



Guide for therapy centres and vocational training institutions on ecotherapy for substance abuse disorders



TABLE OF CONTENTS



ONE

- 02 1. Introduction**
- 03 1.1 Why this guide
- 03 1.2 Definition of Ecotherapy
- 04 1.3 Current use of ecotherapy in project countries

TWO

- 08 2. Analysing the positive potential of ecotherapy**
- 08 2.1 Benefits of ecotherapy
- 11 2.2 Potential barriers to the implementation of ecotherapy
- 12 2.3 Conclusion

THREE

- 15 3. Good practices in the field of ecotherapy**
- 15 3.1 Good practices from Germany
- 18 3.2 Good practices from Spain
- 20 3.3 Good practices from Greece
- 22 3.4 Good practices from Portugal
- 25 3.5 Good practices from Denmark

FOUR

- 30 4. Tips for implementation**

FIVE

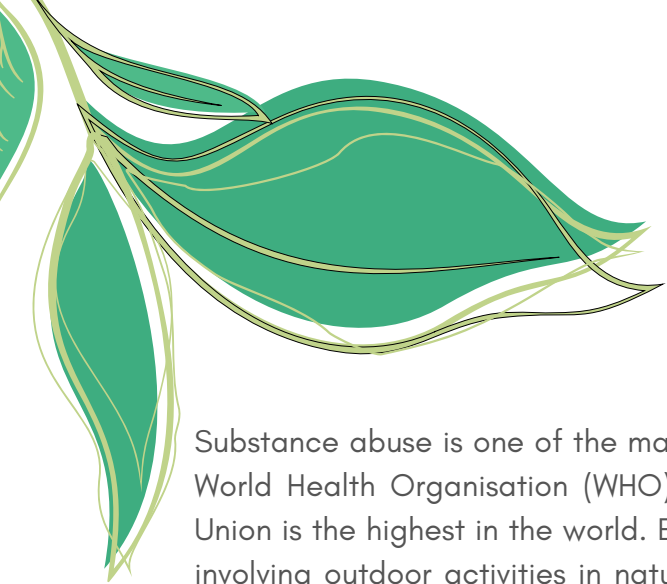
- 33 5. Recommendations**

- 35 References**

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION





1. INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse is one of the major challenges facing EU societies. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), per capita alcohol consumption in the European Union is the highest in the world. Ecotherapy is a formal type of therapeutic treatment involving outdoor activities in nature (e.g. gardening, outdoor exercise, cycling, etc.). Its benefits can have a tremendous impact on the rehabilitation process of people suffering from substance abuse disorders. Despite the research carried out in the field of ecotherapy and its positive effects on health disorders, this method is still not used in the field of substance abuse disorders in Europe.

To fill this gap, the project Eco-Therapy for people with substance abuse disorders aims to develop educational materials and interactive training resources in the field of ecotherapy for training and therapy centres, trainers and counsellors. One of these resources is this guide. Aimed at vocational training and therapy centres, the guide describes the benefits and best practices for using ecotherapy. It also provides practical guidelines for the delivery of vocational training courses in ecotherapy.

Eco-Therapy is a two-year project that aims to develop and enhance the skills of professionals to better support people with addiction problems by introducing an innovative ecotherapy approach in vocational training institutions and treatment centres.

The guide is based on the results of desk and field research carried out by the project partners in Germany, Spain, Denmark, Greece and Portugal. The desk research consisted of the mapping of best practices in the field of ecotherapy at local, national and EU levels and besides studies of current curricula with the aim of identifying gaps. The field research consisted of interviews with professionals and trainers on ecotherapy and its potential. In each partner country drug and alcohol abuse counsellors, trainers from vocational education and training institutions (VET) and also representatives of therapy centres were interviewed.

1.1 WHY THIS GUIDE

The beneficial effects of connection with nature on psychological well-being have been recognised since ancient times. However, it was only recently that scientists examined these effects using experimental research (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Jordan & Hinds, 2016) and the term ecotherapy was recently coined to refer to “the healing and the growth that is nurtured by healthy interaction with the earth” (Clinebell, 1996). Today, ecotherapy (or nature-based therapy) is known as a therapeutic approach that uses natural outdoor space to promote human well-being (Corazon, Nyed, Sidenius, Poulsen, & Sigdotter, 2018).

Despite its potential, which is supported by relevant research, ecotherapy has not yet been utilised and adopted in VET training for any kind of professional groups. On the other hand, desk research carried out in all countries of the consortium has also shown how ecotherapy, although known, is not regularly used as a main treatment in therapy centres but as an alternative therapy. A further aim of this guide is therefore to shed more light on the potential of ecotherapy as a therapeutic method and to break down some of the prejudices surrounding the method. In the guide we will highlight the strengths and opportunities of the therapy and make suggestions on how to address and work with barriers in the use of ecotherapy as a therapeutic method in VET training and therapy centres.

1.2 DEFINITION OF ECOTHERAPY

Ecotherapy is an umbrella term that includes various practices (Chaudhury & Banerjee, 2020). Social and therapeutic horticulture includes activities such as passive appreciation of gardens, active gardening, or vegetable growing. Animal-assisted therapy uses domesticated animals (e.g., dogs, horses, dolphins) for therapeutic purposes. Care farming refers to the therapeutic use of agricultural landscapes and farming practices (e.g., looking after animals, crop management). Environmental conservation, which refers to engaging in conservation activities for the promotion of health and well-being, also falls within the boundaries of ecotherapy. In turn, green exercise includes walking and other physical exercise in outdoor spaces, while nature arts and crafts are concerned with doing art outdoors or with natural material. The, so called, wilderness therapy refers to the interaction with nature in remote location leading to self-discovery and change and outdoor adventure therapy, is defined as “a therapeutic modality combining therapeutic benefits of the adventure experiences and activities with those of more traditional modes of therapy” (Newes & Bandoroff, 2004). Finally, there are specific ecotherapy techniques that promote the interaction with wild or semi-natural areas of nature (e.g., interactions with birds, wildlife, plants, experiencing nature or cherishing memories of such interactions). Ecotherapy can be used either as a therapeutic or preventive approach with positive effects on various aspects of well-being. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis on the effects of nature-based outdoor activities on mental and physical health,



showed that such activities lead to improvements in depressive mood and positive affect and to reductions in anxiety and negative affect, while the effects on indicators of physical health were less clear (Coventry et al., 2021). Another systematic review of randomised control trials of ecotherapy interventions in individuals with mental disorders corroborate these findings, by showing that practices such as therapeutic horticulture, forest therapy, and animal-assisted therapy can effectively reduce symptoms of anxiety, depressive, schizophrenia-spectrum, trauma- or stress-related, and substance-related or addictive disorders (Williams, Barnwell, & Stein, 2020).

Specifically, research in the field of substance use disorders (SUD) has shown that horticultural activities, integrated adventure therapy programs, and wilderness therapy are useful in substance use treatment (Chaudhury & Banerjee, 2020). For example, therapeutic horticulture programs that have been implemented with prisoners with a history of substance use have been shown to lead to significant reductions in vulnerability to addiction (Richards & Kafami, 1999) hostility, risk-taking, substance use, and depression at release (Rice & Remy, 1998). Also, a 3-day program based on integrated principles from adventure therapy, therapeutic camping, and relapse prevention led to significant improvements in autonomic arousal, frequency of negative thoughts, and alcohol craving among 13 people with SUD (Bennett, Cardone, & Jarczyk, 1998). Thus, ecotherapy is a promising therapeutic approach for the treatment of mental disorders and specifically for the treatment of SUD.

1.3 CURRENT USE OF ECOTHERAPY IN PROJECT COUNTRIES



The concept of ecotherapy is widely used in **Germany** under different terms. Literally translated, it is in most cases nature therapy. The 'new nature therapies' include garden therapy, landscape therapy, forest therapy, animal-assisted therapy, green care, green meditation, ecological health, and eco- psychosomatic. There is no state-recognised training in the field of ecotherapy in Germany.

However, there is a hardly manageable abundance of private providers offering specialised further training for people with sound training in the educational, psychological or health sectors. Since the sector is not regulated by the state, its professionalism is not always immediately apparent. However, there are some initiatives that approach the topic scientifically and are keen to teach the most up-to-date science-based methods and also "certify" other training providers:

German Institute for Nature Therapy, Forest Therapy / Forest Medicine and Green Care is recognised for the development of training standards for scientifically based New Nature Therapies as well as the promotion of research and teaching.

The Competence Centre for Forest Medicine and Nature Therapy creates quality standards for professional further education and training of forest health trainers and forest therapists.

Regarding the possibility to implement ecotherapy in **Spain**, this country has extensive natural resources in which ecotherapy activities can be carried out, with a total area of forest and natural sites of a total of 26.280.281 hectares (52% of the total area of forests and natural sites). However, despite the high demand of people who could benefit from this type of therapy and the existence of natural space and



resources where it can be carried out, it is not common to find ecotherapy as part of training programmes or as the basis of therapeutic centres. This can be related to the lack of legislation for this therapy. In Spain, ecotherapy is considered as an alternative therapy, which could be included in the group of Natural Therapies. At the present time, no official document has been found that regulates ecotherapy legislation.



In **Portugal** ecotherapy, as an umbrella term for the nature-based approaches to healing, is also relatable to other known practices such as "Forest Therapy", "Nature Therapy" or "Forest Bathing", designations that are more common in some European southern countries. Ecotherapy as a term however, is an expression that is not commonly used in Portugal. Although the expression "ecotherapy" is not the most popular in Portugal, neither the terminology nor its principles rest unknown.

However, "Forest Therapy" is the commonly used designation. The "Forest Therapy" and "Forest Bathing" experiences are offered by some companies in Portugal to the general public, but training and certification in those areas remain a prerogative of extra national organisations. Even though ecopsychology and ecotherapy are gaining some prominence in Portugal⁸, the access to it appears to be rather limited when it comes to existing offers and the reached target-groups.

In **Greece**, there is a wide range of offers and initiatives which are not targeted specifically at people with an addiction problem, but are rather aimed at healthy individuals, economically vulnerable populations, or in the form of promoting exercise in nature. In addition, there have been several initiatives aimed at preschool education where education takes place outdoors in nature.



Another initiative is experiential ecopsychology workshops, offered to adults, adolescents, and children mainly for purposes of personal development and well-being, but also for therapeutic purposes to people with mental disorders under supervision of their therapist. For people with mental disorders, ecotherapy practices have also been applied in various mental health institutions, implementing e.g. animal-assisted intervention programs and therapeutic horticulture programs.

Very few applications of ecotherapy were identified in the field of addiction treatment however. One of few examples is a social reintegration program in which people with SUD and in general people with mental disorders are given the chance to engage in activities such as maintenance of green spaces, care farming, and visits to greenhouses.



In Denmark ecotherapy as a term is not widely applied as a common term within substance abuse treatment and rehabilitation, but research on the internet reveals that the terms Natural Therapy or Green Care are applied as umbrella-terms with various therapeutic initiatives with nature as the focal point. Although the term ecotherapy is not widely applied in Denmark, the methods are well known and are gaining greater ground in treatment options for various physical and mental disorders and challenges. It is now widely recognized that nature has "healing powers" for body and mind, and several psychologists deliberately conduct their sessions in nature, with a focus on nature's positive influence on the psyche.

The University of Southern Denmark at the Faculty of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences a PhD. D research project developed an evidence-based education in Natural Therapy. The 1-year education is called NBMC and includes 8 modules of 2-4 teaching days each. Another treatment scheme is the HB model, integrating three conceptual models: A bio-psycho-social alcohol and drug treatment model, a holistic health model and a relapse prevention therapy model. The model is fully compatible with: ICD-10 Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems.



CHAPTER TWO

ANALYSING THE POSITIVE POTENTIAL OF ECOTHERAPY



2. ANALYSING THE POSITIVE POTENTIAL OF ECOTHERAPY

In the first phase of the project, the partners carried out extensive national research and interviews with experts to further explore the potential of ecotherapy. Based on this research, the partners conducted a SWOT analysis to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

However, the mission of this phase was to prepare a guide targeted at VET institutions and therapy centres, which will outline the benefits, best practices and testimonies for the use of ecotherapy. The SWOT analysis therefore merely serves as indicators of identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

However, in the following we will primarily focus on the strengths and opportunities of the therapy, described together as benefits.

The identified weaknesses and threats, described together as potential barriers to the implementation of ecotherapy, are briefly reviewed subsequently.

2.1 BENEFITS OF ECOTHERAPY

Several factors may indicate an emerging and positive attitude toward ecotherapy and its dissemination. The novelty and attractiveness of ecotherapy is one thing, combined with the popularity of nature and outdoor activities after the pandemic as another factor. The popularity of nature and outdoor activities of course applies to most people in general, however, there seem to be several obvious benefits of nature's positive influence on humans from a treatment perspective.

Overall there seems to be multiple physical and mental benefits of ecotherapy applied in the treatment of alcohol and drug addiction. Research shows improvement in the rehabilitation process as a consequence of positive aspects of contact with nature.

The observed positive signs of this process are expressed as; a reduction of stress and anxiety levels combined with an increased self-awareness, attention and self-esteem. This positive impact of ecotherapy in addiction treatment has led to an increase in interest of people in therapeutic centres, in new activities and forms of therapy. Ecotherapy can be used either as a therapeutic or preventive approach with positive effects on various aspects of well-being.



A recent systematic review and meta-analysis on the effects of nature-based outdoor activities on mental and physical health, showed that such activities lead to improvements in depressive mood and positive affect and to reductions in anxiety and negative affect, (Coventry et al., 2021). Specifically, research in the field of substance use disorders (SUD) has shown that horticultural activities, integrated adventure therapy programs and wilderness therapy are useful in substance use treatment (Chaudhury & Banerjee, 2020). Furthermore, research in “forest bathing” has shown that many types of addiction are associated with mental distress such as anxiety, stress and depression. The term emerged in Japan in the 1980s as a physiological and psychological exercise called *shinrin-yoku* - “forest bathing” or “taking in the forest atmosphere”. By alleviating mental distress, recovery rates can be improved (Kotera & Rhodes 2020). In the 1990s, researchers began studying the physiological benefits of forest bathing, providing the science to support what we innately know: time spent immersed in nature is good for our immune system (Li, 2010).



Ecotherapy helps to break negative behavioural patterns, facilitating the therapy process - applied as activities in nature which can divert the addict's focus from addictive stimulants to nature's stimuli and their positive effects on the body and mind, by reducing negative and intrusive thoughts and thoughts associated with drug use. The national studies also show that for some, ecotherapy can actually make therapy sessions fun in the sense that although it may also be conversational therapy, it is perceived differently and positively when it takes place in nature, compared to traditional therapy. It gives the possibility for counsellors to combine the client's personal interests/hobbies with therapy in a more classical sense, but in the context of nature. Thus, the therapy provides new methods to gain access to clients and gain their trust. The simple principle is that since the vast majority of people have positive experiences associated with activities in nature, the positive influence of nature can be used in a therapeutic context in addiction treatment, tailored to the wishes and needs of the individual.



Studies described in the national reports also show that the therapy can promote the acquisition of soft skills and sustainability notions towards individual values that had previously been ignored.

Based on successful experiences in nature, e.g. walking 5 km, the clients can strengthen their belief that other goals in life can also be achieved. In this way, nature becomes a source of positive change and perhaps even a catalyst for new goals. This will boost the happiness and motivation of the individual and possibly increase the avoidance of relapse.

With increasing well-being due to the effects of ecotherapy, increased motivation and an increased sense of usefulness will be likely results. Furthermore, personal progress, as a result of activities in nature, can help to promote a greater degree of responsibility in decision-making towards healthier lifestyles in general.

Reduced isolation is one of the benefits also emerging from the national studies. In this context, several of the therapeutic treatment services in nature are organised as group activities, where people share with like-minded people to use activities in nature as a therapeutic intervention for the individual. Being with others can help addicts not to feel alone with their challenges.

Based on the research, the ecotherapy seems to foster a higher degree of client/counsellor communication and improvement of the therapeutic bond. An increased client/counsellor communication can also be considered as the best starting point for improvement in the treatment and rehabilitation of people with substance abuse.

In a vocational education and training (VET) perspective, so far ecotherapy is not/barely represented in VET. C-VET organisations have flexible curricula into which they can incorporate new content (as long as it is not specifically certified training), offering a unique selling point for the training of therapists or therapy facilities.

In the framework of this project, there are many professional groups that work with persons with addiction problems without being therapists themselves, such as youth workers, social workers, family helpers, etc. For the project it could be more promising to create training content for such professional groups than for psychologists, psychotherapists or similar. These professionals are usually freer in their choice of methods than professional therapists who are, in some cases, paid by health insurance companies. Substance Use Disorder (SUD) treatment offered by various professions could benefit from such training, methodically improving the training of trainees to deal with people with substance abuse problems, incorporating nature as a therapeutically resource.

One of the aims of this project is to prepare a guide targeted at VET institutions and therapy centres, which will outline the benefits, best practices and testimonies for the use of ecotherapy and provide practical guidelines on how to implement VET courses on ecotherapy. This will provide the VET institutions the possibility to include these practices into the VET curricula.

However, as became clear in the partners' SWOT analysis, there are some barriers to consider, when implementing VET courses on ecotherapy.

Although these barriers should not be regarded as an obstacle to the provision of knowledge and training in this area, we will address the barriers below as an awareness in relation to the implementation of ecotherapy.



2.2 POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ECO-THERAPY

Ecotherapy is not yet broadly recognised with its official term and must compete with an abundance of evidence-based educational programmes. Research shows that in several countries ecotherapy is currently used as an alternative therapy and not as the actual treatment of alcohol and drug addiction.

This may be caused by a misconception of the therapy as pseudo-therapy due to lack of knowledge on the subject and scientific studies that support it, considering ecotherapy as a non-scientific or less scientific approach.

Many professionals do not have the knowledge and training to apply ecotherapy as an actual treatment, due to the lack of recognised training in the field. For some it is considered as leisure activities rather than therapy which may induce reluctance to adopt new forms of therapy or reluctance to adopt new training opportunities.

Another identified barrier relates to the very framework for practising the therapy. These include the need to be taught in natural spaces that are not accessible to everyone combined with logistical and structural disadvantages of the centres (e.g., location) making it difficult to implement these activities if centres are not located close to nature. Unpredictable weather conditions might also contribute to the non-selection of this therapy as a standard.

From an individual perspective it is noticed that it may not fit everyone – not all individuals are interested in outdoor activities and the therapy is therefore not suitable for everyone (counsellor as well as client). It requires a personal commitment from counsellors to take up training in order to properly make use of the benefits of the therapy. For this reason some counsellors may find it difficult to implement (requires resources, organisation, infrastructure). Some professionals argue that it cannot be introduced at the beginning of the therapy as it may distract the client from the therapeutically process.

New practices need to be part of the therapeutic protocol of professionals which can be affected by a need for validation from regulatory bodies, causing lack of support and funding to implement activities of this type in therapy centres due to e.g. no cost coverage by health insurance. This can lead to difficulties introducing new practices in public centres. Limited space in curricula is also a factor mentioned, however, this is indeed what this Guide is targeting to change, informing of the benefits of ecotherapy and include both suggested content for training and guidelines on how to implement and develop such training.

2.3 CONCLUSION

As stated in the section describing the benefits of ecotherapy, the therapy has its justification in the treatment of alcohol and drug addiction. As was made clear in the country-specific sections, the major challenge of the therapy is the scarcity of knowledge about it and thus its relatively limited uptake.

However, there seems to be sufficient motivation to take the therapy further, as it has obvious benefits, treatment-wise. The recent interest in the therapy as a form of therapy that brings people into contact with nature in order to exploit its therapeutic, relaxing and revitalising properties seems to be generating a growing application in various countries. While the popularity of nature and outdoor activities applies to most people in general, however, there seem to be several obvious benefits of nature's positive influence on humans from a treatment perspective.

Research shows improvement in the rehabilitation process as a consequence of positive aspects of contact with nature. The observed positive signs of this process are expressed as; a reduction of stress and anxiety levels combined with an increased self-awareness, attention and self-esteem.



Based on the research, the ecotherapy seems to foster a higher degree of client/counsellor communication and improvement of the therapeutic bond. An increased client/counsellor communication can also be considered as the best starting point for improvement in the treatment and rehabilitation of people with substance abuse.

In terms of potential barriers to the application of ecotherapy, one clear obstacle is that the therapy is not yet broadly recognised with its official term and must compete with an abundance of evidence-based educational programmes. Many professionals also do not have the knowledge and training to apply ecotherapy as an actual treatment, due to the lack of recognised training in the field. New practices need to be part of the therapeutic protocol of professionals which can be affected by a need for validation from regulatory bodies. This can lead to difficulties introducing new practices such as ecotherapy in public centres combined with limited space in curricula as another factor mentioned.

This is however the mission of this guide, to prepare a guide targeted at VET institutions and therapy centres, which will outline the benefits, best practices and testimonies for the use of ecotherapy and provide practical guidelines on how to implement VET courses on ecotherapy.

As stated in several of the Good practices described in the section below, ecotherapy can actually be realised on a day-to-day basis and in a simple way which can be useful for those who decide to start in ecotherapy.

In a Vocational Education and Training perspective, the potential transferability / usability of the therapy for VET curricula seems obvious. With this Guide including Good practices, we offer new theoretical and practical resources and knowledge not normally found in VET curricula. Knowledge of ecotherapy activities can serve as inspiration and motivation for students to develop their own activities with knowledge already acquired or that will be acquired thanks to future results of the ecotherapy project.

CHAPTER THREE

GOOD PRACTICES IN THE FIELD OF ECOTHERAPY





3. GOOD PRACTICES IN THE FIELD OF ECOTHERAPY

As part of the project joint research into ecotherapy as a treatment for alcohol and drug abuse, it has been important to highlight good practices of where ecotherapy has made a positive difference treatment-wise, as well as on an individual level.

In this chapter will be presented a selection of good practices, selected in each of the countries. With this collection of good practices, the aspiration is to inspire the reader by illustrating how nature has been used as a therapeutic element in the treatment of addiction problems in different national contexts.

3.1 GOOD PRACTICES FROM GERMANY

Example 1: Addiction Prevention and Social Work with Nature

Objectives/aims expected by this action

Nowadays, addiction prevention is no longer limited to the mere transfer of knowledge about possible risks associated with the use of certain substances. Rather, addiction prevention today must be holistically oriented to the individual, and must consider his or her needs as well as their living environment in order to be effective in everyday life. The aim of addiction prevention is to provide people with skills and thus "tools" to master their lives and to be able to deal with challenges. The wilderness education approach is about making it possible to experience the versatile power of "wilderness" as a valuable resource and to use it in the context of health and life skills promotion.

Target group (or groups)

Since 2006, the project has been running wilderness educational activities to prevent addiction for children, young people and their families. The nature experiences support especially children from socially disadvantaged or addicted families in their personal development and promote a positive approach to nature.

Description of the activity (methods, materials, human and physical resources, timing, etc.)

The wilderness educational approach of the project is based on the so-called Coyote Mentoring - a learning and teaching method that aims to revive and deepen the connection between humans and nature.

The aim is not to accumulate sterile knowledge but to develop an intensive relationship with nature and to perceive it on many levels with all senses. Curiosity, enthusiasm, spontaneous interest, challenges, personal experiences and trust are to be awakened. The roots of this method can be found in the ways of learning and living of indigenous peoples – especially of the Indians of North America and the San of the Kalahari in South Africa. This approach is supplemented by findings from pedagogy, psychology and natural science. (Cf. Quartier, p.66ff.)

There is no teacher-student relationship as we know it from our schools in the western world. The learner is motivated and empowered through various methods to acquire knowledge and experience on his own. The mentor is completely attuned to the person being accompanied and knows that he himself also always remains a learner. He detaches himself from his own concepts and intentions and puts his expectations and goals behind.

The Coyote Mentor uses a repertoire of questioning techniques, perceptual techniques, and the power of nature connections to create a safe space of exploration and discovery for the accompanied person. This creates an informal, joyful atmosphere and it is often only afterwards that it becomes apparent what new things have been learned.

Steps for the implementation (operative steps to implement the good practice)

Wilderness education for addiction prevention is a holistic approach. It is recommended to complete a sound wilderness education training in order to be able to implement the approach.

Impact of the good practice and evaluation of the results achieved

Evaluating and assessing the impact of a preventive measure is fundamentally challenging, as one can never know what would have happened without the preventive measure.

There are some other indicators speaking for the quality and effectiveness of the approach:

The MONDORFER GROUP – who is the initiator of this approach – consists of addiction prevention specialists from various institutions in Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium and France. This interregional cooperation within the MONDORFER GROUP is based on joint ministerial agreements, signed in Mondorf-les-Bains (L) in 1992 and 1998, agreeing to strengthen cooperation in addiction prevention between the five regions: Saarland, Département de la Moselle, Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, German-speaking Community of Belgium, Rhineland-Palatinate. The first interregional wilderness educational training of the MONDORFER GROUP was already carried out in 2005. In the meantime, the training has been officially honoured by the award of the UN Decade 2011-2020 Biodiversity in the area of "Social Nature – Nature for All".

Conclusions

A representative of the project herself says: "If addiction prevention, quite simply put, is supposed to prevent people from becoming addicted, we have to ask ourselves: Does it help if we take them into the forest for a few days, expose them to wind and rain, leave them without a warm shower and play a few games with them? To our knowledge, unfortunately, this miracle has not happened. And yet, a lot has happened." Wilderness education is not the one way to prevent addiction that works. It is not for every client and it is not for every addiction prevention specialist. However, it can be a meaningful and helpful offering.

Example 2: Fachkrankenhaus Vielbach

Objectives/aims expected by this action

The Fachkrankenhaus Vielbach is a special clinic for addiction rehabilitation for men. Since the 1970s, it is a pioneer in Germany with a unique therapy concept that combines medical addiction rehabilitation with meaningful, nature-based therapeutic measures.

Target group (or groups)

Men in social problem situations with alcohol, medication, cannabis and multiple addictions.

Description of the activity (methods, materials, human and physical resources, timing, etc.)

They offer a variety of different aspects of ecotherapy. Patients have the possibility to bring their pets. The clinic has several trained therapy horses and dogs. Furthermore, in contact with animals, patients have the opportunity to experience feelings such as affection, trust and security anew. This is considered a good prerequisite for the recovery of sick souls and does not require specifically trained therapy animals. The clinic keeps donkeys and mountain goats for this purpose, for example. In addition, the clinic also offers different types of garden therapy. Experiencing nature by working in the Vielbach gardens and fields frees the patients' minds for new thinking and more conscious feeling. Patients see how small plants grow into strong plants. A lively, symbolic encouragement for the growth forces that are in everyone and thrive with proper care. Being close to nature and working in green spaces invigorates, brings joy and significantly promotes the success of your treatment. In the garden, patients can also learn to eat healthy and inexpensive food they have grown themselves.

Steps for the implementation (operative steps to implement the good practice)

The multifaceted ecotherapy approach of the Vielbach clinic is not easily replicated ad hoc. It is recommended to create nature experience spaces such as gardens, stables with animals, etc. in your facility piece by piece and to integrate their care into the therapeutic work.

Impact of the good practice and evaluation of the results achieved

Since 1977, more than 4000 rehabilitants have successfully completed their therapy there. The high success rate speaks for the therapy approach. The "nature-based addiction therapy" project practiced in Vielbach received an award from the expert jury of the UN Decade of Biological Diversity as part of the nationwide competition "Social Nature - Nature for All".

Conclusions

Unfortunately, Vielbach is the only rehabilitation facility in Germany that explicitly focuses on nature therapy, although success confirms the approach. It is also possible for these therapy approaches to be covered by health insurance, as can be seen in Vielbach. Therapy facilities would do well to draw inspiration from their example.

3.2 GOOD PRACTICES FROM SPAIN

Example 1: Senderismo y vida sana para recuperarse de las adicciones (Hiking and healthy living to recover from addictions)

Objectives/aims expected by this action

- Enjoy hiking
- Getting out of the routine of the centre
- Work on healthy leisure and free time as an important factor against relapses.
- Improve personal and social habits, facilitating interpersonal relationships and knowledge of the environment.
- Encourage values such as cooperation and tolerance.

Target group (or groups)

People with substance abuse and addiction problems (in this case, of CTA Dianova Can Parellada)

Description of the activity (methods, materials, human and physical resources, timing, etc.)

In Catalonia, with the aim of working on healthy leisure and free time to prevent relapses, in June 2018 the CTA Dianova Can Parellada organised a hiking activity in which 15 members of the centre's addiction treatment programme went on a hiking route through the Alta Garrotxa. During this activity, users had the opportunity to visit the Salt del Brull, one of Girona's natural landscapes, and to swim in the Gorg Blau, enjoying connection with nature. According to the media, the route lasted around 5 hours.

Steps for the implementation (operative steps to implement the good practice)

Go out and enjoy a day of hiking. Please note: bring water, comfortable clothes, staff able to guide you along the route.

Impact of the good practice and evaluation of the results achieved

According to the press, all users enjoyed the day and the physical activity. They were able to work different healthy leisure and free time and have a good time.

Conclusions

The implementation of activities such as the one carried out by CTA Dianova Can Parellada in Catalonia can be a good practice for other centres. These activities, which are very simple to organise and carry out, have a great benefit for the users, who learn new values and healthy leisure activities by spending a different day at the centres.

Source (press article): Dianova Spanish Association (Consulted on 25 August 2022).
Hiking and healthy living to recover from addictions. Available at:
<https://dianova.es/senderismo-recuperacion-adicciones/>

Example 2: PERMIND Project

Objectives/aims expected by this action

- Learn how to create therapeutic gardens based on the principles of permaculture
- Opportunity for adults with mental illness to learn from nature, increase their autonomy, know new people, break the digital gap, to be respectful of the environment
- Teach sustainable ways to work the land
- Train transversal competences
- Promote integration

Target group (or groups)

Adults with mental illness and professionals working with people with severe and prolonged mental illness. Project developed in Spain, Slovenia, Greece and Sweden.

Description of the activity (methods, materials, human and physical resources, timing, etc.)

In the field of Erasmus+ projects, in Valladolid the INTRAS Foundation carried out between April 2018 and April 2019 the PERMIND project. Also developed with other entities in Slovenia, Greece and Sweden the project aimed to create an online platform for professionals working with people with mental illness so that they can learn how to create therapeutic garden-gardens based on the principles of permaculture. Thus, thanks to an innovative approach to agriculture, using permaculture in the recovery process of people with mental illness, the project aims at the social and occupational integration of these people.

Steps for the implementation (operative steps to implement the good practice)

The PERMIND project created an eLearning platform for professionals so they can learn how to create therapeutic gardens based on the principles of permaculture.

Moreover, they create a mobile app for the students to interact and be an active part of their own learning process.

Impact of the good practice and evaluation of the results achieved

The PERMIND project tested its activities in each country that participated, involving around 50 people during the complete year, with the realization of four sessions during the year.

The eLearning platform has a curriculum, tutorials, case studies and instructions on "How to create a mix cooperative" that can be downloaded from the project's website: <https://www.permind.eu/learningplatform/>

Conclusions

The PERMIND project, although aimed at another target group (people with mental problems), can be considered a good practice in terms of how to introduce permaculture and nature work for integrative purposes. The materials developed in the PERMIND project can serve as inspiration within the Ecotherapy project as they start from the same basis: the use of nature to improve the situation of disadvantaged groups. In this sense, within the Ecotherapy project we can learn significantly from the methods and approach used in this project.

Source (project website): PERMIND. 2018. PERMIND Project.
Available at: <https://www.permind.eu/>

3.3 GOOD PRACTICES FROM GREECE

Example 1: Adventure Drugs Rehabilitation (ADR) : Adventure therapy program for patients in rehabilitation for substance abuse

Objectives/aims expected by this action

Adventure Drugs Rehabilitation was created in the context of The Reintegration Through Sport (RTS) project, which was approved by the Erasmus +: Sport, Small Collaborative Partnerships program.

Objectives:

- The use of outdoor sports activities to the treatment and the prevention of the use of psychoactive substances.
- The application of the Adventure Therapy methodology based on the experiential learning process to addiction treatment aiming to the life skill development
- To emerge physical activity and sports as a complementary therapeutic tool in the treatment and prevention of addictions
- To enhance accessibility and equal opportunities for people from vulnerable social groups

Target group (or groups)

Patients in rehabilitation for substance abuse



Description of the activity (methods, materials, human and physical resources, timing, etc.)

The RTS project aimed to highlight the benefits of outdoor sports activities and contribute to the creation of a secure environment, giving exdrug addicts equal opportunities, contributing to their treatment and social reintegration. The project's main goal was to develop and implement an innovative training tool based on the Adventure Therapy Methodology/Experiential learning process and outdoor sport activities in order contribute to the treatment and reintegration of ex-drug addicts.

The Pilot Implementation has been designed by Asociación Experientia in order to implement an adventure-based therapy program for patients in rehabilitation for substance abuse from KETHEA, Greece. The design and implementation of this pilot aims to develop a supportive tool to provide adventure-based interventions. In the pilot implementation, the facilitator team used adventure experiences to help achieve the client's therapeutic goals, in a 5-day adventure trip in nature. The experiences were client-oriented and connected with planned activities and goals. Clients were relating the experience to their treatment process and goals through discussion with the facilitators and their peers. The experiences had involved the clients directly, and through reflection progress, help them to make the experience concrete and relevant to their treatment plan.

Steps for the implementation (operative steps to implement the good practice)

Programming in adventure therapy involves: a planning process taking into account factors such as emotional maturity of clients

- levels of physical skills
 - social development
 - cognitive abilities
 - any mental or physical disabilities
 - a complete assessment and diagnosis of the needs of the client or group
-
- When designing and selecting adventure activities, the therapist should focus not only on the clinical objectives of the clients or the team but also on the emotional and physical safety of the clients, which is a unique aspect of this type of active intervention.
 - Careful analysis of activities toward treatment goals requires the ability to assess the needs of the client or group as well as an understanding of the activities selected for these specific goals .
 - The adventure therapy utilizes a range of activities / experiences such as goal setting, awareness, confidence activities, individual and team problem solving, processing and transfer.

Impact of the good practice and evaluation of the results achieved

The Pilot Implementation Outcome Evaluation of the RTS project was used in order to assess the accuracy, success, utility, worth, effectiveness, quality, and impact of the application of an Adventure Therapy intervention in patients in rehabilitation for substance abuse. Reasons for performing the outcome evaluation are to confirm that the objectives are being met, to justify overall effectiveness, to enhance knowledge and to identify the strengths or weaknesses of the program in scope to reduce operational problems in order to create safer practices and increase educational value, and finally to enhance capacity building of health professionals working in addiction treatment. The evaluation of outcomes also aims to improve policy decision-making of drug addiction organizations to adopt alternative counseling techniques such as adventure therapy methodology.

Conclusions

The adventure therapy offered an alternative therapeutic approach to addiction counselling. Adventure therapy has supported addicts build their self-confidence and self-esteem by helping them identify their strengths while empowering them to overcome challenges, taking responsibility, as they function in real situations and living the consequences of the decisions made. The findings also showed that adventure therapy enhanced group collaboration and team bond, as it allowed the participants to share their experiences through the activities. Finally, the participants learned new skills while they were being able to practise them. In conclusion, despite the limitations (small number of participants, lack of control group) of the pilot implementation, the outcomes show that adventure therapy interventions can work as parallel or as a complementary therapeutic tool into traditional addiction recovery therapy.

Source: Project's Handbook for Addiction Counsellors
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336074129_Adventure_Drugs_Rehabilitation_on_ADR_Adventure_therapy_program_for_patients_in_rehabilitation_for_substance_abuse_A_Handbook_for_Addiction_Counselors

3.4 GOOD PRACTICES FROM PORTUGAL

Example 1: Tiílias-coop: a therapeutic project

Objectives/aims expected by this action

- Rehabilitation of patients through their work with nature
- Contribute for their rehabilitation
- Promote their inclusion in the society

Target group (or groups)

Psychiatric patients, with depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, with addiction problems (alcoholism or drug addiction) and people with mental disabilities

Description of the activity (methods, materials, human and physical resources, timing, etc.)

During one year, they receive theoretical and practical training in gardening, horticulture and green space maintenance. The product of their work is sold to workers at the Lisbon Psychiatric Hospital Center and there are partnerships with external entities, to whom the trainees provide green space maintenance services.

Impact of the good practice and evaluation of the results achieved

Around 200 people from the target-group were impacted with this initiative.

Conclusions

The beneficiaries of this activity are less impulsive, with lower levels of anxiety and, above all, they arrive at the end of the day satisfied with the work they have produced, because the transformation of the spaces is visually evident. They sleep better, and are keen on starting a new life.

Example 2: Nature for Recovery**Objectives/aims expected by this action**

Help patients develop skills to cope with stress and anxiety, increase self-esteem and confidence, and improve overall well-being. The program is led by qualified professionals, including psychologists, occupational therapists, and ecotherapy specialists.

Target group (or groups)

Individuals who are struggling with drug addiction. These individuals may be in the process of recovering from addiction or actively seeking treatment for their addiction.

Description of the activity (methods, materials, human and physical resources, timing, etc.)

- Walks: Participants take guided walks in natural environments such as forests, parks or mountain trails. These walks are designed to help individuals reduce stress and anxiety and improve overall well-being.
- Work with plants and animals: Participants are involved in activities such as gardening or interacting with animals, which can help to improve self-esteem and confidence, and provide a sense of accomplishment.
- Meditation and relaxation: Participants are taught and guided through different forms of meditation and relaxation techniques, such as yoga or tai chi, that are practised in natural environments. These activities are aimed to help individuals achieve a sense of peace and tranquillity
- Traditional therapy: Participants also receive traditional therapy such as cognitive behavioural therapy, motivational interviewing, and individual or group therapy

All the activities are led by qualified professionals, including psychologists, occupational therapists, and ecotherapy specialists, who are trained to adapt the program according to the needs and abilities of each individual.

Steps for the implementation (operative steps to implement the good practice)

The steps for implementing the "Nature for Recovery" program for individuals recovering from drug addiction may include the following:

- Identifying the target group: The first step is to identify the individuals who are struggling with drug addiction and who would be suitable for the program. This may include individuals who are in the process of recovering from addiction or actively seeking treatment for their addiction
- Assessing individual needs: The next step is to assess the needs and abilities of each individual who will be participating in the program. This may include conducting initial evaluations and assessments to identify areas of concern and to develop a personalized plan for each participant.
- Developing a program plan: After assessing the needs and abilities of the participants, the next step is to develop a program plan. This may include identifying the specific activities and therapies that will be used, as well as determining how often the program will be offered and for how long.
- Recruiting and training staff: The next step is to recruit and train staff who will be responsible for leading the program. This may include hiring qualified professionals such as psychologists, occupational therapists, and ecotherapy specialists.
- Implementing the program: The program is implemented according to the plan. Activities such as guided walks, work with plants and animals, gardening, meditation, and traditional therapy are carried out as planned by qualified professionals
- Monitoring and evaluating: The program is regularly monitored and evaluated to ensure that it is meeting its goals and objectives, and to identify areas for improvement.
- Continuation support: Once the program is completed, it's important to provide continuation support, such as follow-up sessions or other activities that are designed to help individuals maintain their progress and continue to improve their overall well-being.

Impact of the good practice and evaluation of the results achieved

The impact of the "Nature for Recovery" program for individuals recovering from drug addiction can vary depending on the individual and the specific circumstances of their addiction. However, the program aims to help individuals develop skills to cope with stress and anxiety, increase self-esteem and confidence, and improve overall well-being.

The program combines outdoor activities such as guided walks, work with plants and animals, gardening, and meditation with traditional therapy such as cognitive behavioural therapy, motivational interviewing, and individual or group therapy. These activities are designed to help individuals reduce stress and anxiety, improve overall well-being and achieve a sense of peace and tranquillity, which in turn can help in the process of recovery.

Additionally, the program aims to help individuals develop a stronger connection to nature, which can provide a sense of grounding and perspective and also help to improve overall well-being.

It's important to note that the recovery process is different for each individual, and the impact of the program can vary. However, by providing a holistic approach to recovery that includes activities based in nature and traditional therapy, the program aims to help individuals overcome their addiction and improve their overall well-being.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the "Nature for Recovery" program is an example of a good practice of ecotherapy for individuals recovering from drug addiction. It combines outdoor activities such as guided walks, work with plants and animals, gardening, and meditation with traditional therapy such as cognitive behavioural therapy, motivational interviewing, and individual or group therapy. These activities are designed to help individuals reduce stress and anxiety, improve overall well-being and achieve a sense of peace and tranquillity, which in turn can help in the process of recovery. Additionally, the program aims to help individuals develop a stronger connection to nature, which can provide a sense of grounding and perspective and also help to improve overall well-being. Programs like this are important, as they provide a holistic approach to recovery that can help individuals overcome addiction and improve their overall well-being. However, it's important to note that the recovery process is different for each individual and the results may vary, regular evaluations are needed to monitor the progress and effectiveness of the program and to adjust and improve as needed.

3.5 GOOD PRACTICES FROM DENMARK

Example 1: Nature spaces

Betesda (rehabilitation centre) has been running a rehabilitative project as part of the treatment of alcohol and drug addiction over a two-year period, supported by funds from the Danish National Board of Social Affairs. The project is called Nature spaces.

Objectives/aims expected by this action

The aim was to improve the lives of people in addiction treatment by using nature as an approach in the treatment of alcohol and drug abuse. Nature Spaces at Betesda aims to improve the lives of people with mental disabilities and substance abuse by using nature and the outdoors as an approach to physical and mental health, understood as well-being, positive self-assessment and positive competence to act. Aims are also improved social skills and inclusion in positive communities including labour market or education.

Specific objectives for the target group:

- They take the initiative to use nature when anxiety, stress and depression are overpowering them
- Achieve psychological well-being, improved social skills and inclusion in positive communities
- Achieve life enhancement in the form of positive action competence in everyday situations (at home, at work and in social communities)
- Gain a stable life in their own home, establish family and friendships
- Improved opportunities to enter the labour market and/or education

Target group (or groups)

People with mental disabilities and substance abuse.

About 70% are men. About 90% are of Danish origin. Approximately 50% of the target group have been granted early retirement, approximately 45% are on transfer income and about 5% are in employment.

Description of the activity (methods, materials, human and physical resources, timing, etc.)*Background of the project*

The challenge was that Betesda's staff (paid and volunteer) needed a new approach and methods. Employees felt they had come a long way with cognitive therapies, but needed methods that sustained progress and made it permanent.

The employees would like to work on solving the challenge: How to create natural situations where participants experience positive self-esteem as a prerequisite to act positively and make good choices? How can this assessment be transferred to everyday situations?

Nature activities

Betesda has a garden with paths, lawns, trees, plants, benches, tables, fire pit, pond, shelter etc., as well as bicycles, petanque, football and volleyball courts.

During the project period, there have been two weekly scheduled nature activities from 15.45 to 17.00, where participation was compulsory. The activities have included cycling on mountain bikes and racing bikes, running and walking as well as shooting with bow and arrow, petanque, football and/or volleyball. Participants and staff have also been cycling, running or walking on Betesda's grounds or in the area, been in the garden, sat by the pond or the bonfire site, etc.

On average, 2 nature activity Saturdays per month (most spring, summer and autumn) from 12.30 -16.30 there have been longer bike rides, fishing trips, sailing, bird of prey shows, farm visits and trips to natural areas - forest, beach, lakes, rivers, bathing lake, hills, parks etc.

In Betesda's kitchen garden, participants plant different vegetables. Something has to happen at the right time and the vegetables need to be fertilised and watered. At the same time, working with the vegetable garden provides general knowledge and exercise.

As a natural consequence of participating in nature activities, participants become curious about what is going on in nature and learn to be and learn to pay attention, see, smell and listen when they go for a walk or a bike ride, for example. They have rarely used their senses in nature before.

Steps for the implementation (operative steps to implement the good practice)

It is a big challenge to get participants to want to be active and get out in nature. They feel they have enough problems as it is. You can't start something up for everyone all at once because they are different in their abilities. One may be ready to go out and look at birds, and another is not. It has to be adapted so that one is not under-stimulated and the other doesn't lose heart because it's too hard".

However, there are a number of issues from their past lives that staff can work on. Some addicts are used to being out for many hours a day because the search for drugs takes place outside. It is not far off for them to be out cold or to be enduring.

To motivate participants, staff take the lead and engage in what they think is exciting. For example, one staff member is an avid exerciser and one is a scout leader. The enthusiasm of the staff is contagious and motivates the participants.

Staff ask about participants' interests, and try as far as possible to accommodate them. These may be childhood activities that are recalled. For example when a participant remembers fishing trips with his father.

Participants are included in the planning of activities to motivate them. The following are obtained information on the different nature activities and experiences available in the area, and information is read together and staff ask, for example, "Would you like to try a bison burger? Would you like to have your picture taken with a big owl? Have any of you ever seen an eagle?" When it becomes the participants' own desires and decisions, interest in participating increases.

Nature activity plans are drawn up for each participant so that they know what they are doing on a given day. Even if participants do not always want to participate, they should do so anyway, as nature activities have become an integral part of the treatment. For example, if you don't want to fish, you can attend a barbecue instead.

Testimonials

The project manager says: "We have a participant who just got clean. When he came, he couldn't walk 50 metres or up the stairs. He was completely crippled due to lack of musculature and lack of flexibility in joints and tendons. As a first goal, we agreed with him to go down and get the newspaper. The next goal was for him to walk around the triangle, which is a longer walk. He also wanted to go and be standing under a windmill. The world suddenly became bigger for him. He rides a bike now, balance and all. At one point he suggested we go mountain biking in the terrain".

Project manager: 'Participants are very impressed with themselves when experiencing nature. They have success experiences, for example, getting a fire going with ironing sticks. Nature is an easy and accessible place to start in terms of building people. Many times they can do more than they think if they can stay calm and focused. For example, "Wow - I could walk 3 miles". Participants learn to see and feel themselves differently in nature. They get new visual impressions; their pulse quickens and their heart beats. They feel the peace and quietness. Just sitting by the beach without saying anything is ok. I have a lovely picture of them sitting in a row, watching and doing nothing. As one participant says: "A sunset takes the time it takes".

Impact of the good practice and evaluation of the results achieved

In nature, people with alcohol or drug abuse can experience accomplishment. They take pride in painstakingly gathering wood for a fire, getting it lit, carved a bread roll instead of buying one, etc. It's easy to have talent in nature. If you can tie a double knot, you have talent. They discover they have some skills they didn't think they had, and that gives them a belief that they can do something in other areas too.

When participants go cycling in the countryside, they have to wear a bicycle helmet. Most of them think it's too childish. But it's a way of learning self-care.

Participants need to feel that they can take back control of their own lives. But this to do so in a healthy and constructive way. By doing so with activities and stays in nature, they get to experience a whole new "them" and whole new sides of themselves that contaminated, but untainted and untouched.

The nature project has become an integral part of treatment at Betesda. Before the treatment consisted of 95% talks, teaching and workshop and 5% nature. Today nature represents 20% and shapes the treatment programme, the pedagogical thinking and actions, planning and understanding of the participants.

Betsda's results are above the national average. 29% are still drug-free after 5 years. The national average is 20% 26.

The project has shown that being in nature strengthens participants' ability to achieve health, inner peace and balance. The negative self-image is replaced by a positive one and a desire to be part of a community. Interest-based communities are created between current and former participants, staff and volunteers.

Project goals for participants are largely achieved. Wanting to be in and be active in nature has become an internalised skill that residents are expected to maintain after their time at Betesda.

Conclusion

Nature activities have become an integral part of treatment at Betesda, and will remain so in future. Staff have acquired new knowledge and new pedagogical tools through training and practice, which they will apply in the future.

The staff feels a need to increase using nature as a therapeutic space more and also taking advantage of the fact that staff and participants are more equal, so that client-orientation and a disease focus are replaced by a relationship focus. There is a desire to make the impact of nature therapy in combination with educational methods more measurable.

Activities and stays in nature have proven to be particularly suitable for addicts. Participants can engage at different levels from walking to the mailbox and back again to participating in a longer bike ride. Nature affects addicts by providing new sights, sounds and smells that residents can engage in and talk about. Nature gives so many positive impressions that destructive thoughts fade into the background. At first for a while, but gradually more and more.

In nature, participants experience well-being and competence time and again, and this displaces negative automatic and unstructured thoughts. It keeps them motivated to get out into nature. It is especially the peace and quiet of nature that allows participants to reflect on their lives, and thoughts and dreams of a life without addiction.

In nature, participants experience new resources and that they can accomplish something, as it is easy to have talent in nature. Perseverance in nature activities is transferred to everyday tasks. By moving into nature and thereby expanding the rehabilitation space, the educational work becomes easier because there is a freer environment and nature is the arena for good, beautiful and community-building experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR

TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION





4. TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In the following section is summarised a number of tips gathered during the research. The tips are related to the implementation phase of ecotherapy, serving as points of attention for implementation. These tips combined with the experiences from the project's piloting phase will foster specific guidelines on how to implement ecotherapy in VET institutions and therapy centres.



Start small: Implementing ecotherapy activities doesn't have to be a big, overwhelming project. Start with simple activities such as nature walks or gardening and build from there.

Make it accessible: Make sure the activities are accessible to all participants, considering any physical limitations or barriers to accessibility.



Get buy-in: Involve participants in the planning and implementation of ecotherapy activities to increase buy-in and engagement.

Incorporate mindfulness: Mindfulness practices such as meditation or yoga to help participants connect with nature and focus on the present moment. Participants often have a strong fixation on the sense of sight and objects. Therefore, it can be useful to repeatedly include wide mindfulness and spatial perceptions.



Use evidence-based methods: Utilise evidence-based methods such as nature-based stress reduction or horticultural therapy to ensure the activities are effective.

Monitor progress: Monitor the progress of participants regularly and adjust as needed to ensure the activities are meeting their needs.





Safety first: Keep in mind the safety of participants and make sure that all activities are carried out in a safe and controlled environment.

Especially in contemplative meditations, it can be helpful if impulses are given again and again in the form of open questions, in order to be securely anchored in the experience and not to lose oneself. Intermittent mindful relaxed walking can be experienced as physically and mentally relaxing. Likewise, more ease can come from shifting location every so often and creating a new focus.



Since mindfulness exercises can be done alone but are often lost in everyday life, professional guidance is experienced by the client as relaxing and inspiring. Here, it is conceivable to provide small reminder cards for mindfulness exercises individually experienced as helpful in order to gradually anchor the mindfulness practice in the client's everyday life.

The offer should consist of a mixture of invitations, leaving space and offered impulses that are experienced as helpful.



As a therapist, one should be present, empathic, and appreciative of the client.

Therapists should be open to the client's experience as they modify exercises and rather extend the invitation to experiment.



CHAPTER FIVE

RECOMMENDATIONS





5. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section contains a summary of recommendations regarding the application of ecotherapy gathered from national desk and field research in Denmark, Germany, Greece, Portugal and Spain.

The desk and field research has documented the need to promote the knowledge of ecotherapy among professionals and VET, as well as to propose adequate training according to the existing needs. The lack of knowledge about this type of therapy is generalised, so it is necessary to give more importance to the theory and scientific studies that support it.

Subsequently, there is a need to support the creation of materials and tools that professionals can use to learn more about ecotherapy and its methods so that they can implement them in their professions. To this end, most professionals believe that it would be a good idea to practise ecotherapy themselves before applying it to other groups as a treatment. In other words, on-site training would be preferred by the professionals. It is also recommendable that the training courses should be dynamic and enjoyable, including theory and practice in equal measure.

Training in ecotherapy for mental health professionals who work with people with SUD should ideally be given in nature, following the principles of experiential learning. The training should include theory, examples, and practice and make use of educational techniques such as educational games, role-playing, brainstorming, discussion among trainees, and teamwork.

Many professionals, however, refer to the difficulty of carrying out ecotherapy in their centres due to the lack of natural spaces close to them. In this sense, future training should take this aspect into account and provide ecotherapy practices that can simply be carried out in common spaces, without the need to be close to a forest and/or park. This will have a positive impact on the use of ecotherapy as it will make professionals aware of the opportunities they have to implement ecotherapy in a simple way and with limited materials.

It is important to make a structural plan and to obtain sufficient knowledge and information levels in the first three months when applying ecotherapy as a treatment method. Many employees might need to be involved and all need to be properly informed. Ecotherapy should be introduced with its official term, which is not yet broadly recognised, and should be presented as an evidence-based therapeutic approach.

Specific for counsellors looking for ecotherapy training:

If you want to do additional training, then look carefully at who offers it, what the contents are and whether the trainers and providers are really qualified and renowned.

Specific for counsellors/therapists:

- Ecotherapy is not for everyone. Do not impose methods on your clients that make them uncomfortable. BUT: Ecotherapy has many different methods to offer – just because someone doesn't like gardening doesn't mean they don't like being in the forest. Be aware of the options.
- If you choose animal-assisted therapy, be aware that your approach to therapy will always be dependent on your animal. It is not a tool that you can simply replace, but your closest colleague with whom you will work in tune.

General:

- In case of a diagnosed mental illness (mental disorder, trauma,...) that manifests itself through addiction as a symptom, ecotherapy cannot replace conventional therapy. It can only be another method in the psychological treatment of a patient.
- Not only drug abuse counsellors/therapists can benefit from ecotherapy methods. Other professionals who work with people with addiction problems can also benefit.
- Just try it out with your clients. As a first step, you can just go out and walk around during therapy and observe if anything changes in your communication.

In conclusion, more information and training on ecotherapy is necessary both for the therapeutic centres and in the VET, from which the new professionals of the future will emerge. This training should be simple and clear, so that it can be used by any individual who wants to start on the path of ecotherapy.



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