



# ECO-THERAPY

Ecotherapy for people with substance abuse disorders



Substance abuse is one of the biggest challenges EU societies are facing. According to WHO, per capita alcohol consumption in the European Union is the highest in the world. Eco-Therapy is a two-year project that aims to improve the skills of professionals to better support people with addiction problems by introducing an innovative approach of ecotherapy in vocational training institutions and treatment centres. 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.

## What is ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy is a therapeutic treatment involving outdoor activities in nature (e.g. gardening, physical activity in nature, cycling, etc.). In the past months, the partners carried out comprehensive research activities and found that ecotherapy is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of 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. animal husbandry, crop management). Ecotherapy also includes environmental conservation, which refers to engaging in conservation activities to promote health and well-being. Green exercise, on the other hand, includes walking and other physical activity in the outdoors, while nature arts and crafts are concerned with making art outdoors or with natural materials. Finally, there are specific ecotherapy techniques that promote interaction with wild or semi-natural areas of nature (e.g. interaction with birds, animals, plants, experiencing nature or keeping memories of such interactions).



## The use of ecotherapy

The current use of ecotherapy in project countries varies. Although the therapy is practised in all partner countries in one form or another and under different names, the common denominator is that in none of the countries is ecotherapy used as an officially recognised form of treatment for alcohol and drug abuse, based on a commonly recognised curriculum.

## The benefits of ecotherapy

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. Ecotherapy can be used either as a therapeutic or preventive approach with positive effects on various aspects of well-being. Based on the research, the ecotherapy seems to foster a higher degree of client/counsellor communication and improvement of the therapeutic bond. 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.

## Next steps

Currently the partners are developing a Guide on ecotherapy that will provide more information on its benefits and opportunities. The Guide addresses therapy centres and vocational training institutions on ecotherapy for substance abuse disorders and is based on the results of desk and field research carried out by the project partners in Germany, Spain, Denmark, Greece and Portugal. With the Guide including good practices from the partner countries, we offer new theoretical and practical resources and knowledge not normally found in VET curricula.

## More information

Eco-Therapy is a European Erasmus+ project co-funded by the European Union. It involves five partners from Germany, Spain, Denmark, Greece and Portugal with long experience in innovative educational projects in different thematic areas.

Project website: <https://ecotherapy.bupnet.eu/>



## Partners

Coordinator

BUPNET GmbH (Germany)

<https://www.bupnet.eu>

Ovar Forma (Portugal)

<https://centroqualificaovarforma.com>

KMOP Education Hub (Greece)

<https://education-hub.kmop.org/>

SOSU Østjylland (Denmark)

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