



Synopsis

**Guide for therapy centres and
VET institutions on ecotherapy
for substance abuse disorders**



INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse is one of the major challenges facing EU societies. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO). Ecotherapy is a formal type of therapeutic treatment involving outdoor activities in nature (e.g. gardening, outdoor exercise, cycling, etc.). 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. 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.

SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

The Eco-Therapy project 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 a 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. 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 level and besides studies of current curricula with the aim of identifying gaps.

DESCRIPTION OF OBJECTIVES

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. With the Guide for therapy centres and VET institutions on ecotherapy for substance abuse disorders, the Eco-Therapy partnership seeks to provide educational materials and interactive training resources in the field of ecotherapy for training and therapy centres, trainers and counsellors. A further aim of the 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.



DESCRIPTION OF METHODOLOGY

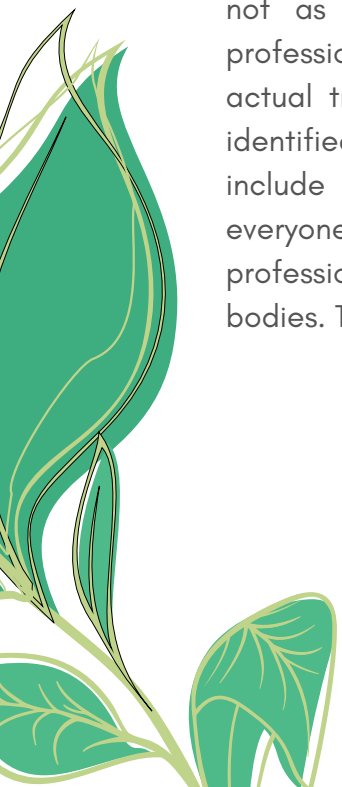
The guide is based on the results of desk and field research.

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.

Overall there seem 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 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, 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.

In general, there seem to be several advantages for VET centres and Treatment centres in implementing ecotherapy curricula and treatment modalities. However, as became clear in the partners' SWOT analysis, there are some barriers to consider, when implementing VET courses on ecotherapy.

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. Also, 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. 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. 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 in public centres.



PARTIAL CONCLUSION

Desk research across partner countries has demonstrated numerous benefits of ecotherapy used in a therapeutic context in the treatment of alcohol and drug abuse. 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. Research shows improvement in the rehabilitation process as a consequence of positive aspects of contact with nature.

In terms of potential barriers to the application of ecotherapy, one clear obstacle is that the therapy is not yet broadly recognised. 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.

SUMMARISING CONCLUSION

Research on ecotherapy 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. Furthermore, ecotherapy seems to foster a higher degree of client/counsellor communication and improvement of the therapeutic bond.

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. 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.



PERSPECTIVES

Based on the partnership's combined desk and field research, ecotherapy has its justification in the treatment of alcohol and drug addiction. In a Vocational Education and Training perspective, the potential transferability / usability of the therapy for VET curricula seems obvious. With the Guide for therapy centres and VET institutions on ecotherapy for substance abuse disorders including Good practices, the Eco-Therapy partnership offer new theoretical and practical resources and knowledge not normally found in VET curricula.





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