

THE BENEFITS OF ECOTHERAPY ON MENTAL HEALTH



Grades 8-12

The Power of Paying Kindness Forward

Health Education, Outdoor Education and English Language Arts

Purpose of the Lesson:

Being outside and spending time in nature can have extremely positive effects on mental health and wellbeing. There is actually a therapeutic technique that relates to this concept. **Ecotherapy**, “also called nature therapy, is a type of mental health therapy that involves experiencing nature to remediate mental health symptoms and boost overall well-being”. This lesson explores the benefits of ecotherapy and connects it to both health education and social studies. Understanding our relationship with nature and place can have a deeply positive impact on mental health. In this lesson, students are invited to explore different types of ecotherapy techniques and document the results in a social studies journal. The closure of this lesson highlights the importance of conserving nature so we can continue to reap the benefits of being in it.

Curriculum Competencies:

Health and Physical Education (Grade 9/10)

- Participate daily in physical activity designed to enhance and maintain health components of fitness (Grade 9/10)
- Describe how students’ participation in physical activities at school, at home, and in the community can influence their health and fitness (Grade 9)
- Explain how developing competencies in physical activities can increase confidence and encourage lifelong participation in physical activities (Grade 10)
- Propose healthy choices that support lifelong health and well-being (Grade 9)
- Identify and apply strategies to pursue personal healthy-living goals (Grade 9/10)
- Reflect on outcomes of personal healthy-living goals and assess strategies used (Grade 9/10)
- Analyze strategies for promoting mental well-being, for self and others (Grade 9)
- Analyze how health-related decisions support the achievement of personal healthy-living goals (Grade 10)
- Assess and evaluate strategies for managing problems related to mental well-being and substance use, for others (Grade 9)
- Evaluate and explain strategies for **promoting mental well-being** (Grade 10)
- Describe the relationships between physical activities, mental well-being, and overall health (Grade 10)

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Outdoor Education (Grade 11/12)

- Participate in a variety of outdoor activities (Grade 11/12)
- Develop and demonstrate a variety of skills for outdoor activities (Grade 11/12)
- Explain how developing competence in outdoor activities can increase confidence and encourage lifelong participation (Grade 11/12)
- Understand their strengths and areas for growth (Grade 11/12)

English Language Arts

- Use an increasing repertoire of conventions of Canadian spelling, grammar, and punctuation (Grade 9)
- Use and experiment with oral storytelling processes (Grade 9)
- Select and use appropriate features, forms, and genres according to audience, purpose, and message (Grade 9)
- Transform ideas and information to create original texts (Grade 9)

After grade 9, English Language arts splits off into different content areas. However, this lesson plan is still suitable for grades 10-12.

First Peoples Principles of Learning:

- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).
- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions.
- Deep understanding of place and connection to the natural world.

Video

[The Benefits of Going Outside - The Atlantic](#)

Guiding Questions:

- How do you feel when you're in nature?
- Do you find a shift in your mood when you're in the natural world?
- Does being out in nature feel like a mental health break?
- Do you intentionally spend time outside when you're feeling a certain way? Happy or sad?

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Step-by-Step Lesson Plan

Preparation: Queue up video/set up projector

1. Have the students watch the video “The Benefits of Going Outside” This can be found **HERE**.

2. Pause the video and use the Guiding Questions to spark discussion.

3. Begin the lesson by discussing with your students the concept of Ecotherapy. Explain to them that ecotherapy is a therapeutic practice designed to connect individuals with nature in an attempt to boost their overall mental health and wellbeing.

Here are the different types of Ecotherapy:

- Community gardening or farming. Gardening with neighbors on shared land offers the chance to grow your own produce, build relationships, and spend time working outdoors. Some programs also teach basic farming tasks like tending animals or crops.
- Wilderness or adventure therapy. This approach to mental health treatment teaches coping techniques and therapeutic skills to teens and young adults as they camp and hike in the wilderness with their peers.
- Park prescriptions. Increasing numbers of healthcare providers and mental health professionals are starting to recommend that people spend a specific amount of time each week visiting a park or pursuing other outdoor activities.
- Forest bathing. Slightly more than a walk in the park, this practice encourages the mindful use of your five senses as you ramble through forests or similarly tree-heavy settings.
- Animal-assisted therapy. Petting, playing, or working with animals like horses, dogs, and birds outdoors can offer another way to manage stress.
- Outdoor meditation and yoga. Yoga and meditation offer well-established benefits, but they might prove even more rewarding outside.

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4. Have your students reflect on how being in nature makes them feel in a Think-Pair-Share. Get them to discuss experiences they've had in nature with a partner. These can be stories of camping experiences, hikes, fishing trips or simply walks around the block. Then get two sets of partners to discuss these experiences with each other. You should encourage students to use this time to really reflect on how nature makes them feel. Discussing these experiences with one another will help inform their predictions for the main activity of this lesson.

5. Explain the curriculum connections to your students. Inform them that they will be participating in an informal version of Ecotherapy as the active component of this lesson. If possible you could plan this ecotherapy as a class trip, where all of the students decide what activity they want to do and you execute that activity as a class. If this is not an option, you should have your students do some form of Ecotherapy for at least 30 minutes on their own. During this time, inform them that they should leave their phones/other technological devices at home so they can actively engage in the activity and with their natural surroundings. Have them choose from the list of Ecotherapy techniques listed above that you have already walked them through. Either while they are participating in the Ecotherapy or shortly after, have your students journal about their experience. Explain to them that reflective journaling is a way for them to track their feelings about an experience. This will also be a way for you to gauge their understanding of the purpose of the activity and their level of engagement if you are unable to do this together as a class.

Here are some journaling prompts you can provide to your students to get them started:

- Being out in nature made me feel....
- My favourite part of the Ecotherapy activity was....
- Something that challenged me about this experience was....
- One thing about this experience I would definitely do again is....
- Something I would do differently next time would be....

Accommodations/modifications:

- Students who are visually impaired can use you or a family member as scribe for their journal or they can use a talk to text function on their technology
- Students whose first language isn't English can write their journal in their first language and you can help them translate it to English

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Step-by-Step Lesson Plan

6. Active Reflection. After your students have participated in Ecotherapy and written their reflective journal entries on their experiences, have them participate in a debrief as a class. This can either come in the form of small group or pair discussion, or they can read their journal entries outloud to the class. Choose whatever method you feel suits your students best. This is an opportunity for them to reflect on whether they saw the benefits of their Ecotherapy activity, how being out in nature made them feel and whether or not this is something they could see themselves doing consistently to support their mental health.

7. Lesson Closure. Discuss with your students how we need to take care of nature so nature can continue to take care of us. Being outdoors is such a privilege and can greatly support our mental health and wellbeing. In order to reap the benefits of nature, we need to continue to work to protect it. Some questions you can pose to your class during this discuss are:

- How is nature conservation connected to mental health?
- What can I do to continue to/begin to protect the natural world?
- How can my participation in nature conservation support the mental wellbeing of others and myself?