from Brian's childhood, expanding his personal narrative and helping him engage with his past. In contrast to indoor art therapy modes, where the setting and artistic materials are static and the artist (client) is active, here both are dynamic, as the client does not control the natural surroundings and sand. In this respect, the sliding sand and the unsuccessful building experience led Brian to ask basic questions about the way he deals with uncontrollable changes in his life and the balance between accepting and fighting them. This episode, triggered by nature's independent dynamic, made Brian "stop and be." This unique outcome helped him open himself to the beauty of the world around him and reconnect with the aesthetics of the natural world outside. This experience not only helped him expand his perspective on his life narrative,

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but also fostered a new sense of hope and meaning in his life.

### **The Paradox between the Personal and Cosmic Cycles**

In their article on psychological time in older age, Shmotkin and Eyal (2003) argue that “the life course of the individual involves both growth and decline over time [and therefore] human beings are ambivalent in their attitude towards time” (p. 265). They claim that older people focus especially on this issue, exploring how much they have achieved so far and how much they still hope to progress. Following this line, Shmotkin and Eyal (2003) also contend that because “time conceptions,” and the question of “what one does with his time” may be a key factor in well-being at any period of life, the concept of psychological time is a vital factor that counselors and therapists should consider in any treatment of people facing normal transitions and developmental challenges and with people of older age, in particular. They also say that “older people seek meaning in their past and observe it from the perspective of their entire life” (p. 261). In discussing the ambivalence around the issue of time and how to address it within therapeutic work with older people, they suggest that

*Time can be viewed as an objective, physical, and quantifiable entity that exists in and of itself and is not dependent on human perception or consciousness. All (human) events are arranged along a linear axis of time. Human beings exist in time.*  
(p. 259)

This issue raises a question about ways in which therapeutic process, in general, and such that takes place in nature, in particular, can help older adults deal with the paradox that exists within this matrix, the personal and cosmic time.

Brian’s story illustrates a way in which cyclic natural phenomena, such as the ebb and flow of tides, sunset and sunrise, migration of birds and the like, can be used to connect people with the universal cycle that we are all part of. This mode of work can help older people broaden their perspective of time and gain acceptance of their past, while gaining a sense of continuity and flow. This spiritual attitude does not seek to scientifically explain or delay the maturation or aging process, but rather to help people relate to it as a natural and normal process, while developing a sense of harmony and unification with their surroundings (Davis, 1998).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This article presents a creative framework in which nature plays a role in therapeutic and nursing work with older people. This mode of work expands the repertoire of common psychological approaches by incorporating spiritual and creative elements in holistic forms of therapeutic and nursing practices, in general, and in therapy with older people, in particular. It illustrates a way in which a dialectic discourse between

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the personal time-limited life and the endless cosmic one can be used to extend people's perspective and help them reframe their own narratives. In doing so, it highlights a way in which the connection between the personal story and the natural-cosmic one can enhance clients' sense of completion and oneness with themselves and their surroundings. It seems that this approach can be integrated in the holistic nursing practice, using creative methods and contact with nature to expand the ways in which holistic nursing can help people engage with their surroundings and broaden their overall concepts of health and well-being.

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**CHOOSING THE 'RIGHT' SPACE TO WORK IN:  
Reflections prior to a Nature Therapy session**

**Ronen Berger**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores ways in which a nature therapist considers the issue of space when choosing “the right setting” for a session with a new client. Drawing upon the therapist’s thoughts prior to the encounter, the paper illustrates ways in which nature’s influence is incorporated into the choice, using this reflection to highlight new concepts. The article begins with a review of relevant theory, to place the issue within the larger context, continues with a reflexive description, and concludes with questions and themes that emerge from the case.

**Placing things in context: A theoretical overview**

**The issue of space**

Traditionally, psychotherapeutic discourse makes it appear as if the therapeutic process takes place in a vacuum; there is scarcely a reference to the environment in which the process occurs (Barkan, 2002; Pendzik, 1994). Over the last few decades, with the emergence of environmental psychology and other post-modern disciplines, an increasing number of writers have become aware of different influences that the environment has upon counsellor–client transactions (Lecomte, Berstin & Dumont, 1981; Pendzik, 1994). There is growing evidence that the aesthetics of the surroundings affect a person’s display of emotions (Maslow & Mintz, 1956), as well as an individual’s social behaviour (Barker, 1976; Orzek, 1987; Pendzik, 1994). However, much of this evidence relates to indoor settings in urban environments, built and shaped by humans. As such, the classic (indoor) therapeutic environment is usually controlled by the therapist, who has organized and furnished it for the purpose of seeing clients and conducting therapy (Barkan, 2002). This status, in which the therapist owns or controls and constructs the location in which the work takes place, creates some basic assumptions that influence important elements such as the therapeutic setting, the therapeutic alliance, and the issues of hierarchy, authority, and contract.

Nature is quite a different environment. It is a live and dynamic space (entity) that is not under the control or ownership of either the therapist or the client. It is an open and independent space, one that has been there before their arrival and will remain there long after they have departed (Berger, 2003). Many authors have written about the therapeutic aspects of nature and of contact with nature (Burns, 1998; Davis, 1998, 2004; Naor, 1999; Totton, 2003; Ulrich, 1983; Ulrich, Dimberg, & Driver 1991). However, few have tried to reconstruct their knowledge to create a therapeutic framework using the relationship with this natural space as the key reference point for therapy.

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### **Nature Therapy: An innovative therapeutic approach**

Nature Therapy is an innovative experiential therapeutic approach that takes place in nature. It broadens the classical concept of “setting” as static, permanent, and under the control and ownership of the therapist (Barkan, 2002; Bleger, 1967), relating to the dynamic natural environment as a partner in shaping the setting and process (Berger & McLoed, 2006). It develops a framework: theory, concepts, and methods that assist its operation in this live and open environment while using its healing elements (Berger & McLoed, 2006) to support therapeutic processes and open them to additional dimensions. Nature Therapy is a post-modern approach, based on the integration of elements from art and drama therapy, Gestalt, the narrative approach, eco-psychology, transpersonal psychology, adventure therapy, Shamanism, and body-mind practices. The approach also includes an educational aspect, using the process with nature as a way to bridge between people and nature and foster love and care for the environment. The conceptualization, analysis, and development of the approach emerged from the process of my doctoral research. Today, Nature Therapy is implemented with diverse populations in individual, group, and family settings in the private, educational, and health sectors in Israel. Postgraduate training is provided in a few academic institutions in Israel and is currently being developed in Europe.

### **Nature as a therapeutic space**

Throughout my experience with therapy in nature, the issue of the working space – the specific natural location choice – has become increasingly significant. Working with different clients in varied environments, at different times of the year and different times of the day, it became clear to me that this factor influences the entire therapeutic encounter, as it shapes the emotional, physical, and imaginary spaces. As such, working in a shaded forest will create a different atmosphere than working in a hot desert, and working on a windy morning on the beach will foster different progress than working on the same beach under the moonlight. Exploring and articulating Nature Therapy, it became clear that people are influenced by different characteristics, including not only their feelings and sensations but also the memories they evoke, their way of thinking, and the metaphors they encounter.

From a constructivist standpoint – one that claims that different people will have different attitudes and relationships with “different” kinds of nature – I learned that I cannot predict what reaction, memory, or images a person will bring up in any given landscape. I remember how surprised I was to discover the strong impact that this issue has upon the narrative that people bring to the session and its development. In that case, which took place when I had just started using Nature Therapy, I met a new client in a field near my home, a place that apparently contained stories from the client’s childhood. Only later did I understand the strong links that connected this space with the stories and dynamics that unfolded within it. This early encounter with the impact of the coincidental choice of space on the process made me understand the important meaning of this aspect, and how considered choice of setting is a crucial part of the planning work of the nature therapist.

### **Using reflections to highlight theory**

Cutcliffe (2003), Reason (1998), Herts (1997) and others have highlighted the importance of reflexivity and reflexive writing, not only as an essential medium for exploring the involvement of therapist-researchers and its influence upon the process of therapy and research, but also as a way to present theories, frameworks, and philosophies from a more

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personal and engaged perspective.

In this paper, I share my own reflective questions about the issue of “choosing a working space” in any form of therapy that takes place in nature and incorporating it in the process. Doing so, I refer to the Nature Therapy concept of the three-way relationship: client – therapist – nature (Berger & McLeod, 2006) and to White & Epston’s narrative approach (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). As I write this article from the standpoint of a Nature Therapy trainer and supervisor, my main interest is to raise awareness of the complexity of the preliminary choice of setting made by the therapist, and recognition that this choice can influence much of what takes place in the ensuing process. As such, the article concludes at the phase when the client arrives, leaving the reader only with my subtext: reflections, questions, and thoughts. The full case study will be published at a later time.

### **A telephone call from a client**

I guess that Ruth knew I would agree when she called me asking for therapy. She had heard about Nature Therapy and had some idea about my personality from the time we had lived in the same community. Therefore, she was probably not surprised when I asked her, at the end of that first telephone conversation, where she would like to meet for the first session: in the clinic, at her home, or perhaps at the entrance to the nature reserve near her home – where most of the process would probably take place. As she chose the nature reserve, I asked her whether the path to the graveyard would be a good place to meet, being a clear landmark that will prevent us from losing sight of each other in the vast oak forest. After a moment of silence, Ruth replied, “Yes, the graveyard will be a good place to begin. You know, for me it is not just a landmark – my husband is buried there.”

### **Between virtual and physical, therapist and client, human and nature: Thoughts about the choice of setting**

As I had two weeks before the actual encounter, I took time to ponder the meaning and symbolism of the conversation with Ruth and the ways in which the specific setting might impact the process. As a nature therapist, I was accustomed to addressing the natural environment as a partner in shaping the setting, and therefore also as a partner in shaping the process (Berger & McLeod, 2006). Nevertheless, with all this flexibility, I had never worked in a graveyard before.

As I believe that the setting has a major impact upon the process, in general, and in Nature Therapy, in particular, I was thinking about specific choices I should make for the benefit of this client. I considered the ways I could create a specific atmosphere that would shape the process in specific ways. In addition, I had doubts about my ability to conduct individual Nature Therapy after working only in group work for the last three years. As such, I felt that most of my concerns were related to how the therapeutic space should be constructed and maintained; how it might affect my position as a therapist; the relationship between the client, nature, and me; the therapeutic alliance; and the process. Comparing my experience in group work with the doubts I was experiencing made me realize that I had learned to construct the therapeutic space in a partnership that included group participants and nature. Reflecting upon this process, it seemed that this matrix allowed me to feel free to change my position within (or outside) the therapeutic space without jeopardizing its maintenance. On a concrete level, I was generally working simultaneously with the two

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circles: a natural one that I constructed for or built with the group using natural elements from the surroundings, and a human circle that the group members made themselves in correlation to the natural one, by building a circle of stones or standing in one. The physicality of the two circles helped to differentiate the 'regular space' outside it from the therapeutic space within it. Once the sacred space was established, it allowed a delicate dialogue to develop between the circles: the past, present, and future, the body and mind, the individual and the group, man and nature – what I have previously referred to as 'the cosmic' (Berger, 2007)

Coming back to my fears of the approaching session with Ruth, I was not at all certain that this theory would suit the present individual work. Being the only person to hold the space for the client, how could I change my position and in what ways could I include nature in it? I knew that part of what I wanted to remind – and in some cases, teach – my clients were their ability to work with nature without the need of constant feedback, dialogue, or containment from the therapist or the other group members. At the same time, I was very much aware of the important role and presence of the therapist, not only as a witness and container but also as a person with whom to form a meaningful relationship. I was also thinking of the active role that this therapist (and group members) can have, in offering non-verbal (creative, physical) interventions with nature and mediating between the client and nature and between the therapeutic space and the everyday one. Thinking about all of those issues, trying not to overwhelm myself, I wondered what kind of setting to build for the upcoming session, not only in order to provide a safe space for Ruth, but also to ensure that I, as therapist, would feel safe and capable in it. Was it necessary to create an intermediate zone (space and time) between the car park and the graveyard, to get to know my new client and form a basic therapeutic alliance before entering the graveyard and the stories it contained, or should I jump right in?

### **Making choices**

Although our meeting was scheduled for 8:30am, I arrived at 7:30am. I wanted to have some time to myself, to reconnect to my body and the nature around me, and to move from thinking about the space Ruth and I needed to actually create one. It was a bright day, after a few rainy ones. The ground was still wet, covered with fresh grass and young violet crocus flowers. Cows were grazing on the other side of the gorge, as a vulture circled above them. What images would this scenery trigger?

After a short walk, I decided to place the mat I had brought with me on a natural lookout facing the gorge. The lookout was located between the car park and the graveyard – a two-minute walk away. It was surrounded by oaks and terebinths, which provided a natural barrier and camouflage from the walking path, while creating a half-closed container for the encounter. The lookout was above a few ancient caves that had been dug out and used for ancient burial. As the caves were well camouflaged by the oaks, I wondered whether Ruth would see them and if so, how (if at all) they would affect the stories that would be told during the session. Ruth's agreement to meet in the graveyard made me aware of the multiple dialogues that the scenery contained and the way that their presence might affect the session. In this context, I thought about my possible interventions: the grazing cows and the flying vulture searching for a carcass, the burial caves, and the graveyard surrounded by evergreens and oak trees. What was the symbolism between these elements and Ruth's story? What could this landscape and elements unfold and what might

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they hide? I questioned whether I was using my knowledge of symbolism in therapy in a biased way, dictating the discourse before it started?

I was also uncertain whether I should open the mat and decide about the specific place to put it, addressing questions I had about the 'right' size it should occupy on the ground. I was aware that this choice would influence the physical distance between us and would also impact the young crocus sprouts, which would be squashed under our weight. As I knew Ruth was in her first year of studying clinical psychology and had considered learning Nature Therapy, I wondered whether I should open these questions for discussion with her, thereby presenting some of the Nature Therapy frameworks. This would underpin our work, as well as give her some responsibility for the choice of setting and the construction of the therapeutic space she needed. Reflecting upon my own experience as a client and the anxiety I felt before the first meeting with a new therapist, I decided not to overwhelm Ruth with questions and to make these choices for both of us. I opened the mat to its full size and sat down.

### **When speculations meet reality**

At 8:26 am, I heard a car stop in the car park. It was Ruth. I walked towards her and she walked towards me. Walking down the path together, I stopped near the chosen location, showed it to Ruth and asked her if we could start here. She looked at me surprised and asked: "Aren't we going to the grave yard?"

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This article presents questions and thoughts about the issue of nature as a therapeutic setting, in general, and about the choice of a space for Nature Therapy, in particular. Using my own voice, the paper aims to illustrate relevant concepts from the innovative Nature Therapy framework, in the hope that they will be heard within this reflective story. In doing so, the paper also aims to open a wider dialogue, exploring not only the preliminary choice of space, but also the issue of its arrangement and the work within it. As such, it questions some of the ways that adventure therapy relates to nature (Beringer & Martin, 2003), and its inadequate theoretical emphasis on its spiritual component, including the intangible ways it shapes and influence nature (Berger & McLoed, 2006; Davis, 1998; 2004; Roszak, 2001; Totton, 2003). As Nature Therapy is a very new framework, my hope is that, as more participants develop and disseminate their own ways of incorporating nature into therapy, a broader set of case examples and research studies, and more fully articulated theoretical framework, will be built up and presented.

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**GOING ON A JOURNEY:**

**A case study of Nature Therapy with children with learning difficulties**

**Ronen Berger, PhD**

**ABSTRACT**

Therapy is usually described as an indoor activity, centering on verbal dialogue between therapist and client/s. Based on a qualitative study conducted with a group of children with learning difficulties, this article presents a way in which therapy can take place creatively in nature, which serves not only as a therapeutic setting, but also as a non-verbal medium and partner in the process. Using participants' voices to highlight the programme's protocol and impacts, the article presents elements from the innovative framework of Nature Therapy, offering practitioners concepts and methods that can be incorporated into their practice.

**Keywords:** Nature Therapy, creativity, nature, ritual, learning difficulties, therapy

**INTRODUCTION**

Most classical methods used in psychotherapy are based on cognitive, verbal, and/or symbolic means and are not well suited to children with late development or learning disabilities (Berger, 2006; Butz et al., 2000; Nezu & Nezu, 1994). Such clients often experience difficulty with therapies that focus on cognitive channels and neglect physical, social, and imaginative mechanisms (Berger, 2006, 2007). As part of the growing use of art therapies with these populations, to work through creative experiences by using nonverbal and non-cognitive methods (Berger, 2006; Polak, 2000), an innovative framework has been developed for working in creative ways where nature is both the setting and a non-verbal partner in the process.

Drawn from a larger research project, the present article includes the facilitator's voice to highlight the protocol of the programme and the potential impact creative methods, rituals, and direct contact with nature has on the therapeutic process of such children. The article challenges some basic assumptions of conventional psychotherapy, while seeking to broaden them to include additional dimensions.

The article begins with a short presentation of the innovative Nature Therapy framework, the Encounter in Nature programme, and the methods that underpinned the study. This is followed by a description of the programme and the results of the research, incorporating participants' voices to highlight different elements. The concluding discussion includes some recommendations for future work in this field.

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### **Nature Therapy: An Innovative Framework**

Nature Therapy is an innovative, experiential, therapeutic framework that takes place in nature. It seeks to broaden the static, constantly controlled, environment of "therapy" (Barkan, 2002; Bleger, 1967) to create a dynamic therapeutic environment (setting) that is a partner in shaping the process (Berger, 2007; Berger & McLeod, 2006). In this new field, concepts and methods are being developed to create a dynamic and open environment, using nature's healing elements to support therapeutic processes, and discovering additional dimensions (Berger & McLeod, 2006). Nature Therapy integrates elements from art and drama therapy, gestalt, the narrative approach, eco-psychology, transpersonal psychology, adventure therapy, shamanism and body–mind practices. The approach is based on the author's personal and professional experience, as well research designed to conceptualize, analyze, and further develop it. It has been implemented with individuals, groups, and families in the private, educational, and health sectors in Israel. Training is provided in several academic institutions in Israel and is currently being developed in Europe. This article presents some of the concepts and methods of this innovative framework, using a case study to illustrate them and offers ways for their implementation in practice. Due to space limitations, a full presentation of the framework cannot be included. (For an in-depth and detailed description and all case studies, see Berger, 2007).

### **Setting the Scene: Encounter in Nature – a Nature Therapy Programme for Children with Special Needs**

"Encounter in Nature" is a therapeutic educational programme developed by the Nature Therapy Centre and adopted by the Israel Ministry of Education. The programme is conducted in schools for children with learning difficulties and/or special needs. It operates in "natural" spaces within or near school grounds (small groves, parks, or gardens) for two hours a week, throughout the school year. The programme is facilitated collaboratively by a therapist and a teacher, who has participated in a week-long training course that taught the programme's basic theory and methods. The facilitators receive bi-weekly supervision in a two-hour Nature Therapy-oriented session. Since the programme's founding in 2002, it has been employed with hundreds of schoolchildren from the entire "special needs" spectrum - developmental delays, autism, learning difficulties, ADAH, ADD, severe behavioural and emotional (psychiatric) disorders. The following case study is taken from this national programme.

### **Aims of the Programme and Research**

The main aim of the programme was to help the children adapt to their new school and internalize its norms of behaviour, while developing non-violent communication skills. It also aimed at improving their ability to work as a group, to strengthen their self-esteem and expand their life experience and overall perspective. The research that accompanied the program was part of the author's PhD. conceptualising and developing the Nature Therapy framework. It seeks to connect practical experience and theory-generation, and to use the latter to influence the further implementation of programs. It used an Action Research strategy, integrating Grounded Theory principles informing the construction of theory. Reflexivity was also incorporated to highlight ways in which the researcher's standpoint may have influenced the research and its outcome.



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The case study "**Going on a Journey**" aimed specifically to explore therapeutic and educational influences that Nature and specific Nature Therapy oriented interventions may have on these children; i.e. to see what personal and group issues were triggered and/or supported and to explore specific ways that nature and Nature Therapy may have impacted them. Based on the grounded theory analysis of participants' experience, this evidence was used for theory construction and for further development and implementation of programs.

### **Method**

Data was collected based on established principles of qualitative research and case study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; McLoed, 2002; Yin, 1984), using open-ended questionnaires that were distributed to the group facilitators after the training (just before the programme began) and at the end of the year-long process. The second set was used as the basis for a three-hour interview, in which the participant was asked to reflect upon the year's process. In addition, routine process logs were analyzed in order to broaden the data. In order to generate concepts, the data was analyzed using Grounded Theory techniques; they were coded into "meaning units" aimed at generating a theory (McLoed, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). After the data was analyzed, a draft paper was sent to the group facilitators for their reactions, which were then integrated in the writing of this article. This process, connecting theory generation with practical experience, researcher and practitioners related to basic principles of Action Research (McLeod 2002; Reason 1994) insured the trustworthiness and ethical maintenance of the research. This relates to Brydon-Miller's saying about Action Research, which claimed that it "*goes beyond the notion that theory can inform practice, to a recognition that theory can and should be generated through practice, and that theory is only useful insofar as it is put in the service of a practice focused on achieving positive social change*" (Brydon-Miller 2003: 15).

The real names of the facilitators have been used; the children's names have been altered to protect their privacy. The researcher had no direct contact with the children; the facilitators were the only research participants. The Israel Ministry of Education (which ran the programme) and the ethical research committee of the researcher's university approved the research and its procedures.

### **Setting the Scene**

Galim is an elementary school for children with learning and behavioural difficulties, located in northern Israel. The children who attend Galim represent a wide range of diagnoses, involving learning, emotional, social, and communication difficulties, usually accompanied by behavioural problems. The programme took place in a class consisting of nine boys and two girls, aged 7 - 9, all in their first year in this school. The programme was administered in the "natural" territory of the school, including a small grove and a wide, grassy space. It was facilitated jointly by Yara Shimson, a 42-year-old therapist, who incorporates animals into her work, and Ayelet Kan-Levi, a 33-year-old homeroom teacher, who specializes in working with children with special needs. The work was supervised by the author.

### **An Overview of the Year's Programme**

In the light of the aim of the programme, and taking a ritualistic, perhaps "rites-to-passage" standpoint, the programme was built around a structure of a (fictional) story of a group of American Indian children, about to embark on their traditional maturity journey in nature.

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During this voyage, the children had to face and cope with physical and spiritual challenges – successful coping would earn them the respect of the tribe and recognition of their transition from childhood to adolescence.

This choice of theme was based on the approach of using a story as a narrative and metaphoric framework for a therapeutic process (Berger, Doron & Berger-Glick 2006; Gersie, 1997; Lahad, 2002). In this case, the entire journey may be included, placing the process in a larger context that not only defines and normalizes the voyage, but also helps give it meaning. The incorporation of story-making techniques and use of metaphors is consistent with drama therapy concepts of "distancing" and "as if reality". It helps to convey a therapeutic-educational message in an indirect way, without intimidating the group and building resistance (Jennings, 1998; Lahad, 2002; Landy, 1996). Here, for instance, the narrative related the challenges the Indian children met and not those that the participants experienced.

All sessions began inside the classroom. After the facilitators re-told the Indian story and reminded the group of their contract, everyone was invited to go outside and walk in a line (a custom in this school) to the "nature room". The opening ceremony took place in this room, which was reserved only for this programme. Using a "talking stick", participants shared their feelings and their expectations for the day. Then the group was invited to leave the room and start different outdoor activities. The structure of the opening ceremony was maintained throughout the year.

The purpose of using a ritual was to help the children cope with different transitions within the programme and with vague and uncertain episodes during the process. This is similar to Jennings's (1998) use of rituals in drama therapy: "rituals guide us through changes in a very specific way" (p. 103) and Hazan's (1992) belief that "the purpose of the ritual is to create order within the chaos" (p. 91). Based on these quotes and other references highlighting the potential of incorporating rituals in therapy (Al-Krena, 1999; Berger, 2006; 2007; Grainger, 1995; Jennings, 1995, 1998; Jerome, 1993; Jones, 1996; West, 2000, 2004), the ceremony was used as an "organizing" element; the repetitions giving the participants a sense of control and confidence.

Yara: "The opening and closing rituals drew a clear line between the educational classroom environment and the programme's therapeutic one. It created order and gave the time we shared a special meaning. The "talking stick" ritual allowed us to keep order in the hectic group, using the known structure of the ritual as an outline for boundaries and authority."

Ayelet: "The ritual created a safe structure in which the kids could express themselves in any way they wished: talking, vocalizing, dancing... Having a clear, well-known ritual freed me from the fear of losing control, of creativity turning into anarchy."

Following the metaphor of the Indian maturation journey, the year-long programme was built in phases. Each phase took place in a different location and used a different mode of work. The idea was to form a cyclic, yearlong journey, beginning and ending in the same place. Seeking to unite the group and help it develop non-violent communication skills, the first phase in the programme focused on challenges and adventure games, using activities

such as crossing a river (a winter puddle) or going through a rope-course. These elements were borrowed from adventure therapy, using challenging activities and a task-oriented process to develop communication skills and improve group work (Ringer, 2003).

Yara: "Crossing the river" (a large puddle made by the rain) was a difficult assignment, as the children found it hard to keep in order and plan ahead. When Ben was pushed into the water and got quite wet, we stopped the assignment and reflected on it. In the following session, a week later, we tried again. Ben agreed to share his feelings of humiliation while the others listened and asked his forgiveness. This time they kept in line, helping and cheering each other as the bridge was successfully crossed. That was fun."

In the next phase, which aimed to put the children in touch with their strength, develop creativity, and support their individuation process, the work was extended to include creative modes. It included art activities, such as building power symbols and totems, to help the children overcome different challenges on the journey. To help the group take more responsibility for the process, we integrated exercises such as making gifts and preparing food over a fire.

After the group had consolidated and the violence had decreased, we proceeded to the next step, in which a new mode of work was introduced. Remembering the Indian story, the group was invited to build a "home in nature", a place for everyone to gather and "be", before the last phase and conclusion of the journey. Using this symbolic yet concrete method, the process of planning, building, and maintaining a home in nature can promote a parallel process of building a safe, personal, inner home (Berger, 2004; 2006; 2007). It enables participants to work on personal and interpersonal issues, such as boundaries, partnership, and belonging (the home location compared with other homes, cooperation in its building and maintenance) and other issues related to the broad psychological concept of "home" (What does a home include? What is inside and what remains outside? What gives the home strength? What materials is it composed of? What is its relationship with the environment?) (Berger, 2004, 2006, 2007; Berger & McLoed, 2006).

During this phase, a remote and unfamiliar "nature" space within the school's territory was selected as the group's space. The children marked it off with ribbons, defining its boundaries for themselves and for others who might pass by. The discovery of a cave-like space, under a willow tree on the edge of the marked territory, made the children very excited as they worked together to turn it into their secret group home.

Yara: "This was the first time I could actually see them working together, planning, listening, and taking decisions in a logical and non-impulsive manner. As the place was cleaned up and reorganized, fights gave way to active creation. The children found a carpet, gate, chairs, and ropes, which they brought to create a pleasant and homey atmosphere."

To conclude this phase, a name-giving ceremony was performed as part of the Indian journey. This was a different kind of ritual, aimed at connecting the children to their strength and supporting their individuation process, so that they could be seen and recognized as individuals, within the larger group. Here, each child received a new name, based on a positive characteristic that he or she had displayed during the previous sessions.

Yara: "This was very important, as it gave the children a chance to adopt new, empowering names. Since the names that were chosen, such as Open Sore, Fast Runner and Thoughtful One, were based on positive social behaviour that they had displayed during the programme, it gave the children something to strive for and look forward to."

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As the end of yearlong "maturation journey" approached, the fourth and last phase was introduced. The group was assigned its most important mission: to take care of a pair of falcon chicks, that had fallen out of their nest and been wounded, until their successful recovery and return to the wild. This mode of work was based on the Nature Conservation Therapy method (Berger, 2003, 2004, 2007; Berger, Doron & Berger-Glick, 2006), in which the therapist tries to match a relevant nature conservation need or project to the therapeutic needs of the individuals and the entire group. Using the story of an animal, landscape, or plant creates both distancing and identification, which can help people unfold and share complex stories, while normalizing their experience and broadening their narratives (Berger, 2003, 2007).

Ayelet: "Two weeks before the arrival of the birds, when we told the group about the project, personal issues began to unfold. One boy asked whether the chicks' father had pushed them out of the nest, while another asked if their mother and brothers missed them and, if so, why they didn't pick them up. Hearing these questions, I felt that the children were finding a way to voice some taboo issues. Although I could not answer them, I felt that sharing these questions with the group had normalized some of their pain and strengthened the children."

Yara: "For some of the children, the idea of setting the birds free was very difficult. Some were sad and angry because they felt abandoned, while others felt guilty about abandoning the birds. Some were worried about their physical survival, while others asked whether they would come back to visit or nest. This episode allowed them to experience and practice endings. Opening the cage door and seeing the birds fly back to nature gave the separation new meaning. Suddenly it all made sense."

Ayelet: "Not only did the rehabilitation project allow them to feel special and capable, but assuming the role of caretaker also allowed them to encounter and process such issues as responsibility and empathy, as they identified with the birds' injuries and vulnerability."

The year ended with a ceremony, in which the group hosted all the school's pupils and teachers for a special event, in which the children retold the story of the journey and returned the healed birds to nature.

## **Results**

Three major categories emerged from the grounded theory analysis, each containing several sub-categories:

### **1. *Issues related to nature***

- a. The influence of nature on the process – challenging, opening doors, changing situations.
- b. The difference in atmosphere created by nature.
- c. Nature as supplier of materials.
- d. The children's attitude to nature.
- e. Other issues.

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## **2. Issues related to group and individual process**

- a. Strengthening self-esteem and confidence.
- b. Group-building and development of positive communication skills.
- c. Processing personal issues regarding parenthood, anxieties, death and abandonment.
- e. Developing responsibility.
- f. Developing the option of planning (as opposed to impulsive action).

## **3. Issues related to other elements**

- a. Training and supervision.
- b. The use of rituals to support the process.
- c. The personal process experienced by the facilitators.

In light of the scope of the present article and space limitations, the discussion of results focuses on the first two issues only. For a full analysis, see Berger, 2007.

### **Nature's Role and Influence on the Process**

Analysis revealed that the incorporation of nature had a strong influence upon the process. One of the most prominent results was **the way in which the independent dynamic of nature influenced and shaped the process.**

Yara: "As we were organizing and cleaning the 'home' (the cave-like space) one of the kids found a centipede. This caused a panic: the kids shouted and ran all over the place. After I caught the centipede and calmed them down, they agreed to look at it from a close distance. Then, as we released it, a spontaneous "fear-coping" ritual took place. The next time we found a centipede, there was hardly any hysteria."

Ayelet: "Planning the activities was complicated, as we never knew exactly what to expect. There was always the fear that we would wake up on the morning of the activity and be faced with heavy rain in winter, or a heat wave in summer. This made it very demanding: it challenged us to be creative and alert, to be ready to invent relevant activities that would suit both the group and the weather. Working in this uncontrolled setting evoked options for activities that we had never thought about. For example, one rainy day, we accepted the group's suggestion and walked together under a big plastic sheet, to keep ourselves dry. This was funny and enjoyable, and at the same time it required group cooperation, leadership, physical intimacy, and creative thinking."

These variable situations, dictated by nature, created special circumstances, in which the counsellors and the children shared an ever-changing environment that was not within their control or ownership. It appears that this was one of the most significant elements of the process, as it raised the issue of coping with the uncontrolled and unexpected; promoted flexibility and expanded coping mechanisms. The independent dynamic of the setting challenged not only the participants, but also the facilitators, raising the question of whether this 'uncontrolled' element should be addressed as an obstacle.

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An alternative way to address nature, based on the concept of the three-way relationship of client – therapist – nature (Berger, 2004, 2007; Berger & McLeod, 2006), is to relate to it as a partner in the process, shaping and influencing it in various ways. In the above examples, nature provided an element that gave the group a chance to work on the issue of fear and called for work on issues such as cooperation, intimacy, and leadership.

Another element emerging from the research findings was the potential that lies in the qualitative difference between the natural environment and indoor settings.

Yara: "There was a considerable difference between the way the children behaved in the classroom activities and their actions in nature. Apparently, nature raised their level of motivation and cooperation; they played, worked, and created together in a more spontaneous way. It seems that work in nature called for 'creative doing', which gave our children, who come from wide-ranging experiences of failure, a chance for a positive experience, working and expressing themselves in ways that are not exclusively verbal or cognitive."

Hence nature, as a living, sensual place, evokes work that involves all the senses and communication channels; physical, emotional, imaginative, and spiritual (Abram, 1996; Roszak, 2001). In this respect, Nature Therapy expanded communication channels and helped develop coping mechanisms that improved the participants' overall functioning.

Another element that emerged from research data was nature's contribution as a supplier of materials.

Ayelet: "I remember how they insisted on going on an expedition to collect herbs for tea on a day of heavy rain. In fact, it turned into a bravery mission as they all returned wet but quite happy... I think that this aspect of taking care of basic needs - a sheltered place, a warm fire and herbs for tea - was very important. It gave the children a chance to prove their ability to take care of themselves, by using materials they find in the here and now.'

This finding suggests that nature had a major impact on the process. Not only did it provide the physical space and materials for the encounters, but it also created experiences that allowed learning and development that might have not taken place indoors.

### **The Process of Group and Individual Development**

According to research findings, a meaningful therapeutic process was provided, both on personal and group levels. Apparently, the strongest effect of the work was the development of the children's self-esteem and self-confidence. This achievement was made possible by the empowering approach, which provided an opportunity to succeed and be acknowledged as "good and worthwhile".

Yara: "It was very exciting to be with them and observe them during the ceremony in which the birds were returned to the wild. The entire school came to watch, and respected them for their work and their process. It was beautiful to see the way they proudly took the stage, reading out their year-long story, and finally opening the cage and letting the birds fly free."

Ayelet: "Seeing them there, I felt sad and proud at the same time. They were so excited. For some, it was probably the first time that adults recognized their taking centre-stage as a positive thing."

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### **Group development**

Another aspect of the work was the process of group-building, including the development of positive communication skills.

Yara: "At first, they were constantly bickering, using hands and bad language as the main means of communication. Arguments were mainly about their place in the group: who would sit next to us, who would light the fire, and so on. In time, through the adventure activities and the construction of the camp, this sort of behaviour decreased, more positive ways of communicating were developed, and the group began to bond."

It appears that strict maintenance of the contract supported the internalization of collective behavioural norms, while the active physical and creative orientation of the activities helped to expand previous communication patterns into more positive ones. Another element that contributed to this development was the maintenance session structure and of rituals.

Yara: "The opening and closing rituals were very important, because they provided order and security. The fact that the children knew what to expect gave them a feeling of control and calmed them down."

Another important accomplishment of the work was the development of personal and group responsibility. This was achieved mainly through the design, construction, and maintenance the camp – making group decisions regarding questions such as: What will it look like? What materials will we use to build it? What rules will be kept? Who will be allowed to enter?

Ayelet: "As they were designing and building the camp, I saw them plan and think things through, talk about what needed to be done, by whom and when. This was the first time I actually saw them thinking and working together as a group."

This process was further developed in the work with the birds, as the children were committed to caring and feeding them as well as cleaning the acclimatization cage.

Yara: "Although some of the children were disgusted by the dead chicks (fed to the falcons), they insisted on taking part in the feeding, as this was part of the group's voyage."

### **Personal development**

Personal learning was also gained, in parallel to group learning.

Yara: "Ron was a poor student, who found it hard to cope with verbal and cognitive class assignments. He arrived in the group with severe behavioural issues. He was not popular, and suffered from lowered self-esteem. During non-verbal and physical activities, Ron got a chance to do something he was good at and, in some cases, even best in the class. In the bridge-crossing mission, he took the role of leader, using his physical abilities to help others. Over the course of the year, Ron changed his position, from being one of the disturbing children in class to being one of its positive and popular leaders."

Ron's story highlights the potential of working experientially in nature as a medium for change. In this case, the qualitative difference between the natural environment and the indoor setting provided a kind of learning that the classroom probably could not have offered.

David's story illustrates another example of a personal learning process that took place during the programme:

Ayelet: "At first, David found it very difficult to cope with the changes that the programme involved: going out of the classroom and entering the nature room, coming out of it into the open space, going back to the nature room, and then to the classroom again. He expressed

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this difficulty by bursting into tears, or outbursts of anger or aggression towards anyone around. In time, through the insistence on maintaining the structure and behavioural norms, along with the changes that being in nature generated, David learned to cope better. Apparently, the development of flexibility allowed him to let go of some control and to be more relaxed."

David's story illustrates the potential that lies in the approach, combining the maintenance of the contract and the use of rituals, together with the independent dynamic that nature creates.

### **Concluding the Journey – Summary and Discussion**

In its description and analysis of a Nature Therapy programme, this article presents a creative and non-verbal approach, in which nature-orientated therapeutic work can take place with children with learning difficulties. It highlights a way in which such work can be implemented and facilitated by the staff in a school setting, within a natural, semi-urban environment. The article reveals the potential that lies in creative modes of working, in general, and the way in which a direct encounter with nature can support and extend the therapeutic-educational process, in particular. Very little research has been published to date on Nature Therapy, or its application with children with learning difficulties (Berger, 2007).

I am currently engaged in evaluative research on the effectiveness of such programmes with different groups and in various natural settings, as well as the issues involved in designing professional training programmes. In developing this framework, my basic assumption is that nature has resources that can support emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical personal well-being, which in turn can be used for psychotherapeutic purposes (Abrams, 1996; Berger 2007; Berger & McLeod, 2006; Beringer & Martin, 2003; Burns, 1998; Davis, 1998, 2004; Hartig et al., 1991; Roszak, 2001; Totton, 2003). I believe that the intentional use of nature as a resource can be effectively integrated into work with any kind of client seeking to develop and heal. In particular, it can help promote the positive health of people with verbal difficulties. I also believe that this approach can help to (re)connect people and nature, fostering love and care for it by means of personal engagement (Berger, 2007). In this respect, the four modes of work included in the programme described here characterize the human–nature relationship aspect of the Nature Therapy framework. It begins with an adventure approach, relating to nature as an obstacle to be overcome, continues on to an artistic approach, relating to nature as a strength-giving partner and addressing it in symbolic and less concrete way. It then proceeds to building a home in nature, relating to nature as a safe place to be in – a home – and concludes with the bird-rehabilitation phase, as the children use their strength to take care of another creature and help nature.

My hope is that as more practitioners develop and disseminate their own ways of doing therapy in nature, a broader set of studies will emerge, facilitating the construction and presentation of a more fully articulated theoretical framework.



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**USING CONTACT WITH NATURE, CREATIVITY AND RITUALS  
AS A THERAPEUTIC MEDIUM WITH CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES**

**A case study**

**Ronen Berger, PhD**

In most cases therapy is addressed as an indoor verbal activity in which the relationship between therapist and client stands at its centre. This article proposes a different approach to therapy: conducting it creatively in nature, with the environment being used not only as a therapeutic setting but also as a medium and a partner in the process. The article is based on a case study carried out with a group of children with special needs within a school setting. It explores the therapeutic and educational impact that this approach had on the participants and on nature's role in it. The article also aims to initiate a dialogue around the option of working with this population in non-verbal and experiential ways, illustrating the potential that the use of group work, creativity and contact with nature may offer.

**Keywords:** Creativity; Experiential learning; Nature Therapy; Special needs; Therapy

**Introduction**

It seems that the insight-oriented, symbolic and abstract language used in classical psychotherapy may be of little relevance for adults and children whose IQ and abstraction skills are below the average (Nezu & Nezu, 1994; Butz et al., 2000). This may explain the development and growing use of creative and experiential approaches, working in non-verbal and non-cognitive ways, which may better suit the characteristics of this population (Polak, 2000). From the little published evidence, it seems that such an approach has been used successfully indoors in group and individual settings, as a means to develop social skills, self-confidence and self-esteem, and provide opportunities for personal exploration and expression (Polak, 2000). Nevertheless, despite the potential that may exist in nature as a setting suitable for non-verbal and experiential therapeutic educational work, it seems that work has taken place only within the field of adventure therapy, working with children and youths with behavioural, authority or boundary problems (Neill & Heubeck, 1998; Price & DeBever, 1998; Simpson & Gillis, 1998; Garst et al., 2001; Kaly & Hessacker, 2003). Yet it seems that no form of outdoor therapy had been developed for populations whose IQ and abstraction skills are below the average (Berger, 2005).

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As there is only little published material exploring the option of working therapeutically with children with learning disabilities in nature, the aim of this case study is to explore the impact of Nature Therapy on such children. The study is part of the follow-up research on the Encounter in Nature Therapeutic Educational Programme which took place during 2003–2004, in four special needs schools in Israel.

### **Method**

In order to learn more about this innovative way of working, to explore the impact on the participants and the specific roles and influence nature had upon the process, qualitative follow-up research was conducted using basic case-study methods and established principles (McLeod, 2002, 2003). Data were collected, using open-ended questionnaires which were handed to the group facilitators at the end of the year's process, followed by a three-hour interview. In addition, routine process logs were taken and analyzed in order to check the correlation between specific activities, interactions, elements in nature and the group and individual processes.

Both questionnaires and interviews referred to the group and individual processes, relating to the influence of nature on them and to the facilitator's parallel process. Data were analyzed and categorized in order to explore the meaning within the overall context of the work. Established principles were used in order to form and support the construction of theory (McLeod, 2002, 2003). After the data were analyzed, using Reason's collective inquiry principles (McLeod, 2002; Reason, 1994), a draft paper was sent to the group facilitators for their reactions which were then integrated in the writing of this article.

### **The setting**

Ilanot is a day school for children and youths with special needs, in the north of Israel. It is attended by 64 pupils between the ages of 6 and 21. Some of the pupils have, in addition to the organic disabilities, additional emotional, physical or behavioural difficulties and some are under psychiatric treatment. Most of the pupils come from low or middle socio-economic backgrounds, from different settlements and cultures (Jewish/Arab/Christians, secular/religious). The school buildings are surrounded by a high fence and trees, enclosing a small garden and a courtyard in which the programme took place.

### **Participants**

The group consisted of five boys and two girls, aged eight to ten. Like most of the pupils in this school, these children were of low intelligence and self-esteem and non-developed emotional language, communication and socializing skills. In addition, they were hyperactive and very dependent on adults, taking little initiative and responsibility for their actions. The group was characterized by a high level of anxiety that was expressed when it had to cope with changes or unexpected events.

### **Facilitators**

The programme was jointly implemented by Yafa; a special needs home teacher and Irit, a dance movement therapist, both experienced with this population. Prior to implementing the programme, the staff attended a training course on which the basic concepts of the Nature Therapy approach were taught and the programme's outlines were delivered. The

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programme was supervised by the author of this article on a regular basis—a two-hour session, once every three weeks.

### **Timetable**

The programme was conducted between September 2003 and June 2004, in a one-hour session every week. It was held in such natural surroundings as were available within the school territory: a small garden and a courtyard.

### **Aims**

The programme aimed to develop communication skills, to improve the participants' positive interactions and their ability to work together as a group. It also aimed to improve their self-esteem and self-confidence, and to expand their life experience and overall perspective.

### **Results**

In order to provide as detailed an account as possible of the experiences of the participants in this therapeutic programme, the analysis of interviews and questionnaire material is presented here in two parts: first, the detailed process the group went through over the ten months of its enactment and then an account of the categories generated through established theory analysis.

### **Illustrating the process**

Autumn (first unit: sessions 1–6). The first unit of the programme took place in the familiar classroom. This unit was designed to introduce the overall framework of the programme and various elements of it: the concept of conducting experiential, process-oriented group work in nature, cooperation between the home teacher and the therapist (who had a previous acquaintance with it), and negotiating and signing the group contract. This time unit was also used to complete the separation process from a number of classmates who left the group during the previous year, but apparently 'were still with them'. Since these issues deal with different aspects of the concept of change, the work in this unit was focused around this issue. It was well correlated with the 'cyclic story of nature'—the seasonal transition from summer to autumn and the various changes it brought. The sessions in this unit began with an opening ritual—standing in a circle, singing the song 'Together' (a popular Hebrew song which talks about togetherness, love and peace), moving and dancing together at the same time, and concluding with the participants sharing current feelings. The work was carried on by looking out of the window, describing what was seen, and then moving into an exchange of the thoughts and emotions arising from the outside scenery viewed. The session concluded with a closing ceremony which was similar to the opening one, using the 'sharing' to reflect on the day's process. The unit expanded itself by adding structured outings into the school's open territories, exploring them, picking up meaningful objects and bringing them back into the classroom, then exploring them further in experiential ways. This unit was characterized by a high level of anxiety and a strong egocentric sense which was expressed by most of the children.

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Yafa: It was very difficult to collect and hold them; it seemed as if each one was busy only with his own, personal needs.

Irit: There was a lot of anxiety, especially fear of insects and snakes. It seemed as though they were used to dealing only with fixed and predictable things. Therefore we worked gradually, coming out of and returning to the known 'safe' environment, the classroom.

These outings expanded into longer explorations, aimed at locating a specific place to build a 'home in nature'.

Winter (second unit: sessions 7–20). The second unit of the programme followed the structure which was built up during the first unit, expanding through the concept of 'building a home in nature'. The sessions opened with the indoor 'together ritual', and continued in the chosen natural place, in an actual 'building a home in nature' activity. This concept of 'building a home in nature' was developed by the Nature Therapy approach, and consists of a concrete creative activity of designing, building and maintaining a home in nature. According to Berger (2004, 2005), this home space can be accepted as a personal or group sacred space; a place which is qualitatively different from its surroundings; a safe place where transformation can take place (Jung, 1969). In addition to this process, revisiting the home on a regular weekly basis allows the participants to explore and work on basic issues, such as boundaries, control and flexibility, belonging and identity. The physical process of building and containing the space is equivalent to the formation of the therapeutic alliance between the therapist and client, as well as a physical representation of the virtual potential space (Winnicott, 1971; Berger, 2003, 2005). These factors, in addition to the non-verbal and creative characteristics involved, make the process a powerful mean for general therapeutic work, with this population in particular.

The actual work began with a sorting out activity, getting rid of garbage which had been dumped at the chosen location, a peripheral area within the school not touched by others. The actual building process began with the group choosing to build individual homes as opposed to the option of building one mutual group home. These homes were located at a distance of 50cm up to 2m from each other, and were constructed from materials which were found on site. The 'homes' were quite different from each other, in size, height, width of boundaries and materials used. Some were prominent, having a clear form and boundaries, while others were hardly seen. The differences between the 'homes' illustrated not only elements of each child's personality, relating to such issues as boundaries, use of space and dominance, but also the group dynamics, relating to who is in the centre and who is outside. After the construction phase, some dialogues took place between the children. Some joined another's 'home' while others stayed in their original one. Some wanted to stay and 'be' in their 'homes' while others wanted to experience more of the 'doing state', asking to wander to further locations and explore the surroundings. The weather and other 'natural' elements that followed played a big role in the shaping of the process. As winter moved in, the environment changed: rain and mud were present, plants sprouted, and animals such as migrating birds and earthworms appeared. These elements intrigued the group members who were not accustomed to encounter such elements so directly within the school setting and perhaps not in their lives in general. This pushed the group to set out from their 'home in nature' to further areas, exploring what could be found in the 'here and

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now'. Some elements, such as mud and earthworms, were brought back into the classroom, where they were explored, by means of experiential learning principles.

Yafa: The encounters with the natural elements gave the children a chance to experience and explore things which they never met. It was great to see how their attitudes changed, not only towards the natural elements themselves, such as insects and mud, but beyond that to the option of opening themselves to experience and encounter with the world.

This unit was characterized by an individuation process, allowing the participants to explore various personal issues while keeping a nourishing dialogue with the other group members. Again, the conclusion of this unit and moving on to the next stage were influenced and shaped by the change of the seasons: end of winter, the spring budding and the onset of warm summer days.

Spring and summer (third unit: sessions 21–30). As winter ended and the warm days of spring and summer followed, together with the drying of the soil and wilting of the flora, a new voice was heard in the group. This voice was common to both participants and facilitators, raising the option of leaving the present location, and looking for a new place which would suit the new circumstances better.

Irit: The sheltered and pleasant feeling turned into a sensation of heat and hardship. It felt very strong—the reality changed and we had to adjust, to look for other alternatives and to change. It connected with something very primeval within me—the need to migrate.

The sessions in this unit focused around the concept of separation from the personal 'homes' and the transition to a new chosen territory on which a new mutual group 'home' would be built. The process was designed in a dramatic way, using drama therapy's image of therapy as a ritualistic journey (Lahad, 1992; Grainger, 1995; Jennings, 1995, 1998; Jones, 1996). As such, these sessions were oriented around questions such as: 'Where are we going to? What new reality do we intend to meet and create? What obstacles might come in our way? What can help us overcome them? What should we take with us and what should we leave behind?'

At the outset, a new place was chosen, this time closer to the school's building, surrounded by high trees which provided shelter from the sun and wind. Boundaries were then checked and marked.

Yafa: It was great to see how they took claim over the space wanting to protect the place, declaring it as theirs by writing 'No Entrance' signs and placing them on its borders. One boy even built 'traps' around the home—widening its territory and giving it additional symbolic protection.

The actual building started by bringing materials from the former personal 'homes' to the new site, including symbolic elements, building materials and even earth.

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Yafa: Tory found the transition difficult. In the beginning he chose to build a personal home outside the communal one, near, but separated. Later, when we started singing and talking inside the home territory he peeked inside but refused to enter. It took time until he came in and joined, constructing a personal space within the communal one.

Once the 'home' was built, the participants followed their own interests, taking initiative to deal with various activities. An interesting difference occurred between the boys and the girls: while the boys kept busy outside the home, making swords and weapons and playing with them, going on symbolic hunting expeditions, the girls stayed at home cleaning and decorating.

The final stage of the work took place towards the end of the school year, consisting of two major issues. One was the separation from the 'home' site, revisiting the places in nature which had been used in different phases of the work, relating to them, exploring them in perspective and giving them personal and group meanings. The second issue was the separation from the therapist, who was about to go on a year's sabbatical and leave the children after having worked with them for several years.

Irit: Because the whole process was very meaningful for me, it was hard to say goodbye. In the last ritual, many goodbye songs came up spontaneously, it was very moving.

This final unit was characterized by a process of group coherence, strengthening trust and intimacy within the group. This process was expressed by the action of taking active responsibility for the formation and maintenance of the group's safe space, the 'home in nature'. It was centred around the group dynamic and narrative in contrast to the previous phase, which was centred on the individual. The unit ended with a closure and separation process, departing not only from one of the group facilitators but also from the 'nature' which had given the group a space to experience, learn and grow.

### **Established theory analysis**

Grounded theory analysis of data from interviews and questionnaires provided by the facilitators generated the following main categories: (1) nature's role and influence on the process, and (2) the impact of the programme on the group participants.

#### **(1) Nature's role and influence on the process**

The research indicated that nature had a major influence upon the process, in a number of ways. One of the strongest elements which influenced the process related to nature's independent dynamics, namely the change of seasons, and the dynamics of animals and plants. These elements influenced not only the physical space, constantly shaping the setting, but also the art forms and the 'homes' built 'inside' it. This situation created a unique therapeutic circumstance, in which both facilitators and participants were present in an ever-changing environment that was not under their control or ownership. It appears that this element exercised one of the strongest implications on the process, raising the



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issue of coping with the uncontrollable and unexpected, and developing flexibility and coping mechanisms.

Irit: The biggest influence that the programme had upon the children was around the question of coping with an ever-changing environment. This reality brought up many opportunities to work on the question 'how do I cope and function with the unexpected changes that life may bring?'.

This factor challenged not only the children who participated in the programme but also the facilitators, raising the question of whether 'nature' is an obstacle and disturbing factor, getting in the way of the counsellor's original plans forcing them to work in correlation with it; keeping an open and flexible mode of working.

Yafa: These changes, the drying of the earth and the growth of the thorns, all had to be coped with, encouraging us to keep a flexible mode of working. This way of working makes you really be present and work in the here and now.

During the programme, with the assistance of the Nature Therapy-oriented supervision, a different perspective was developed, namely learning how to relate to nature's dynamic as a form of therapeutic intervention which presents the participants and facilitators with a spontaneous, rather than planned, perspective or activity.

Irit: Then the rain came, giving the children a chance to get wet and dirty, to touch mud and bringing them into touch with their senses.

In this sense, nature, being a dynamic and sensuous space, gave the children an opportunity they would never find in the classroom, not only in the concrete aspect of the encounter with the rain and mud, but also presenting them with the chance of 'doing something which is not allowed' within a permissive therapeutic framework.

Another significant element influencing the process was the way in which nature provided the group with an alternative space offering a different atmosphere from the classroom. According to the research findings, this had an important impact, not only on the physicality of the setting, being outdoors, large and open, but also on the whole atmosphere it contained. This atmosphere may be emotional, physical, spiritual or aesthetic and had few implications on the process. It brought up the use of the experiential mode of 'being' and increased the participants' connection with themselves and others.

Irit: Nature is a special environment to work in as it calls for metaphors, creativity and physicality and less for concreteness. In school everything is around skill, here they had a different opportunity.

This aspect is inherently connected to the counsellors' choices of methods, keeping a dialogue between the structured and deductive form and the flowing and creative non-verbal modes of working, staying in the experience without cognitive and verbal processing. Part of this special atmosphere provided by nature can be addressed as a kind of supportive space which encourages the listening and the 'being' states.

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Irit: It seemed like certain behaviours and emotions which were hardly expressed in the classroom were frequently expressed in nature: caring for each other, a sense of belonging, curiosity, and personal and group responsibility. There was no need to ask for permission to talk, or any need to remain sitting on chairs, which reduced conflicts and invited calmness and togetherness. Since the space was so big and varied, each child had the opportunity to find something of interest: an insect, a rock or a plant. In this sense, when someone had difficulty with a specific activity, he/she could find an alternative one and stay within the overall framework without breaking it down.

In addition, this aspect of the experience helped the group reach new levels of intimacy and allowed its members to find variety within it.

Yafa: There was something in nature that made them connect in a different way. Perhaps it was the fear of nature that made them bond, looking for support from each other. Some took leadership roles and became very active. This process was present also in the classroom, but it was more prominent in nature.

There is no doubt that this 'permission' and the supportive elements of nature are connected with the atmosphere and emotional space which was created, held and maintained by the group facilitators, yet it seems as if there was something additional that made this special satisfaction possible. It can be explained perhaps by the difference of the space, inviting people to leave their prejudices about themselves and the others, arriving fresh and open to nature, allowing alternative narratives to be expressed and developed. It may also be that there is something in the environment itself, perhaps the spiritual and emotional wisdom of good old Mother Earth that provides a feeling of contentment and freedom.

An additional kind of contribution nature offered was its ability to supply physical materials which were needed for this active and creative 'home-building' process.

Yafa: The 'home' was built out of materials which were found on site and elements which were brought from the previous, personal 'homes'. Branches and sheets were used to create walls and borders. This element has an important symbolic meaning, making the statement 'we can construct our new reality and narrative using the things we have, right now, creating the future out of the present'.

These findings, illustrating nature's role and influence, are consistent with one of Nature Therapy's basic concepts concerning the three-way relationship between the therapist, the client and nature. The findings support this concept by illustrating 'nature' not only as a physical setting which provides space and materials, but also as a partner in the process shaping the setting, the facilitator's interventions and methodological choices, hence expanding the therapeutic influence of the entire process (Berger, 2003, 2005).

## **(2) The impact of the programme on the participants**

According to the research findings, a meaningful therapeutic process took place. The process included a procedure of dispersal of the formation of the group, whereby a collection of individuals who hardly communicated bonded into a functioning group whose members cared, communicated, interacted and worked with each other.

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Irit: At the beginning, it seemed as if each of the children was busy with himself choosing to build individual houses, avoiding the option to work in couples or triples. With time, a gradual change took place and spontaneous collaborations emerged and relationships were built.

This process was empowered and received concrete meaning through building 'homes in nature', involving the transition from an individual 'home' to group homes. Group and personal responsibility was also developed as the group became more active and bonded.

Yafa: They placed 'No Entry' signs and asked to close the place with walls to prevent other children coming in. I enjoyed watching this active protest action. It is so rare to see them behave that way, taking an active responsibility upon themselves.

Throughout this process, a varied personal learning was gained, and communication skills were developed as violence decreased within the group.

Irit: At the beginning they did not know how to talk to each other; mainly, they just swore or used their hands against each other ... during the process they learned to communicate, to talk, listen and share. Today there is hardly any fighting or swearing.

The creative mode of working encouraged the development of self-expression, including the development of non-verbal and creative communication skills:

Yafa: During the year's work, the opening ritual changed. It became more creative and open, because they used their bodies more freely, initiating more movement and vocalisation.

Throughout the whole process, self-esteem and self-confidence were built up, as the group changed its meeting place from a marginal and neglected location (where the first personal 'homes' were built) to a more central and popular area (where the 'group home' was constructed). Similarly, individuals sounded their voices and became more dominant:

Irit: Marisa went through a big change. At the beginning, I wondered if I would ever hear her say anything. She used to be afraid of leaving the classroom or going out to the courtyard during the breaks. Now I am amazed, watching her play with the others during the breaks, communicating and expressing herself. She even learned how to resist and stand up for herself.

Personal and group cohesion was also developed as the level of anxiety decreased and a sense of belonging was formed.

Yafa: In the beginning, we would come out of the classroom in a clear structure: I walked in front and Irit walked at the back, trying to give them a sense of security. As time went by, the children were able to let go of this protective structure, and simply ran and enjoyed themselves together.

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In addition to the personal learning which the participants have achieved, they also changed their attitude and behaviour towards nature, moving from fear and alienation to familiarity, belonging and caring, expressing curiosity and affection towards it.

Yafa: At first, most of the kids were afraid of animals and shouted when they saw one. With time, through the experiential encounters with the natural elements (fauna and flora), exploring them in direct ways, their attitude changed to one of curiosity and affection, as the shouts turned into calls of excitement, inviting others to see the animal that was found.

It appears that this change is connected to the feeling of belonging which was developed during the process of building the 'home in nature'. The sense of belonging came about not only between the participants, but also between them and the actual place—nature.

Irit: They tried to turn nature into something familiar, into their home. It was as if they wanted to bring in transitional objects, things which would give them confidence.

According to these findings it appears that there is an interesting correlation between the process of 'building a home in nature' and the process of familiarisation with nature. Apparently, a direct encounter between the participants and nature was necessary in order to let go of the feelings of fear and alienation, transmitting those into feelings such as belonging, partnership and ownership. These findings strengthen one of Nature Therapy's basic assumptions, claiming that granting love and care to nature are possible through a personal emotional process and not only through the behavioural approaches which are so often used in the environmental education programmes (Berger, 2003). Hence, Nature Therapy may be addressed as an innovative environmental education approach, working together with the basic ecopsychology concept which argues that in order to change people's attitude and behaviour towards nature they must go through a personal emotional process of feeling for nature as if they are part of it, as if it was their home (Roszak, 2001; Totton, 2003).

From an overall perspective, it appears that this specific way of working in nature triggered a number of basic psychological themes such as fear of the uncontrolled and unpredictable, together with identity issues, such as the concept of personal boundaries, and the need to belong to other people or places. It appears that the direct contact with the natural elements triggered these basic humanistic, perhaps universal issues, allowing the participants to explore and develop them within a therapeutic environment.

## **Discussion**

Returning to the aims of this case study, its conclusions can be divided into two major sections: nature's potential as a therapeutic medium and the participants' process. It appears that nature provided the participants with an alternative, sensuous environment, clean of human prejudice, and thereby allowed them to develop skills and expand personal issues in experiential ways which might not have been possible in the indoor and everyday environment. From a closer perspective, it seems that nature's important influence was also connected to living things, allowing them to perform as active media, a co-therapist perhaps,

triggering specific issues, while shaping the process in various unexpected ways. Regarding the process that participants went through, it appears that Nature Therapy was an effective approach to use within a peer group framework, providing support and modelling, as well as a rich space to develop personal issues such as responsibility, communication, cooperation, creativity, curiosity and flexibility. These are important coping mechanisms which can improve a person's overall function and well-being (Lahad, 1992). In addition, the programme increased the self-esteem of the participants, while their anxiety and aggressive behaviour decreased. Another interesting outcome of the programme was the change that took place in the children's attitude towards nature, changing from alienation and fear into one of familiarity, belonging and caring.

### Conclusion

This case study presents a way in which the innovative Nature Therapy approach can be used with children with learning disabilities within a school setting, addressing nature as a media for experiential and non-verbal work. The article presents and discusses the unique role that nature played in the process, taking part in the shaping of the setting and process alike. It presents a successful learning process by the group, illustrating some of the ways in which the facilitators worked with 'nature' to improve the outcome of the programme. An element not dealt with in this article, but important to mention, is the way in which the work in nature contributed to the facilitator's parallel process, developing a well-functioning collaboration contributing to their personal learning, an element which will be presented in a separate article. The proposal based on these findings is to go beyond the common behavioural and cognitive approaches used with children with learning disabilities, using the methods presented here which can be better adapted to suit the special characteristics and needs of this less verbal and less cognitive population.

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Early child development and care

### **A SAFE PLACE<sup>1</sup>**

**Ways in which nature, play and creativity can help children cope with stress and crisis**

**Establishing the kindergarten as a safe haven where children can develop resiliency**

**Ronen Berger & Mooli Lahad**

#### **Abstract**

This article presents a way in which the innovative Nature Therapy conceptual framework coupled with creative therapeutic methods can help children develop resilience and support their coping with uncertainty and stress. It refers to the Safe Place program that took place in 110 Israeli kindergartens, helping over 6000 children after the Second Lebanese War. It is based on the Lahad (1993), Ayalon & Lahad (2000) BASIC PH integrative model of "resiliency" highlighting the importance of the kindergarten in such development and challenging the tendency to use the kindergarten as a deductive, preparatory course for school and schooling only. The article integrates theory with examples from practice which can help readers incorporate them into their own work.

#### **Introduction**

The Second Lebanese War, the shelling of rockets, terrorist attacks and other stress factors challenged the resilience of the children of Northern Israel, forcing them to cope with the effects of political uncertainty and the security situation in the area, as well as with the overall uncertainty and stress that life may involve.

There are several fundamental questions that should be asked before embarking on the subject of the role of kindergarten in the process of coping and recovery of children exposed to war:

What role does the kindergarten play in providing tools for coping with such difficulties?  
How can the kindergarten teacher help children develop their resiliency and assist them to cope with uncertainty and crises?

This article offers a perspective that acknowledges the importance of the imagination, the body and the group as key components in developing a child's resiliency and the significance of the kindergarten and the kindergarten teacher's central roles in its development. It refers to the "Safe Place" program, a Nature Therapy program designed and used after the Second Lebanese War in dozens of kindergartens in northern Israel, with thousands of children. This

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<sup>1</sup> Safe Place is a joint program of the Nature Therapy Center and The Community Stress Prevention Center (CSPC), certified by the Educational-Psychological Services and the Ministry of Education, and subsidized by the Israel Trauma Coalition (ITC).

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article will present a Nature Therapy oriented resiliency model ways as applied to kindergartens. The article includes a theoretical background, references to studies and examples of the application of the program in the field. We believe that based on the 'Israeli example', the model, with some cultural adaptation, can be implemented in similar situations around the world.

### **Resiliency**

Ozer (2003) argues that almost 50% of the Americans will suffer traumatic incidents in their lifetime, however very few will develop PTSD. This statement suggests that humans are resilient. Lahad (1993) suggests that everyone is born with mechanisms that help them to cope with complex situations, entailing pressure and uncertainty. Not everyone can handle their troubles and difficulties all the time, but the vast majority does.

This explains why most people who have undergone traumatic experiences, such as war, abuse, loss, etc., are able to resume normal functioning and lead a relatively normal life. These abilities are called resiliency. They are the resources that help people regulate disturbing emotions and adjust their reactions to the new reality (Lahad, 2008). According to The BASIC PH resiliency model, developed by Lahad (1993) and Ayalon & Lahad (2000) there are six modalities/channels that constitute resiliency: Beliefs, Affect, Social Functioning, Imagination, Cognition and Physiology. The unique, individual combination of channels helps people cope effectively with stressful situations and lessens the chances of developing psychopathology as a result of exposure to traumatic incidents<sup>2</sup>. The primary use of the cognitive channel assumes that it may help the person understand his experience and find a suitable logical solution. However, this will not necessarily soothe his soul and/or alleviate the physical symptoms that might occur as a result of the traumatic experience, as the emotional memory of the traumatic experience is stored in the right hemisphere of the brain, responsible for emotions, sensations and imagination. In order for healing of trauma to take place, the treatment of symptoms will also require emotional and physical expression. Using the physiological and emotional-affect channels can help unload residual hard feelings left from the experience and extract new meanings from it (Lahad, 2006). For this, the individual's ability to use the social channel is very important because without it he will not be able to share his experience with others, which could result in his feeling lonely and helpless. Innovative studies such as the one carried out by Kaplansky (2008), emphasize the potential for coping and recovery in employing the language of imagination. This channel allows one to create an alternative-preferred reality, described by Lahad (2000a) as the Fantastic Reality, which may contain the most effective strategies for coping with impossible situations such as loss and bereavement. Lahad's model and research (Shacham & Lahad, 2005,) reveals that each person has a unique coping mechanism composed of a combination

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In this article we distinguish between post traumatic stress disorder and a traumatic experience. The former, (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder consisting of psychological-physical-social clinical symptoms. A person continues to experience a crisis even long after it is over, as if it is going on in the present. PTSD symptoms harm one's functioning and the quality of his life in general. The latter, the traumatic experience is a normal reaction phenomenon that one experiences after a crisis event. The symptoms are supposed to disappear within two to three months. If they do not, one might suspect post trauma (Lahad & Doron 2007; Noy 2000).



of the languages most accessible to him, the BASICPH. The more languages one is able to "articulate", the greater the ability to cope with changes, and the ability to prevent the development of distress and traumatic symptoms (Lahad, 2002). According to the BASICPH prevention model, the task of developing resilience does not focus solely on the ability to acquire more languages. A person can benefit by expanding one's existing coping channels/languages. It is in fact the strengthening of existing forces and expanding flexibility that will contribute to coping with changes. It is important to emphasize that the task of this project as a primary and secondary prevention is to help children develop resiliency. It does not replace post-trauma-focused therapy such as EMDR, PE, SE, SEE FaR CBT or others. Moreover, there are suggestions that developing resiliency may prevent the evolution of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Lahad, 1993; Lahad, Shacham, & Niv, 2000).

### **Is it possible that modern life and educational system diminish resiliency?**

It seems that along with the immense developments that the modern world has to offer, its improvement of the quality of life and scientific-technological abilities, it also diminishes many important resiliency indexes, mainly the affect-emotional, physiological-physical, imaginal and social channels. When our children are six years old we send them to school, an institution whose main goal is to develop the cognitive channel, believing it will further the child over the course of his life, and make it possible for him to successfully fit into academia and the work force. Most schools ask children to sit quietly on chairs (restricting the physiological channel), in rows or by a computer (diminishing the social channel), and to give specific, "correct" answers to logical questions (reducing the imaginal and affect-emotional channels). This can also be the reality at home. It is not uncommon to hear a parent tell his four year old child to stop crying because "boys don't cry" or to tell his daughter to "quit talking nonsense" when she asks about fairies and dragons (restricting the imagination). In addition, must note the busy daily schedule of most parents and the dying essence of neighborhood community, as well as the development of the virtual media. All of the above, can create a situation in which the child spends his afternoons at the computer or watching television, avoids playing creatively and interacting socially (restricting the social, emotional-affective, physiological and imaginal channels). The results of an up-to-date study accompanying the Safe Place program, suggests that schools in Israel not only do not develop resiliency, but on the contrary, diminish it (Berger, in preparation). A critical view of what is occurring in the kindergarten system in Israel reveals that they, too, are influenced by technological progress. It seems that "educational standards" trickle down into the kindergarten, which is required to amplify its didactic-scholastic demands. At the moment, it seems as if the kindergarten has become an elementary school preparatory course (Snapir, 2008) and not a space where the child can develop in accordance with his age, with spontaneous playing and creative research as its very center (Winnicott, 1996; Levin, 1989, 1999).

If the above is taken into account, it would seem that very limited channels are "officially opened and encouraged by the system" when a child or her caretakers, who were exposed to the war, need to process their experience. The "standards in education" and the achievement indicators employed by the Ministry of Education in Israel, and most probably in almost all western states, dictate a fixed, highly cognitively-oriented syllabus. Despite this "top-down" policy, which I wish to dispute and warn against, it seems that most kindergartens in Israel still allow children to express emotions, to imagine, to be alone and

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with the group, and to play. Thus, the kindergarten teacher and the kindergarten contribute to the process of developing resiliency in children.

### **Nature Therapy**

As technology has developed, we have moved away from nature. We shifted from mystical, religious, tribal life in reciprocity with nature, to an individualistic, capitalist, urban one. We moved from traditional therapy methods, centered on the mutual beliefs expressed in group rituals through dance, drama and music, to scientific approaches to recovery, which focus on rational explanation, understanding and words. The Shaman was replaced by a doctor or a psychologist and the elderly tutor by a kindergarten teacher or schoolteacher. A superficial glance reveals that in the race after progress and modernization we have lost basic important knowledge (Berger, 2008; Berger & McLeod, 2006). Furthermore, some of today's children do not know that the source of the chicken nugget was a chicken living in a field or chicken coop, and not a plastic container taken out of the refrigerator in the supermarket. This psycho-social reality can explain the spreading of phenomena such as loneliness, alienation, depression (Berger, 2008; Berger, Berger & Kelliner, 1974; West, 2000), and the collective "search for meaning", such as the widespread overseas trips taken by many Israelis after their military service. This process clarifies the attraction of the "New Age" and its penetration into the establishment; from holistic approaches to therapy and teaching, to the development of health products carrying the slogan of being "in tune" with nature" (Berger, 2008). It seems that despite material abundance, we are discontent with our bodies; nevertheless something calls us to re-connect to body, to spirit, to our soul, to the earth...Nature invites us to make room for the child within, those parts of us that feel, imagine and are present in the experience of playing. Connecting to the cycles of nature can help us bond with parallel processes in our lives and to relate to them in a broad universal context (Berger, 2008). An encounter with a migrating bird, a dead lizard or a blooming plant can be a stimulus for expressing a similar story within us, of which we were previously ashamed. Sharing the story can normalize it and impart hope (Berger, 2008). The direct contact with natural elements, the wind, the earth, the plants, can connect us to our body and can awaken the world of images and emotions. Something in the encounter with nature and its powers has the potential to connect us to ourselves; to our strengths and to our coping resources (Berger, 2008; Hartig, Mang & Evans, 1987; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Korpela & Hartig, 1996; Friese, Hendee & Hendee, 1995; Herzog, Black, Fountaine & Knotts, 1997; Greenway, 1995; Naor, 1998; Russell & Farnum, 2004).

Nature Therapy is an innovative experiential therapeutic framework that takes place in nature. It seeks to broaden the static, constantly controlled natural environment of 'therapy' (Barkan, 2002; Bleger, 1967) to create a dynamic therapeutic environment (setting) that is a partner in shaping the process (Berger, 2007; Berger & McLeod, 2006). In this new field, concepts and methods are being developed to create a dynamic and open environment, using nature's healing elements to support therapeutic processes, and discover additional dimensions (Berger & McLeod, 2006). Nature Therapy integrates elements from art and dramatherapy, gestalt, the narrative approach, eco-psychology, transpersonal psychology, adventure therapy, shamanism and body-mind practices. The approach is based on the author's personal and professional experience, as well as research designed to conceptualize, analyze, and further develop it. It has been implemented with individuals, groups, and families in the private, educational, and health sectors in Israel. In Berger's

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definition of the basic concept "to touch nature" claims that "through the direct contact and connection with nature people can also touch their own 'inner' nature. One can feel authenticity and develop components of personality and important ways of life that might have been hard to express amidst the intensity of modern life" (Berger, 2005B, page 38). This definition refers to the Ecopsychology perspective of Nature Therapy and to the solutions it tries to give to the distresses caused by technology and modern living (Berger, 2008; McLeod, 1997), while deepening feelings of reciprocity with nature and concern for it.

### **The Lebanese War – A precedent that highlights the need for a systemic resiliency program in kindergartens and beyond**

The Second Lebanese War shattered the routine of children in northern Israel. Expanding the front into the depths of the country, evacuating homes and making them "unsafe," the daily experience of rocket hits and burning forests resulted in fear, anxiety and uncertainty, which undermined basic needs for the sense of order, control and safety.

This war was a precedent case, hurting both thousands of northern residents of Israel and nature - the trees, panoramas and animals - all exposed to the same Katyusha rockets and to the same fire that burnt them to ashes .

After 33 days of war, the challenge for therapists as well as for educational staff was to help children and the educational system recover from both personal encounters with the devastation and the destruction to nature that symbolized the war and its long term effects. We convened education and therapy professionals, and thought of ways to turn the collective injury, shared by people and nature, into a safe, recovery or healing process that could enhance the strengthening and establishment of a new sense of safety, thus further promoting resiliency. The result was the designation of the Safe Place program for both staff and kids.

### **A Safe Place – a psycho-educational program for developing resiliency and coping resources in kindergartens**

Stemming from a view desiring to connect the story of the recovery of the forest damaged in the war, with work on developing resiliency, to advance flexibility, normalize bad experiences and give a sense of safety to the children, we created a program that joins Nature Therapy with the BASIC PH model. With the goal of awakening the language of imagination, we focused on the search for a framework story and a healing metaphor that would help children connect with their inner sources of strength. This would replace the memory of the difficult experience, calm them and reduce anxiety; strengthen them and establish a sense of safety. Because the exterior surroundings (the forest) also suffered during the war, we made up a story connecting the destruction of the forest with natural and man-made attempts to recuperate and revive the forest. A very tangible, fascinating strengthening process in nature that helps to strengthen the children. This story also makes use of an analogy between the tree, which is a metaphor representing the individual, and the forest which is a metaphor for the entire community (Berger, 2007.)

"Once upon a time there was a forest...

All kinds of trees grew in the forest and a variety of animals lived in it.

In the forest, right between the trees, there was a house of very strong people; they were the forest rangers.

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One day a big fire burst out in the forest – huge flames, noise and a big burning heat.

"Careful!" the forest rangers warned the animals. "Fire! Run, hide..."

Everyone waited for the fire to die out, but it was very big.

The burned trees wanted it to end and the animals in hiding wished to return to the forest – to their trees.

But the fire rangers said: "The dangerous fire isn't over yet, it is still forbidden to return."

The forest rangers were very brave. They poured lots of water on the fire and helped extinguish it.

The big noise stopped; only the smell of the fire remained.

"The fire is over!" called the forest rangers. "It is permitted to return to the forest!"

All is safe now!"

(Taken from the book *The Forest Rangers* which accompanies the Safe Place program.)

The book tells the story of a tribe of forest rangers who live near a beloved forest that was damaged by a huge fire that lasted a long time... The story emphasizes the various ways the trees and the animals cope with the fire—those who moved to distant safe woods, those who hid underground and those who got hurt and even died. The story goes on to tell about the ways the forest rangers helped the woods recuperate and recover after the fire was put out. It also relates the exciting meeting with the animals who returned to their forest. This story, which was published as a book with beautiful pictures, serves as a framework for the entire program. As the story is being read, the children play, act and draw the ways the animals coped and through them encounter their own stories of coping. A deer who escapes and does not want to return to the forest meets a buck who misses it. A porcupine looking for refuge finds himself sharing a hole with a skunk. It turns out that despite the differences all have similar feelings and ways of coping...

The metaphor adorns changing characters when, with the help of a dramatic ritual, makeup, and props, the children become the forest rangers. They change from an animal or a plant exposed to fire into a strong, capable character, which guards, protects and is good to others. From this point on, every session will begin with the ritual of children becoming forest rangers, after which they go out of the kindergarten into nearby nature (the forest) in order to build the forest rangers camp. By having the children take actual responsibility to build the safe place, the metaphor and image become tangible and concrete. The weak become strong; victim becomes protector. Later on, the forest rangers build power symbols which help them in their tasks and challenges, whose successful completion enables them to plant young trees and to place nesting boxes and feeding stations for birds. The forest rangers work for the good of the forest and participate in guarding the renewal and continuity of life. At the end of the process, the forest rangers return to their village and receive the blessings and appreciation of their community (the parents and the settlement).

The program was applied as a process of twelve, two-hour sessions, led by an external group counselor from the Nature Therapy Center and the kindergarten's regular staff. In order to provide the kindergarten teacher with suitable tools in the field, to draw her closer to the

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program's methods and to broaden her view of the process, the program provided supervision for the kindergarten staffs participating in the program. Safe Place is a protocol program, anchored in a reader, which includes both theory and the layout of the sessions. This layout outlines the contents and proceedings of each session and offers ways to adjust them to institutions of children with special needs and/or learning difficulties.

Research accompanying the entire program, shows connecting to the metaphor of the forest rangers; the dramatic acting-out of its characters; going out to nature, encountering and observing changes in it; the process of building the "forest rangers camp" planned jointly by the children and from materials they find in the field; ceremonies and non-verbal creative work that goes on throughout the program. All these factors helped children develop resiliency, and especially social, emotional and imaginal channels. In addition, it helped children to share painful stories, thus normalizing hard experiences and strengthening feelings of being capable and connecting to hope.

The qualitative part of this study shows that the components of the story and program form a wider effect, which enables the children to project, express and investigate diverse stories and interactions, not necessarily only those related to the war. These stories can involve coping with disease, moving to a new home, difficulties being a newcomer to Israel, violence and parental neglect, loss, divorce, social problems, etc. In addition to the personal benefit of individuals, it appears that the program contributed immensely to the unification of the group, reduced anxiety levels, and lessened the degree of violence in the kindergarten in general. It enhanced the children's self-confidence, their ability to express their emotions, and their capacity to cope with changes and uncertainty. Furthermore, it drew them close to nature and enabled them to get acquainted with it.

Following are some remarks of kindergarten teachers concerning the program, taken from the qualitative section of the research:

**L.** a kindergarten teacher from Kiryat Shmona: "The main contribution of the program to the children was social and emotional. Choosing a name for the tribe and a site to build the camp on, and later actually constructing it in nature from natural materials they found taught them to cope with disagreement and to cooperate. The socio-dramatic game of animals and forest rangers helped them tell their experiences from the war, to release tension and lessen anxieties."

**A.** a kindergarten teacher from Tiberias: "The program succeeded in magnetizing all of the children, not an easy feat in our kindergarten...the ritual of wearing the forest ranger's belt helped the children become actual forest rangers! This was evident in their body language; they stretched tall and proud. The mutual effort of collecting boards for the camp taught them to help each other without fighting or using swearwords. The program had a calming and unifying effect on the group."

**D.** a kindergarten teacher from Tiberias: "The program was very good. Drawing the forest rangers and moving in space in nature; screaming and being physically active helped frightened children overcome their fears and express their feelings. There was one child who, before the program, I scarcely heard. After he was given the role of forest ranger he began to talk and told me what had happened to him in his home and neighborhood. It wasn't always easy to hear..."

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**M.** a kindergarten teacher from Metula: "This is an amazing program. Building the camp in nature, the group games and the rituals we held together taught the children how to cooperate and assume responsibility. Children who were scared to go out of the kindergarten building gained confidence and overcame their fears. It was a very unique experience."

### **The kindergarten teacher as a key player in the development of child resiliency**

As stated previously, children cope with difficulties and hardships daily, at home, in the kindergarten and in their environment. Coping with this reality becomes more difficult when there is an external security threat, which may affect the child's sense of safety and emotional stability, hamper the process of resiliency-building and impair daily functioning. In today's reality, when most children spend more waking hours in the kindergarten than at home, the kindergarten teacher and the kindergarten should play an important role not only in the cognitive development of the child, and in teaching him scholastic material, but also in attending to his emotional-social- imaginative and physical needs.

Despite the attempt to restrict the boundaries of the role of kindergarten teacher to Education and leave the therapeutic aspects to professionals, it seems that a large part of this important function nevertheless falls upon the kindergarten teacher. This is so because she is the one who interacting with the child; she sees him, creates and maintains the space in which he is active day by day. It is her duty to help him part from his mother in the morning, help him cope with social difficulties in the kindergarten and bandage his wounds, if he falls in the yard. Even though teacher- training-programs in Israel include relatively few lessons in the field, and despite the fact that the emotional-imaginative-physical topics are not part of the core curriculum instructed by the Israeli Ministry of Education, it seems that the kindergarten teacher is sensitive to these issues and feels responsible for the child as a whole. It is important to emphasize that the above statement does not imply turning the kindergarten teacher into a psychotherapist or counselor. There are professionals trained in those fields. Nevertheless, the child's uninterrupted and continuous relationship with a significant caretaker implies an important emotional role that the kindergarten teacher has in the emotional development of the child, in general, and at times when the child copes with personal crises and hardships, in particular (Winnicott, 1995). This position does not wish to separate this role from her other ones, but rather to help her develop skills of observation and the emotional ability to pay attention to the language of resiliency in every interaction in the kindergarten. This approach seeks to enable the kindergarten teacher and the child to resume playing in the sand box, make statues out of mud, and build a camp and a tree house.

### **Elements of the program that the kindergarten teacher can apply in the kindergarten**

Previous sections presented the concept of resiliency and various aspects of the BASIC PH model and the Nature Therapy framework, in the context of the Safe Place program. This section will demonstrate selected methods from the program in a manner that invites kindergarten teachers to incorporate them in their routine kindergarten curriculum. A brief description of the method will be followed by a quote from the kindergarten teacher or the group counselor, showing how it was applied and its impact on the children.

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1. The Healing Metaphor: Lahad (2006) maintains that the use of a metaphor can change our inner reality and our conception of the outer reality. Through the metaphor people can experience their world in a new way and thereby undergo recovery processes and the creation of a new and preferable reality (Rosen, 1996). The Safe Place program and the framework story that accompanies it use numerous healing metaphors, chosen specially to help children recover from hard and traumatic experiences and develop resiliency. These are broad metaphors, which invite children to connect to and through them indirectly; tell their stories and compose their means of coping. The dramatic game of being the animals, the trees and the forest rangers facilitates this process, while building the camp in nature connects fantastic reality (in the story) to the concrete reality in life.
  
  2. Building the Forest Rangers Camp – The Building of a Home in Nature model: The Building a Home in Nature Model (Berger, 2007; Berger & McLoed, 2006) is based on the person's need to find and/or create a space for himself, where he can feel safe and protected from uncertainty and/or dangers "outside", in nature. The premises of the model claim that the creative, active and concrete process enables therapeutic work on basic issues, as well as on one's relationship with the environment. Defining the place makes it possible for the individual to examine and define his relationship with others, his place in the group, while the interaction with nature can allow him to examine his relation to the non-human environment. His sojourn in the house, and his concern for it, elicit a feeling of belonging to the place and to the rest of the group, who took part in its construction. The process of building the home from materials found in the area teaches the participant that he is capable of creating the reality of his life in the "here and now." This process gives hope and a feeling of control over reality.
    - S. a kindergarten teacher in Tiberias: "It was amazing to see Omer, (pseudonym) who was irritable and lonely, change throughout the program and improve her social status in the kindergarten. After we became forest rangers, the group counselor gave her a responsible function of being the ranger whose duty is to bring love and tolerance to the camp and to be in charge of all of the friends in the forest. She said that the forest rangers always looked out for each other and then the children also protected Omer. They helped her avoid a fight, and clean and decorate the camp. Omer learned how to talk to them and became part of the group. The process of building 'homes in nature' was very important, especially because the majority of the children in the kindergarten come from broken homes. Here they had a chance to build a safe place. It helped the personal trauma of each and every child and helped them feel trusting and safe. Building the camp together drew the children closer to each other and lessened violence."
  
    - Ch. A kindergarten teacher in a special education kindergarten in Kiryat Shmona: "The children waited to become forest rangers, to wear the belts and carry out the movements that would turn them into forest rangers. Testimony of the healing power of the program was evident last week, when a sick child asked to rest in the home the children had built. The program was assimilated into the milieu of the kindergarten. This is expressed in the children's request to have their morning snack in the camp, a space that has also become the "book corner." They sat calmly in this setting, they didn't call each other names and they listened attentively. I also enjoyed being a forest ranger."

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### 3. Rituals

Rituals play a central role in bestowing a sense of order and safety, and cultivating a feeling of belonging, satisfaction, and control over the uncontrollable (Evans, 1997, Hazan, 1992, Meged, 1998). The application of rituals can greatly help children cope with changes and internalize new behavior codes (Berger & McLoed, 2006; Berger 2007; Berger, 2008). The Safe Place program incorporates various rituals: initiation rituals where, with the help of makeup, props, movements and sound, the children evolve into forest rangers; rituals that help the children make a distinction between the activities of the program that take place outside the kindergarten building and are run by an external group counselor, and the activities in the kindergarten headed by the kindergarten teacher. Another form of ritual can develop skills to cope with change or expand listening abilities. In the "speaking stick" ritual, only the person holding it can speak, while the rest listen. This form of play expands communication channels, teaches one how to be tolerant and lessens violence. Everyone will hear as long as there is order and they pay attention.

Yael Paran, a group counselor in one of the kindergartens which participated in the program in Tiberias said: "During the "speaking stick" ritual, the children expressed things that frighten them: 'Mother won't want me anymore, there will be another war, I will get lost in the supermarket...'. I invited them to all stand up and yell their fears into the center of the circle. They all stamped their feet and made dismissive movements with their hands. Yair yelled, 'Shoo, get lost fear,' and all joined him as his cry turned into a big funny song. I walked among them and called on fear to come out. Slowly, slowly the circle calmed down, and so did the fears..."

### **Discussion and Summary**

This article has introduced one way of using Nature Therapy to help children cope with difficulties, and to establish the kindergarten as a space which develops resiliency. Relating to the Safe Place program, it presented an integrated manner to implement elements from the BASIC PH model and the concept of "resiliency" in kindergartens, while highlighting the importance of imagination, emotion, the body and social play for improving children's ability to cope with uncertainty, stress and crisis. The article also stressed the importance of the kindergarten teacher in cultivating the children's emotional, imaginative, physical and social abilities and psychological health, and not merely those abilities related to deductive learning and cognitive links.

To accomplish this, it is necessary to establish the kindergarten as not only "a preparation course for first grade" but also, and perhaps mainly, a space which develops all of the children's resiliency channels, allowing them to express themselves and develop and just "be". Nature's role in the process is crucial; as a space enabling play and relating to the environment, it transmits a message extending beyond time; as an entity that is larger than us, it represents the eternal and the universal. Another element this article touched upon is the attempt to use this process to empower the kindergarten teacher; the person who has direct contact with the children and has a significant influence on their development and maturing. This topic, as well as the findings of the research which accompanied the Safe Place program will be addressed in a separate article.



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This program has addressed issues that are quite important, though not yet treated satisfactorily, in light of the state of security in which Israel currently finds itself. It can also be relevant to other countries dealing with health, stress and the uncertainty resulting from natural or man made disasters.

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## **NATURE THERAPY: THOUGHTS ABOUT THE LIMITATION OF PRACTICE**

**Ronen Berger. PhD**

### **Abstract**

This article will present several issues that relate to the limitations of the innovative practice of Nature Therapy. Drawing upon examples from practice, it will separate physical and psychological limitations, and suggest ways in which the limitations of a framework can be bypassed, turning weakness into strength.

Key words: Therapy, Nature Therapy, Limitations, Ethics, Creativity

### **Introduction**

Developing a therapeutic framework for practice also obliges one to be aware of its limitations: populations that are less than suitable, therapeutic issues it may not address appropriately, and situations in which its use might be anti-therapeutic and even harmful to clients (Berger, 2008; McLeod, 2003, MRC, 2001). This article will present several issues that relate to the limitations of the innovative practice of Nature Therapy. It will start with a short presentation of the Nature Therapy framework, followed by a reflexive section highlighting the complexity of the issue. It will continue on to a presentation of the limitations of the practice, making a distinction between its physical and psychological limitations. Drawing upon examples from practice, the article will suggest creative ways in which these limitations can be bypassed, thus turning what seems to be a framework's weakness to strength. This conceptual and descriptive article is based on the author's experience in conceptualizing and developing Nature Therapy, while practicing, teaching and supervising Nature Therapy students during the years 2000-2007.

### **Nature Therapy: An Innovative Framework**

Nature Therapy is an innovative form of therapy that takes place in nature. Integrating elements from shamanistic rituals, vision quests and other traditional healing frameworks, together with elements from modern and humanistic therapies such as Art and Drama Therapy, Gestalt, the Narrative Approach, Eco-psychology, Transpersonal Psychology and Adventure Therapy, it seeks to offer an alternative to the static, constantly controlled environment of "therapy" (Barkan, 2002; Berger 2008; Bleger, 1967). Nature Therapy relates to nature as a live and dynamic therapeutic environment (setting) that takes part in the shaping of the process and the conduct of the work (Berger, 2008; Berger & McLeod, 2006). This fresh framework develops theory and methods that incorporate nature's potential into therapeutic processes, while expanding and opening it to additional dimensions (Berger & McLeod, 2006). The approach is based on the author's personal and professional experience, as well as research designed to conceptualize, analyze, and further develop the field. It has

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been used with individuals, groups, and families in the private, educational, and health sectors in Israel. Training is provided in several academic institutions in Israel and is also currently being developed in Europe. This article presents some of the concepts and methods of this innovative framework. Due to space limitations, a full presentation of the framework cannot be included. (For an in-depth and detailed description and all case studies, see Berger, 2008).

### **Defining a Discipline's Limitations – A Question of Perspective**

Cutcliffe (2003), Reason (1998) and Herts (1997) have highlighted the importance of reflexivity and reflexive writing, not only as an essential medium for exploring the involvement of therapist-researchers and for its influence upon the process of therapy and research, but also as a way to present theories, frameworks, and philosophies from a more personal and engaged perspective. As this article was written from the standpoint of a therapist, researcher and theorist, one that acknowledges the importance of the connection between these fields, it seems right to first state the standpoint from which this article was written. It is a perspective that relates to the subjective influences of the therapist, in addition to different ways the work can be impacted by the unique surroundings in which it takes place. These issues can be divided into three main themes:

1. It is the therapist rather than the framework "doing the work". As I see it, Nature Therapy, as a framework is (merely) a set of ideas that can help therapists (and clients) choose the "right setting" (Berger, 2007), plan interventions and "do good" nature-oriented therapy (Berger, 2007b, Berger & McLoed, 2006). It is the personality of the therapist, as well as the specific interventions and actions that he or she takes in relation to the surroundings and the client that will enliven the framework and hopefully help the magic of "therapy" crystallize. As such, the question of the field's limitations relates both to the limitations of the framework, as well as to those of the therapist; his personality, character, training and experience.

2. There is more than one way to relate to and "do" Nature Therapy. My doctoral dissertation presented various different ways in which Nature Therapy can take place: a variety of methods and concepts that can be used differently in varied settings and with different clients (Berger, 2008). Unlike approaches or models that have an exclusive, strict, "one way of doing business" attitude, Nature Therapy invites the therapist to use the framework creatively; matching it to the needs of the client and to the characteristics of the environment. Trying to define one particular way of doing it, would work against its basic philosophy and concepts and "kill" the field. In addition, it would limit the therapist's creativity and flexibility, which, according to Yalom, is one of the most important elements in therapy (Yalom, 2002).

3. There are two types of application for practice that depend on the nature of the environment. Nature Therapy's application is strongly connected to the environment in which it takes place. Working in a wilderness environment, such as the desert, will elicit different kinds of experiences than an urban one, such as a schoolyard (Berger, 2008). It will allow different encounters with the natural elements and with issues such as uncertainty, belonging and sanctity. This difference will have a decisive impact on the contract, the therapeutic alliance, the methods used and the entire process. From my experience working and supervising work that took place in each of these types of environments, it would appear that there are different types of Nature Therapy applications, relating to the major

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differences in the intensity and power that the encounter with nature may yield. One can work with the power of the desert wind or a desert sunrise only in the desert, as one can work with an encounter with a wolf only on the location where they can actually be encountered... (Examples of these differences in practice can be seen in the two cases Studies, chapters 5 & 6 in my doctoral dissertation (Berger, 2008).

This perspective highlights the difference between the framework (as a set of concepts and methods) and its application in practice, which is carried out by a therapist in a specific environment. It points out the complexity of the attempt to define the discipline's limitations. An optimistic and creative standpoint makes it seem like an attentive, creative and flexible facilitation style, one that seeks options rather than holds onto conventions and norms. As such, it can find ways to adjust the framework to different populations with different characteristics and needs.

At the same time, in an attempt to define the discipline's limitations, it seems that the framework might "not fit" or may need specialized adaptation to some populations and their specific needs. These limitations are detailed below, each followed by an example that highlights ways that the limitation could possibly be turned into strength. The article concludes with a short discussion.

### **Physical Limitations**

Nature Therapy takes place in "nature". Taking this phrase at face value could seem to exclude people with physical difficulties from its benefits. In other words it could imply that Nature Therapy is less suitable for the elderly, the handicapped, young children, or other populations that might find it hard to reach this environment and spend time in it.

The introduction of this article referred to the possibility of extracting elements from the framework to suit the client's characteristics and match his needs. This implies that we must find a way of using Nature Therapy with people who are limited in their physical and/or movement abilities. Following are two examples that highlight this possibility...

#### **"We Can be Outside and Play"**

##### **Nature Therapy with a Group of Adults with Adolescent Diabetes An Example from Practice**

Orit, the head of the Endocrinology Department at Ziv hospital, Israel, was very hesitant before agreeing to start the pilot Nature Therapy program, with a group of ten adults suffering from Adolescent Diabetes (Type I) "Ever since they were diagnosed most of them have stopped going outdoors. They refrain from playing physical children's games (such as ball games, hide-and-peek, chase and so-on) and have stopped going on school trips. Every injury can turn into a complex infection, not to mention a sudden decline in the level of blood sugar that can end in death. Are you sure this kind of work is not dangerous for them?" The first encounter took place in a pine forest, a five-minute walk from the Endocrinology Department. After a few get-acquainted games, played in a circle, participants were invited to take some private time in the woods and find a natural element that symbolized their feelings or thoughts. Danny brought a stone and said "this stone symbolizes the weight that the disease has added to my life. It's a constant worry, not to forget to check that the pump is working. I would really like to put it aside or, at least move it away from center stage..." Dina related to the shadows and light made by the sun and said "it's like my life cycles, times of darkness, in which each ray of sunlight gives hope. I am so happy to be here now; it's something we have never done as a group." Julia brought seeds

of yellow-weed and said "I want to free myself; to fly and go where the wind takes me, just like these seeds". As a result of this sharing, a conversation began that focused on the common issues shared by group members. They seemed to be talking about the different ways that each one related to and coped with the sickness. Julia said that even though they meet regularly in the hospital for check-ups and treatments, they never talk about these issues. Ben said that he would love to hear more, but right now he was embarrassed. "Maybe we can have some fun first, you know, like normal people do when they are in nature..." "Let's play" Julia said. The ice was broken when Ben shouted, "let's play tree chase. When you hold a tree I can't catch you and when you don't I can. Go..." Everyone joined the game. Within seconds, the entire group of diabetic adults was playing like children, shouting and running all over the place, having fun... After playing another few games, Tali called everyone over to join her around the fire for tea. Jokes circled the group on the amount of sugar in the tea and the cookies, as the group drew closer in the circle around the fire. "I haven't had so much fun for a long time" said Danny. "From the age of seven, when I was diagnosed, my parents hardly allowed me to go outdoors and play. I don't remember if I have ever climbed a tree... It's great to do this with all of you. It feels like we all share these stories, like we're a family. I wonder what would my parents would say if they could see me now..."

### **Short Discussion**

This story not only illustrates the way in which Nature Therapy can take place with a group whose very issue is physical limitation, it highlights the way in which Nature Therapy can allow them to work on the psychological issues contained in their physical limitations. Meeting in nature, outside the hospital, helped participants let go of the conventional ways they encounter each other (as patients coming for treatment), while revealing other characteristics and needs. Nature and a playful facilitation style helped them reconnect with childlike parts within, take part in games that allowed them to connect with the strength of their bodies, while strengthening their relationships with each other. Working in a natural environment, near the hospital, within a limited time-frame, minimized the workshop's risks and reduced anxieties, allowing this population to benefit from a creative encounter with nature.

### **"The Valley and I"**

#### **Nature Therapy with an Elderly Individual An Example from Practice**

Jonathan, a ninety year old man, had lived most of his adult years in one of the kibbutzim of the Hula valley in northern of Israel. He had a clear mind and a healthy, though pain-ridden body. Jonathan could walk around the settlement, but leaving it had become a real difficulty. Towards his nineteenth birthday, his grandchildren invited him to an autobiographical journey, using Nature Therapy as the main medium for work. Under Jonathan's guidance, I drove him around places in the valley that he loved. Reaching one of the places, we stopped and took time out, just to be. Each place revealed a story, which I then typed into my laptop computer. It seemed as if Jonathan's life had been imprinted in this landscape; the scenery was the container for so many memories and parts of his personality. In our last encounter, Jonathan chose to take me to an area in the middle of the

valley that has been re-flooded and developed. He said that although this place was very

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meaningful for him, he had not visited it since it was re-flooded fourteen years ago. Upon entering the reservation, Jonathan became very excited. "I can't believe they are here again, I can't believe it. I haven't seen them for so many years. Aren't they beautiful?" he said, pointing to the pelicans. Reaching the lake, he asked me to stop the car, as he got out and started walking excitedly. I left the laptop in the car and joined him. "Look, can you see these cormorants, look how they dive. Do you know what wonderful fishermen they are?" he said. Joining Jonathan, I realized that he was walking with a fast tempo and an assertiveness I had never witnessed before. After a while, he stopped and sat down on the ground. "It's only now I realize how much I have missed this place. I remember it from the days it was still a swamp, before we dried it out, before these roads were built - way before you were born. It was a different decade. We had time to listen to stories, not like now, when my grandchildren come for very short visits and even then prefer to watch TV. This is my home! I remember these birds so well because I have spent so much time here with friends and family, most of whom have already died. This changing landscape is like the changes in my life. Seeing it again brings it to life again. I wish I could share some of it with my children and grandchildren".

Four months later, when Jonathan's autobiographical diary was completed, he invited his whole family for a journey to the valley. He brought to life each story in a specific location, surrounded and heard by the people he loved most.

Three years later Jonathan died. His autobiography, his stories and his beloved landscape remain.

### **Short Discussion**

This example not only illustrates the way in which NT can take place with an elderly person, with limited physical and walking abilities, it shows a unique way in which it can allow growth that might not have been realized in other ways. It shows how the physical aspects of Nature Therapy can be reduced and the focus instead becomes an intimate encounter with the landscape. This is used to "voice out" personal stories and place them within the context of an individual's life journey.

Another way of using Nature Therapy with old people can be for example, with those who live in an old people's home. They can be invited to go on short walks in nature near/outside the institution to observe changes in nature. Then, continuing the work indoors, their observations can serve as the basis for a conversation or a creative activity about constancy/changes/cycles in their lives. In this respect, the main use of the framework will be metaphorical; nature serving as a metaphor for life.

### **Psychological Limitations**

The psychological limitations of practice relate to two basic issues that constitute the core of the Nature Therapy framework:

a. Nature Therapy takes place outdoors, in nature, in a place that does not necessarily have human-made boundaries, is open to the world's influences and is not owned by the therapist (Berger, 2007, Building a Home in Nature). The choice of setting involves basic issues that influence the therapeutic contract and the therapeutic relationship. Inviting nature to take an active part in the process invites challenges that might not take place indoors and could conceivably be complex for some clients.

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b. Nature Therapy is experiential in nature; placing experience at its very core. It uses the direct, creative and embodied encounter with nature to help clients re-visit their childlike parts - the spontaneous, the emotional and the imaginary (right hemisphere). It gives much less space to the cognitive and "adult" parts (left hemisphere) of an individual.

With reference to these two issues - related to the setting and related to the experiential and regressive modes of work - it seems that Nature Therapy's practice touches upon basic emotional and/or mental factors that could be "real issues" for some clients, overwhelm them and even cause anti-therapeutic experiences. It would appear that people with an extreme need for clear boundaries, hierarchy and a high level of control are potential candidates to be hurt by the overwhelming experiences of NT work. It seems that we may need to exclude people with recognized emotional and/or mental difficulties (psychological) from using it. It may not be recommended for people with psychiatric difficulties, in general, and those with anxieties, difficulties in their perception of reality and/or PTSD, in particular. Clearly, a therapist working with such populations can (and should) foresee the complexities of using Nature Therapy and make the necessary adjustments for its successful implementation. Such adjustments can be seen in the second example of this section. However, the real complexity relates to situations in which the therapist is not aware of the client's psychological condition and/or the different ways in which the environment can influence it. Such a case is presented in the following example.

### **"Nature can Re-activate a Trauma"**

#### **An Example from Practice**

Jessica, a fourteen-year old girl took part in a year-long Nature Therapy program, at a school in northern Israel, for children with delayed development. In addition to behaviors typical of a girl with mental retardation, Jessica also had some emotional and communication difficulties, which were expressed in outbursts of emotions: sudden laughter, shouting or crying. By virtue of the good relationship she developed with the therapist and due to the enjoyment she gained from the non-verbal and playful nature of activities, Jessica had become a regular program participant and an active group member. She felt safe and had learned to take an active part in the sessions.

Throughout this time the therapist was not informed of the PTSD Jessica had developed during the first Lebanon War, nor about the psychiatric testing she had gone to, that had examined her ability to judge reality. Although he felt she needed special care, he felt safe including her in all the activities. Towards the end of the year, as a peak activity, the group was taken for a day's trip to "Gamla", a nature reserve on the Golan Heights, an area surrounded by an army training zone. It was the first and only time they had ventured so far away from the school. During the first three hours, Jessica participated in all the activities happily, and did not show any signs of anxiety. In the fourth hour, sudden sounds of shelling from the nearby army zone interrupted the relaxed atmosphere. Jessica became hysterical and started shouting and running around looking for shelter. From the symptoms she displayed, it was clear that the routine army drill had re-activated a post-traumatic experience, which completely overwhelmed her. She ran to the edge of the Gamla cliffs in search of refuge, endangering both herself and the therapist who had run after her, trying to stop her. After he managed to stop her, calm her down and gather the group around, it became clear that Jessica was re-living her experience of the war, in which she had hid from shelling. A behavioral strategy with right-left body tapping, repeated statement of the sentence (elements from EMDR- Eye Movement Desensitizing and Reprocessing) "these are not sounds of war but of army training; the war has ended, you are safe" and holding in a



close circle, helped Jessica relax and return to the group and to reality. With the danger clearly behind her, she managed to calm her breath, stop sweating, make eye contact and stay with us.

### **Short Discussion**

This example presents the way in which an unpredictable element in the Nature Therapy workshop environment can re-activate a post-traumatic episode. More than the sound of the bombing itself, it is the unpredictability of an event related to a person's experience that triggers the trauma. This example highlights a situation in which NT can actually be anti-therapeutic...

In Jessica's case, the therapist's knowledge of EMDR and behavioral techniques helped him calm the client and perhaps even help her recover from a childhood trauma. Yet, this story could have ended differently...

To some extent, this example also highlights the limitations of the therapist's ability to know his/her clients and predict and/or control the environment. It shows his/her limitations in predicting the ways in which a client will react to a certain environment and his/her need to be on the alert at all times...

### **"The Way Out"**

#### **Using Nature Therapy with an Adult Suffering Shell Shock and Depression An Example from Practice**

Abraham, a forty-five year old man, was hospitalized in the open psychiatric ward at Ziv hospital, Israel, suffering from a combination of shell shock and depression. The first three sessions took place in Abraham's room, where I sat near his bed while he covered himself (including his face) with a blanket and talked about his fear of "coming out". As the symptoms subsided, with the help of drugs and the systemic treatment given at the hospital, Abraham was willing to sit on his bed, meet me and talk, without the blanket. He was still very busy with "sounds of the war" but could also talk about other aspects of his life and about his relationship with his son, in particular. On one hand, this conversation made him happy, reminding him of his love for his son: at the same time it made him sad. "He is angry that I never go with him anywhere, I think he is even ashamed of me. What can I do? Every time I go out the door of our home, I'm afraid I'll have a flashback or a panic attack. So, instead, I just let it go". During the next session, I suggested to Abraham that we go for a walk in the hospital garden. At first Abraham didn't agree, but towards the end of the session he agreed to go out for just a moment, to see the almond bloom. Reaching it, he said "isn't this tree beautiful, we have such a tree in our garden at home, I miss it". Three days later, in anticipation of our next meeting, Abraham was waiting for me by the department's door with two chairs. "Can we meet under the tree?" he asked. During that session we talked about the meaning that the almond tree had for him: memories associated with it and the symbolism he gave its cycles - the falling leaves and the blooming flowers. The war and the traumatic stories associated with it were not even mentioned once. As it was raining in the next session, we did not go out; instead we conducted our encounter by the window that overlooked the garden and the almond tree. "It is so close and yet so far away, just like my relationship with my son. Can we go out and feel the rain?" he asked me...

A year later, just before the holiday of Tu Bishvat (a Jewish holiday marking the coming of spring) I received an invitation from Abraham to join a tree planting ceremony

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that he and his son were about to lead at his son's school. "You know," he wrote, "Sometimes the way out is actually a journey in..."

### **Short Discussion**

This example presents the way in which chosen elements from Nature Therapy can be incorporated into verbal therapy, with clients suffering from extreme psychological difficulties. It highlights the way in which the encounter with nature can broaden a client's perspective and help him achieve a meaningful turning point.

### **Working Within the Discipline's Limitations - Discussion and Summary**

This article has presented some of the practice limitations of the young field of Nature Therapy. It referred to the physical and psychological aspects of the work, indicating populations for which it is less suitable and situations in which it might even have an anti-therapeutic influence. It included examples of the framework in use with such populations, demonstrating ways in which a sensitive and creative facilitation style can adopt it to the population's special characteristics and needs. These examples highlighted the option of using only certain elements of the framework, and combining them with other therapeutic approaches. Illustrating options for using the framework, while highlighting ways that it focuses on the strength and health of the client, it challenged the limitations previously presented and the assumption that it might be inappropriate for populations with extreme physical and/or psychological difficulty. In conclusion, I would like to highlight several issues, perhaps questions that this article has opened:

1. Are we practicing Nature Therapy or incorporating it into other practices?

Most of the case examples in this article included used only a few elements from Nature Therapy, incorporating them into other approaches and frameworks. In fact, it would seem that it was this selection that made it suitable for these populations. The question that thus emerges is: should such work be regarded as "Nature Therapy" or as something else? What are the boundaries between disciplines and how can they be defined, in general, and in cases of interdisciplinary disciplines, in particular? Are these semantics important and to what extent do they matter?

2. Can only a therapist with a wide and interdisciplinary background practice in this manner?

In most of the examples presented earlier, the therapist combined elements from several therapeutic approaches. It seems that it was this integration that made the adaptation successful. Does this mean that only therapists with a wide therapeutic background can create these adaptations and work with such populations? What are the implications, for Nature Therapy training programs and supervision?

3. Is it time to develop an ethical code and a standard for the professionals who work in this developing practice?

In conclusion, it would seem that this article gave few answers, while opening up many questions... It is my hope the questions will trigger debate on the issue and thus help the further development of this young and growing field.

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## **DEVELOPING AN ETHICAL CODE FOR THE GROWING NATURE THERAPY PROFESSION**

**Ronen Berger, PhD**

### **Abstract**

This article will discuss issues relating to the development of a code of ethics for the growing Nature Therapy profession. It will address the profession's unique issues and in particular, those relating to its relationship with nature, It will include a short presentation of a Nature Therapy framework, an overview of ethical issues in parallel disciplines, including adventure therapy, and conclude with recommendations for the future development of such an ethical code.

### **Introduction**

It seems each therapeutic discipline and profession must have an ethical code, yet how does it develop? While working on my doctoral dissertation, conceptualizing and developing a Nature Therapy framework, I was asked to add a section about this issue. Although I thought that the development of an ethical code was beyond the academic scope of a PhD, and should be formulated by the professional community representing the practice, I rose to the challenge and added such a chapter to my dissertation. On concluding this chapter and relating it to my PhD's overall action- research orientation and strong affiliation with practice, I believe that discussion of this issue could help further the development of a code of ethics by the association that represents the profession.

This article will thus discuss issues relating to the development of a code of ethics for the growing profession of Nature Therapy. I will address unique issues that must be taken into consideration, in particular, the special relationship participants' form with nature. I will not attempt to present an established ethical code, but rather to highlight complexities and questions that full development may seek to answer. The article will begin with by outlining a Nature Therapy framework, and an overview of ethical issues discussed in parallel disciplines: art therapy, psychology, adventure therapy, animal assisted therapy and horticultural therapy. I will then suggest unique issues that Nature Therapy's ethical code must address, and will conclude with recommendations for issues that future development of such an ethical code may warrant.

### **Nature Therapy: An innovative framework**

Nature Therapy is an innovative, experiential, therapeutic framework that takes place in nature. It seeks to broaden the static, constantly controlled natural environment of "therapy" (Barkan, 2002; Bleger, 1967), to create a dynamic therapeutic environment (setting) that is a partner in shaping the process (Berger, 2008; Berger & McLeod, 2006). In this new field, concepts and methods are being developed to create a dynamic and open environment; using nature's healing elements to support therapeutic processes (Berger & McLeod, 2006). Nature Therapy integrates elements from art and drama therapy, gestalt, the narrative approach, eco-psychology, transpersonal psychology, adventure therapy,

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shamanism and body–mind practices. The approach I have developed to Nature Therapy is based on my personal and professional experience, as well as research designed to conceptualize, analyze, and continually uncover additional dimensions of the approach. It has been implemented with individuals, groups, and families in the private, educational, and health sectors in Israel. Nature Therapy training is provided in a few academic institutions in Israel and curriculums are currently being developed in Europe. This article presents some of the concepts and methods of this innovative framework. However, due to space limitations, a full presentation of the framework cannot be included. (For an in-depth and detailed description and all case studies, see Berger, 2008).

### **What constitutes a professional code of ethics?**

The study of ethics is a philosophical endeavor that deals with values, morality and moral behavior (Casher, 2003; McLeod, 2003; Shapler, 2006). Professional ethics relates to the manner and conduct of a professional group and/or association (Shapler, 2006). Ethics should include a broad perception of the complexities and complications that the profession may face and, consequently, develop a relevant collection of rules, regulations and guidelines. A professional ethic derives from the identity of the profession, while relating to its values and its moral context (Exler, 2007). It deals with the excellence of the profession as it will be expressed, conducted and performed in practice. Generally speaking, it would seem that the aim of a professional code of ethics is to ensure good practice and to protect clients from immoral and unethical behavior of professionals which may hurt or harm them (McLeod, 2003; Peled, 2003; [www.yahat.org/ethics.asp](http://www.yahat.org/ethics.asp)). This is true in all cases, particularly in the case of disciplines that relate to therapy and health, a practice that has an inherent moral and ethical dimension (McLeod, 2003).

Different professions tend to have different codes of ethics (Shapler, 2006) that address unique issues relating to the identity and practice of the profession (Exler, 2007). As a code of ethics relates to professional identity, and as such also to qualifications and training needed to join a specific professional group, it can also help to distinguish the profession and its members from other professions. It can be used to ensure the quality and standards of the profession (Exler, 2007).

Most professional ethical codes include:

- 1) A description of the identity of the profession;
- 2) A list of basic values and principles that guide the activities of the professional group. In most cases this will include universal values such as professionalism, integrity, loyalty, respect for human rights, autonomy and individualism;
- 3) A list of ethical standards of the profession (Shapler, 2006).

An examination of the ethical code of the Israel Psychologist's Association and of the Israel Expressive Art Therapists Association (Peled, 2003) shows that both are based on four underlying principles: the promotion of the psychological well-being of the client, professionalism, integrity, and social responsibility. These association's lists of ethical standards relate to the relationship between therapists and their clients and to relationships between therapists and their professional community.

As the theory and practice of the expressive art therapies relate to and include creative, spontaneous and bodily process, its ethical code includes sections referring to issues such as the creative process, physical touch and physical intimacy. It acknowledges their important role in the performance of this expressive practice, and does not seek to prohibit their use or determine clear-cut restrictions, but rather to highlight complexities

and ethical issues that their use may involve. These guidelines seek to allow the incorporation of “grey areas,” while helping to ensure a high level of professionalism and a high level of moral and ethical standards. This example shows how a specific therapeutic profession took the ethical code of a parallel, more traditional profession (psychology) and broadened it to meet its specific principles, framework and practice. It shows the ways in which an ethical code can vary from one developed for a parallel discipline.

Taking place indoors and working from an anthropocentric standpoint, it is hardly surprising that neither codes of ethics (the Israeli Psychologist’s Association and the Israeli Expressive Art Therapy Association) refers to a relationship with the environment in general, and to the relationship with nature in particular (Peled, 2003). However, it is obvious that this should be included in an ethical code of professions that do include and/or relate to nature as an inherent part of their practice.

### **Developing an ethical code for Nature Therapy**

The previous section outlined the overall concept of a professional ethical code and highlighted ways in which each discipline and/or profession can match it to the unique characteristics of their practice. This was demonstrated by the way that the Israeli Expressive Art Therapy Association added on elements that relate to artistic and expressive processes; elements that did not exist in the parallel ethical code of the Israeli Psychologist’s Association.

Nature Therapy takes place in nature. It works in creative ways and takes nature as a *live partner* in the process. It acknowledges both natures’ instrumental and intrinsic values, working in the intermediate zone that allows their co-existence (Berger, 2008). It seems like this view towards nature is parallel to ways people address each other: relating to the other in terms of objects, acknowledging various elements that these relationships can provide, and at the same time acknowledging their autonomous and independent value. In this respect, Nature Therapy can address nature as a resource and material provider, while acknowledging its independent and autonomous values (Berger, 2008). This dialectic attitude appears to represent the basic identity and moral questions of our modern culture as well as relationships and moral issues that the individual must confront (Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1991; McLeod, 1997; Roszak, 2005; West, 2000). Coming from this perspective, and taking into account the underlying philosophy of Nature Therapy, it seems like the issue of nature and the relationship with it, are central in the development of Nature Therapy’s ethical code.

### **Parallel professional codes of ethics: Adventure therapy, horticultural therapy and animal assisted therapy**

A review of ethical codes and/or ethical consideration of parallel professions were conducted to highlight and discuss “nature-related issues” in the development of an ethical code for Nature Therapy. Adventure therapy, horticultural (gardening) therapy and animal assisted therapy, all relate to nature in the broadest sense. It is important to say that all of these fields are young disciplines in the early stages of development. This relates both to academic aspects (theory and research) and to political aspects (forming professional associations, obtaining governmental recognition and providing academic training). This may also explain why none of them have yet established and/or implemented an independent ethical code, one that relates to “the issue of nature.”

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### **Adventure therapy**

The Therapeutic Adventure Professional Group (TAPG) of the Association of Experiential Education (AEE) tried to develop an independent code of ethics for the field. This code deals mainly with issues concerning the use of challenge and risk as an inherent part of this practice. In light of Adventure Therapy's instrumental standpoint towards nature and its anthropocentric attitude (Berger, 2008), it would appear that it does not refer to ethical issues involving the discipline's engagement with nature. It does not address ways in which the practice of adventure therapy may harm nature, nor does it develop ethical standards and/or guidelines relating to this issue (Gass, 1993; Gillis & Gass, 2004; Newes, 2008).

### **Horticultural therapy**

A review of the literature, including the main book in the field, edited by Simson and Straus (1998) shows that this young profession has not yet developed a professional ethical code. Salomon (2005), an art therapist and horticultural therapist, who wrote about ethical issues in the garden setting, relates to the garden as an art product, created and designed by the client during his creative process. She raises ethical issues that relate to the uniqueness of this setting and remaining open and alive. She also addresses ethical issues relating to the relationships between therapist and client. She questions the therapist's ability to guard and protect this "art form" (which can be addressed as an extension of the client) from other people who might pass by and/or from changes that "nature" might cause (Salomon, 2005). This anthropocentric attitude relates to the garden (and nature) from an instrumentalist standpoint that does not recognise the garden's autonomous and independent value and, as such, does not consider ethical issues involving the garden's well-being. This means, for example, that it does consider cases in which plants and/or animals, directly and/or indirectly involved in the work, might be injured; neither does it indicate behaviors that can protect them. The question, of attitude towards the garden and to nature, seems to relate to the basic values of the profession, and as such to its professional identity. It may be that such a code of ethics will be further developed with the continuing growth and establishment of this young field.

### **Animal assisted therapy (AAT)**

Although this young profession has not yet established a recognized professional identity and/or established a professional association, they have already started a dialogue about the development of an ethical code, in general, and about relationships and behaviors with animal-participants, in particular. Kassirer (2003) and Zamir (2007) highlight the importance of this issue and suggest relating to the animals from an intrinsic perspective, i.e. not just as an objects "serving" the therapeutic process and the needs of clients, but also as living beings, with autonomous feelings and thoughts, who deserve acknowledgment, respect and honor in their own right (Kassirer, 2003; Zamir, 2007). Exler (2007) claims that because (participating) "animals" are central to the process, moral issues relating to the relationship with them and their incorporation and use in therapy must be discussed and incorporated into the profession's ethical code (Exler, 2007). Exler and Zamir emphasize this issue by highlighting the fact that animals (unlike human therapists) did not choose to work as "co-therapists" and as such their incorporation in therapy must deal with basic ethical questions, some of which could even challenge the profession's moral legitimacy.

Following these claims, Zamir (2007) highlights the difference between assisting, using and utilizing animals, claiming that the cases in which the last takes place are immoral and should not be allowed by this ethical code (Zamir, 2007). In an effort to connect these thoughts with practice, Kassirer (2003) offers a list of examples from practice in which animals were hurt. She suggests using them as the basis for examining and developing an ethical code that will account for these moral issues. Kassirer relates mainly to sublimation processes, in which animals were hurt and/or killed, due to the client's expression of anger, and to cases in which their welfare wasn't properly provided for. Concluding this review, it seems like AAT acknowledges the need for the development of a specific code of ethics; one that acknowledges animals' rights and the complexities that this practice involves.

### **Recommendations for future development of an ethical code for Nature Therapy**

The following recommendations for the development of an ethical code for Nature Therapy, are derived both from the review of the literature provided in this article and also from my own experience. The recommendations also draw on the voices of my students, as they were presented in discussions on these issues during their first and second year training, in an aim to include these voices into the growing professional community of Nature Therapy practitioners. It is important to emphasize that this list is partial at best, and should be only viewed as a set of recommendations. It is not offered as a complete ethical code; rather it presents ideas that can be used as guidelines for future development. Due to the complexities of the issue, and in an attempt to encourage dialogue, part of this list will be written as questions and not as clear-cut declarations or statements.

- 1 An ethical code must be developed by a professional group that represents all members of the professional community and not by a single person. This should be done by democratic and transparent processes based on similar processes used by more established professions.
- 2 An ethical code must relate to two main aspects:
  - A. Relationships between the people that the work includes - therapist and clients, clients and professionals, colleagues. Most of this can be developed in relation to existing ethics, developed by parallel professions appearing in the literature. In addition, unique issues that relate to the specific settings and methods used in Nature Therapy should be addressed, for example:
    - a. Participants' conscious choice of Nature Therapy rather than other forms of therapy conducted indoors.
    - b. Participants' safety - particularly in extreme environments such as deserts or work taking place at night.
    - c. Participants' assessed ability to cope with the environment. For example: not asking a person with heart disease to climb a mountain.
    - d. Participants' permission to leave the therapy setting and go home whenever they want to. The ethical discussion of this issue may require special attention in cases of intensives taking place in remote locations.
    - e. Participants' informed consent on the type and level of experiences in nature they are about to have. Ensuring that participants have enough information to give meaningful consent. This information should relate to issues concerning the environment, the setting and the methods.
    - f. The amount and content included in trainings to insure sure that therapists using Nature Therapy are sufficiently competent to make these assessments.



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B. The relationships between all participants and nature - therapist and nature and clients and nature. Although it seems as if this aspect relates to some of the issues that were raised in animal assisted therapy, it probably requires more autonomous development. This aspect needs to address the basic “identity issues” of this profession, that relate to the relationship and standpoint towards nature as well as to the classification of Nature Therapy (educational or therapeutic). The following questions aim to evoke further discussion:

- a. Relating to the word ‘therapy’ in Nature Therapy:
- b. Does Nature Therapy relate to nature from an instrumentalist standpoint and what does this attitude imply about practice and ethics?
- c.. Does Nature Therapy only use nature for the client’s benefit or is it also concerned about nature’s autonomous protection and wellbeing?
- d. Should the practitioner take care of nature only as the setting of his/her clinic or should it also be taken care of from a wider moral perspective?
- e. Who is the focus of the process: the client or nature, or somewhere between? And in case of the former – to what extent should ‘nature’ “pay the price?”
- f. How can one measure such a price and by which standards can he/she decide what kind and to what degree this is permissible?
- g. In what ways will this choice influence sublimation processes in (and towards) nature and how will it influence therapeutic impacts and limitations of the practice?
- h. Is educating for love and care for nature one of the goals on Nature Therapy’s agenda? Is this an “external” value or is it part of the discipline? If it is part of the discipline – where does this position Nature Therapy? Is it a form of therapy with an environmental agenda or is it a form of environmental education with a therapeutic orientation? How does this relate to ethical issues?
- i. Does Nature Therapy inevitably involve the modeling (by the therapist) of respect for nature, or maybe even directly teaching participants to respect nature?

3. An ethical code should relate to issues such as professionalism and professional responsibility, as well as to the issue of professional standards and qualifications. It probably also needs to address courses, curriculum, and requirements for acceptance into training programs. For example:

- a. To what extent must the practitioner be familiar with the specific habitat and ecological conditions of the environment in which the work takes place? How does this relate to the safekeeping of habitats as well as of clients (this is particularly true in wilderness and extreme environments)? Who does this impact training, curriculum and supervision?

4. Last but not least, and relating to all of the above, an ethical code must find a way to address “grey” areas, that do not have an answer that is clearly right or wrong

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## Discussion and conclusion

This article has presented a list of recommendations for the development of an ethical code for Nature Therapy, with reference to existing literature, my experience, and the voices of students currently studying Nature Therapy. It has highlighted complexities and given examples of issues that may need special attention. It would appear that the issue of relationship between all participants in the work and nature, (Section 2B above) is of the utmost importance and is likely the most complex to deal with. Yet, even before the actual process of creating this code, the important question, "Who will create the code?" must be addressed and resolved. If I may conclude with a parting suggestion, it seems right to recommend that four or five people be chosen from the Nature Therapy community. It would be helpful to add one or two external members who can critique the committee's work and ensure its integrity. It would also be best if some of this committee's members have prior experience with a similar process of developing a code of ethics. I hope that this article and the recommendations it has presented can also contribute to the development of such a code of ethics. I hope that those chosen to develop such ethical codes will maintain not only a high level of standards, but will bring to the task their abiding love and respect for the diversity of all members constituting these professional groups.

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