

## **Ecotherapy\***

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Ecotherapy is an emerging field of psychotherapy that expands beyond the traditional human-centered treatment modalities to include the human-nature relationship.

Ecotherapy is based upon the theoretical orientation of ecopsychology, a relatively new field that recognizes that human health and identity are integrally linked to the health and sustainability of the earth. Ecopsychology maintains that environmental problems and psychological disease are a result of our alienation from the natural world and thus, one of the goals of ecopsychology is to heal this fundamental split by increasing consciousness of our inherent connection with nature. Ecopsychology takes a holistic approach addressing the physical, psychological, and spiritual conditions of both the human and nonhuman world.

### **Historical Context**

Although environmental psychology has long studied the interplay between humans and their environments, it was not until the early 1990s that a new, more politically focused, environmental psychology emerged. It was during this time that a group of concerned psychologists and scholars began to hold informal gatherings in the San Francisco Bay Area to address psychology's response to the environmental crisis. From these gatherings, ecopsychology was birthed; the term coined by cultural historian, Theodore Roszak (1933-1911) in his coinciding book, *The Voice of the Earth* (1992). Three years later, Roszak, along with co-editors Mary Gomes and Allen Kanner, published *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (1995). It was through this collection of papers that the field of ecopsychology began to attract a wider audience and find its foothold within the academic community.

Ecopsychology has traditionally been an interdisciplinary project, influenced by a wide range of disciplines including transpersonal psychology, depth psychology, deep ecology, religious studies, environmental studies, and the humanities. Human ecologist, Paul Shepard (1925-1996), was perhaps the first social scientist to make the connection between mental illness and human detachment from the natural environment in his book, *Nature and Madness* (1982).

In 1996, Howard Clinebell introduced the term *ecotherapy*, defined as “healing and growth nurtured by healthy interaction with the earth”. Nearly fifteen years later, Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist brought more attention to the field through the publication of their edited book, *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind* (2009).

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

Although there is current debate about what ecopsychology actually is, most first generation ecopsychologists adhere to the principle of an ecological unconscious that has been largely repressed by industrial and modern society resulting in collective madness and environmental destruction. Similar to Carl Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious, the ecological unconscious includes our evolutionary and archetypal inheritance, which binds us to earth.

### **Major Concepts**

Buzzell and Chalquist (2009) define ecotherapy as a new approach to psychotherapy that takes into account the vital role of nature and the human-nature relationship. This involves shifting from an ego-centric to an eco-centric perspective, practicing

psychotherapy as if the whole world mattered, recognizing grief and trauma caused by environmental destruction, and encouraging nature-connection practices.

### **Shifting from an Ego-centric to an Eco-centric Perspective**

Taking a philosophical approach, ecotherapists imagine a world that is ensouled and animate. Within therapy, this involves practices such as active imagination that encourage dialogue between the individual and autonomous aspects of the psyche, including the psyche, or soul, of the nonhuman realm.

### **Practicing Psychotherapy as if the Whole World Mattered**

Mainstream psychotherapy has avoided critical analysis necessary for addressing the current environmental crisis, and, in many cases, has supported behaviors that are responsible for it. Ecotherapy takes a more radical position, resisting, and speaking against, the avoidance of these political and social issues.

### **Recognizing Grief and Trauma Caused by Environmental Destruction**

Drawing from systems theory, ecotherapy views grief and trauma caused by environmental destruction as inseparable from other forms of loss and trauma. Global warming, species extinction, loss of place, and other environmental disorders are respected as immediate concerns to be addressed within psychotherapy.

### **Encouraging Nature-Connection Practices**

There is a wealth of empirical research that supports the healing capacity of nature. Nature connection practices include, but are not limited to, horticultural therapy, animal-assisted therapy, adventure therapy, and wilderness rites of passage.

## **Techniques**

Ecotherapy does not adhere to any specific techniques *per se*, rather it works from an attitude of reciprocity and interdependence. It is by holding this stance that transformation and healing come about. Nevertheless, there are various practices and methods that some ecotherapists employ.

### **Bringing Nature into the Consulting Room**

As part of the intake session, ecotherapists might include nature related questions to assess a client's previous and current relationship with nature.

### **Taking Therapy Outdoors**

Ecotherapists commonly meet with clients in an outdoor setting. When meeting outdoors, nature becomes an essential piece of the therapeutic process.

### **Nature-Based Assignments**

Nature-based assignments take place between sessions and include directives such as spending time in a special place, devising rituals for oneself in a natural setting, and mindfulness practices in nature.

### **Use of Ritual in Nature**

Ritual and symbolic acts are often used as a way of moving beyond rational thinking and touching upon the unconscious aspects of the human-nature connection.

## **Therapeutic Process**

Ecotherapy begins with a taking a philosophical stance that surpasses modern dualism and repositions humans within the larger community of all beings. Ecotherapy does not adopt a clinical model of diagnosis and treatment, rather it functions on the premise that by becoming conscious of one's inherent connection with nature, a psychic shift takes place that brings about a greater sense of intimacy with self, others, and nature.

Ecotherapy is not concerned with alleviating symptoms as it is with facilitating wholeness. Thus, ecotherapy is a non-invasive form of therapy that relies on a non-judgmental, accepting, and genuine attitude by the therapist.

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*See Also:* Archetypal Therapy, Analytical Psychology (Jungian Therapy), Adventure-Based Therapy, Animal Assisted Therapy, Ecowellness, Nature-Guided Therapy, Ecotherapy, Transpersonal Psychology.

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