



Ascension

Ascension WI EAP

## Outdoors and Mental Health

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In Wisconsin we spend a good chunk of time indoors due to the long, often harsh winters. When spring hits, it's not uncommon to see more and more people getting out and enjoying the fresh air, and for good reason! The restorative properties of natural environments are endless and as a result, enjoying natural spaces, or greenspace, is often recommended in therapy as a means of self-care and coping.

Ecotherapeutic programs are popping up around the United States as an alternative means to assist individuals with severe trauma and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) reactions. These programs are also utilized to help people rediscover themselves, build self-confidence, and enhance personal growth. Ecotherapy tools can be used in a group or individually, and in some cases, need not even require a therapist. Planting flowers, working in a garden, going for a nature walk, trail running, biking or completing an activity that offers a sense of purpose such as chopping wood, picking berries, or any outdoor physical activities are all examples of effective nature based tools.

Being outdoors exposes us to different smells, sights, sounds, and touches that stimulate the mind and help keep us grounded in the moment. Being present, or in the here and now, helps us to notice and take in our surroundings. Being in nature allows us to escape from the stressors that pollute the mind and body to which we may have become numb. It acts as an emotional and

mental reset button providing individuals with the break they need from daily stressors.

Certain activities, such as horticultural planting, mimic behaviors associated with nurturing behaviors. Wilderness programs, including those that involve team building and obstacles, incorporate social skills, problem solving and communication skills, and enhance self-confidence. Physical steps taken during "walk and talk" therapy mimic tools involved in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing treatment (EMDR--a therapy modality used to treat PTSD) that assists the right and left hemispheres of the brain to reset. Natural therapy has been found to decrease anxiety and stress levels, improve social engagement, decrease depressive symptoms, improve sleep patterns, improve overall mood and an individual's sense of purpose. It also helps restore attention, and so much more.

The healing powers of nature are undeniable. For those that work indoors, stepping outside on breaks provides a temporary escape from the stressors of work. Others may try a new outdoor activity such as reconnecting with your inner child (swinging, playing a yard game, laying in the grass and looking at the clouds, blowing bubbles, etc), discovering a new hobby such as gardening, setting up a tent (even if it's in the backyard), attending a local outdoor exercise class, or striving to set a new personal outdoor fitness record. There are many great ways to receive healing from the great outdoors. So what are you waiting for? Get out there!