

# IT'S IN YOUR NATURE:

## Investigating The Effects of Nature-Based Leisure on Individuals Living With Mental Health Issues

Alexandra Manuel, B.A  
Department of Therapeutic Recreation, Douglas College



### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of nature-based leisure (NBL) on individuals living with mental health issues (MHI). Through the use of qualitative semi-structured one-on-one interviews participants defined NBL for themselves and explained the effects participating had on them. Approximately thirty minute interviews were recorded then transcribed verbatim for data analysis. The findings included the effects of NBL such as mental benefits, energy release, a way to get out of day to day routines and relationship building as well as the role their mental health issue played in relation to their NBL participation. These findings point to a need for healthcare professionals to assess an individual's level of NBL participation as a factor in diagnosis and treatment. The findings also point to a need for more education surrounding NBL for Therapeutic Recreation Practitioners, in order to integrate more NBL with clients living with MHI.



### LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been found that connecting with nature is crucial to our overall health and well-being and specifically, nature-based leisure (NBL) can allow us to reconnect with the outdoors while providing numerous benefits (Foston, 2016). There has been a large amount of evidence demonstrating the relationship between natural settings and human health (Thomsen et al., 2018). Outdoor settings can offer an exciting and creative way of engaging individuals in mental health (MH) treatment and is a unique and effective approach to psychosocial recovery (Schell, et al., 2012). Just being outdoors and in nature, far away from our high speed society has been said to have a positive effect on attentiveness and self-awareness as well as reducing feelings of pressure or stress in one's life full of deadlines and social demands (Mutz & Müller, 2016). We can see clearly that nature is important for all humans, but more needs to be known about the relationship between nature and one's MH.

### PARTICIPANTS & METHODS

- Seven research participants, both male and female, completed one to one face to face semi-structured qualitative interviews. All research participants self identified as having a MHI. The MHI's included schizophrenia, anxiety, depression and panic disorder. Participants were recruited through social media.
- Interviews were approximately thirty minutes in length with ten main questions and were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim for data collection purposes.
- Qualitative measures were the most effective as they provided intimate portraits of the participants due to the more personal subject matter.
- After transcribing, interviews were then coded in order to identify major themes.

### FINDINGS

#### NBL Defined

- Time spent doing NBL
- Time at which one does NBL
- Seasons in which one does NBL
- Type of NBL activity

#### Positive Effects of NBL

- Mental benefits
- Releasing energy
- Getting out of day to day routine
- Relationship building
- Positive impacts from MHI
- Calming effects

#### Barriers To Doing NBL

- Effort
- Weather
- Barriers due to MHI



"I'm able to think more clearly about my life and what I'm going through when everything else has been stripped away and I'm participating in NBL"  
-Participant #2

"Being in nature calms me and makes me happier, I can also see a difference in my thinking patterns and my mental self-talk is more positive"  
-Participant #4

"I find nature a place of serenity and calm that clears my head and is healing"  
-Participant #5

### DISCUSSION

- The most profound finding from *It's In Your Nature* was the positive effects of NBL. The results of these findings referred back to the research question proposing that NBL has a positive effect on individuals living with MHI.
- All seven participants commented on the positive effects of NBL in relation to their MHI.
- Participants talked about how NBL can be an escape from the day to day routine. This is supported by the Attention Restoration Theory (ART) that said interacting with environments like the outdoors that contain fascinating stimuli invokes your attention and allows you to stop thinking about other things for some time and to focus on the moment you are in (Berman et al., 2012).
- The use of the term "effects of MHI" was found in both the positive effects and the barriers section, showing that someone's MHI issue can both drive and hinder their NBL participation, being aware of these common barriers to NBL for people living with MHI can help in reducing them.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Healthcare professionals should assess an individual's level of NBL participation as a factor in diagnosis and treatment of mental health issues (MHI). If NBL participation was taken into consideration when prescribing treatment it could serve as a alternative to traditional modalities. More conversation surrounding NBL when individuals first disclose their MHI to healthcare professionals needs to occur because it can be a helpful additional treatment.
- NBL participation should be integrated more into Therapeutic Recreation (TR) services and education for both TR Practitioners and their clients. More education surrounding NBL participation in future TR Practitioners could assist in the treatment of many MHI.



### REFERENCES

- Allison, R. (2011). Engaging clients through outdoor activities. *Mental Health Practice*, 14(5), 16-19. Retrieved from <http://0-search.ebscohost.com/orca.douglascollege.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rath&AN=58793402&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Berman MG, Kross E, Krpan KM, Askren MK, Burson A, Deldin PJ, ... Jonides. (2012). Interacting with nature improves cognition and affect for individuals with depression. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 140(3), 300-305. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2012.03.012>
- Bowen, D. J., Neill, J. T., & Crisp, S. J. R. (2016). Wilderness adventure therapy effects on the mental health of youth participants. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 58, 49-59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2016.05.005>
- Foston, M. (2016). The benefits of green exercise. *Alive: Canada's Natural Health & Wellness Magazine*, 4(04), 54. Retrieved from <http://0-search.ebscohost.com/orca.douglascollege.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rath&AN=116135707&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Kelley, M. P., & Coursey, R. D. (1997). Therapeutic adventures outdoors: A demonstration of benefits for people with mental illness. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 20(4), 61. Retrieved from <https://0-search.ebscohost.com/orca.douglascollege.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rath&AN=470923382&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Knight T. M., Buyung-Ali M.L., Bowler Diana E., & Pullin Andrew S. (2010). A systematic review of evidence for the added benefits to health of exposure to natural environments. *BMC Public Health*, Vol 10, Iss 1, p 456 (2010), (1), 456. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-10-456>
- Maier, J., & Jette, S. (2016). Promoting Nature-Based Activity for People With Mental Illness Through the US "Exercise Is Medicine" Initiative. *American Journal of Public Health*, 106(5), 796-799. Retrieved from <http://0-search.ebscohost.com/orca.douglascollege.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rath&AN=114349478&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Mutz, M., & Müller, J. (2016). Mental health benefits of outdoor adventures: Results from two pilot studies. *Journal of Adolescence*, 49, 105-114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.03.009>
- Reid, C., Greaves, L., & Kirby, S. (2017). *Experience, research, social change critical methods*. Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press.
- Schell, L., Cotton, S., & Luxmoore, M. (2012). Outdoor adventure for young people with a mental illness. *Early Intervention in Psychiatry*, 6(4), 407-414. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-7893.2011.00326.x>
- Thomsen, J. M., Powell, R. B., & Monz, C. (2018). A systematic review of the physical and Mental Health Benefits of Wildland Recreation. *Journal of Park & Recreation Administration*, 36(1), 123-148. Retrieved from <http://0-search.ebscohost.com/orca.douglascollege.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rath&AN=128583008&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- What Is Mental Illness? (n.d.). Retrieved October 1, 2018, from <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness>