Nature therapy – Theoretical framework

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Abstract

This chapter presents the theory and methods of Nature Therapy, a creative therapeutic discipline that takes place in nature and relates to it as a partner in the therapeutic process. Drawing on concepts from eco-psychology, ritual and drama therapy, this chapter presents the fundamental concepts, methods and ethics of the framework.

Introduction: Nature Therapy – A Theoretical and Applied Framework

Nature Therapy is a creative therapeutic method that takes place in nature, and perceives nature as a partner in constructing a therapeutic setting and process (Berger, 2016a; 2016b; Berger & Lahad 2013; Berger & Tiry 2012; Berger & McLeod, 2006). It is used with different populations and for varied needs, such as children and adolescents with learning disabilities (Berger 2006; 2008), children and adults who have experienced trauma and loss (Berger 2016.a: Berger and Lahad 2010, 2013), individuals who are dealing with psychiatric issues (Berger and Tiry 2012), and the elderly (Berger 2009). Its framework is based on the concept of ritual. Because it is an experiential method, it is primarily suited for group work although it can be adapted to individual work.

The method integrates elements from creative post-modern therapies such as Play therapy, Drama therapy, Narrative approaches and Gestalt, along with elements from traditional rituals, and from nature oriented theories and practices such as Ecotherapy, Deep ecology, Vision quests, Adventure and Wilderness therapy. It integrates ideas from the work of individuals such as Burns (Burns 1998), Jordan & Hinds (Jordan & Hinds 2016), Whitaker (Whitaker 2010), Chown (Chown 2014), Kellen-Taylor, (Kellen-Taylor 1998) and Kopytin & Rugh (Kopytin & Rugh 2016), while developing specific concepts, methods and a code of ethics. Nature Therapy employs specific concepts and ways of doing therapy in nature and hence differs from other nature oriented therapies (see Berger, 2009).

However, like other post-modern approaches that have developed societal theories to

explain the rise of psychological distress in depression, anxiety and trauma (Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1991; Jordan & Hinds 2016, McLeod, 1997; West, 2000), Nature Therapy views the process from a psycho-eco-social perspective. It is based on the assumption that people's estrangement from nature is linked to a broad spectrum of psycho-social distress, and manifestations such as loss of self-esteem and meaning, depression, anxiety, loneliness and alienation (Berger 2009; Berger & Lahad, 2013). Thus the intervention approaches and methods are grounded in an environmental-social framework that aims to strengthen mind-body and interpersonal relationships.

Nature Therapy considers the relationship with nature as the main axis in a process that involves the use of creative methods to explore this relationship in a metaphorical and symbolic way. It is thus akin to the work of other art therapists who have developed methods implemented in nature (Chown 2014; Kellen-Taylor 1998; Kopytin & Rugh 2016; Whitaker 2010). A distinction should be made, however, between these art-based approaches and Adventure Therapy or Wilderness Therapy that tend to emphasize the concrete and verbal and have a task-oriented perspective (Berger 2009; Garst, Scheider & Baker, 2001). Note that the term "nature" as used in this chapter relates to nature as a therapeutic setting and solely in this context.

The chapter begins with a presentation of the key concepts of Nature Therapy: touching nature, the triangular therapist-client-nature relationship, and choosing the right space. It then presents two basic methods termed art within nature, and building a home in nature, and discusses the ethical issues involved. It concludes with an example that illustrates how this theory can be implemented in practice.

Concepts

The concepts of Nature Therapy provide practitioners with a conceptual framework that can help observe and evaluate the therapeutic process while developing it further. They are based on a point of view that acknowledges nature's unique and independent therapeutic contribution while relating to it as partner in the process.

Touching Nature

The core concept of Nature Therapy, consistent with the fundamental assumptions of eco-psychology and deep ecology, is the claim that by reconnecting with nature, people can

connect to their strengths and healing forces (Jordan & Hinds 2016; McGeeney 2016; Roszak, 2001; Totton, 2003). Touching Nature is a basic notion suggesting that direct contact with nature can deepen a person's connection with his/her own nature. In other words, it can connect clients to a feeling of inner power and authenticity, thus enabling them to develop and express important personal qualities. It can also cultivate the well-being of the more-than-human natural world and help to educate for ecology and development from a personal perspective. This can be a rare experience, given the intensity and fast tempo of modern life and people's shared intrinsic relationship with nature (Berger, 2009, 2005).

The triangular therapist-client-nature relationship

The triangular therapist-client-nature relationship is a central concept in Nature Therapy, which seeks to broaden the classical therapeutic relationship between therapist and client by introducing nature as the third factor. Although similar to artistic form and artistic product, which can be regarded as the third element in art therapy work, nature is a living, independent entity that gives this triangular relationship a unique meaning in the context of Nature Therapy. The triangular relationship prompts the therapist to relate to nature as an active partner in the process that impacts the design of the therapeutic setting as well as the therapeutic process itself. In this way, it differs from the perception of the artistic product as a third medium in arts therapy, because in Nature Therapy nature plays an active role and has a dynamic and a life of its own.

This concept of a triangular relationship helps the therapist decide what role to take within the therapeutic relationship. For instance, therapists can take a central, dominant role in the interaction with the client, with nature as a backdrop as a supplier of materials, an approach that can also be regarded as therapy *in* nature. Alternatively, the therapist can take a secondary position as a mediator between the client and nature by being a witness to a process occurring directly with nature, an approach that can be regarded as therapy *with* nature. In general, when the client or group is involved in investigating processes connected with relationships and interpersonal communication such as questions of trust and control, the therapist can focus on interpersonal interactions and relate to nature as a setting or as a supplier of material. On the other hand, when the client is concerned with broader issues of identity and meaning, the therapist can invite the client to interact directly with nature, its cyclicality, and its perennial sequences, and remains a witness

whose function is to intensify the individual's encounter with nature.

Clearly, in many cases, as the dynamics and the issues being examined evolve, the role of the therapist can also change. Changes in position and attitude, which can occur several times during the same session, also enable the client to move along the axis between the interpersonal and the transpersonal, and thus extend the framework and perspectives on the issues at hand (Berger, 2008, 2016; Berger & Tiry, 2012).

Choosing the right space

The concept of choosing the right space highlights the importance of the issue of space in Nature Therapy in general, and the choice of the specific space and time to work in particular (Berger & Lahad, 2013). The assumption that underlies this concept is that different natural locations, habitats and environments have a different impact upon different process and different people. A beach, a desert or a forest will have a different meaning for different clients and in different phases of therapy. An open environment like the beach can be experienced as a space that symbolizes freedom and relaxation for one person while causing anxiety and stress for another. The choice of the season and the time of day can also have an influence, and therefore should be taken into consideration in the choice of the time of the session. At sunrise and sunset, Israeli beaches are a wonderful place to work in the summer because the temperature and setting are pleasant and the symbolism of the environment can connect the individual with feelings and thoughts about the cycles of life, thus providing perspective, acceptance and hope (or sadness, loneliness and depression). However, the same beach at noon, with its high temperature and direct sunlight can be too intrusive for emotional work and therefore might be unsuitable for the therapeutic process. The concept of choosing the right space helps the therapist take these issues into consideration when selecting a suitable time and environment to work in for the specific client and for the therapeutic goal.

Back to Ritual

One of the unique features of Nature Therapy is its fundamental connection to the concept of ritual and its use in therapy. This applies to both collective ritual ideas, such as the connection between people and nature, mind-spirit-body within the community, as well as the integration of performance and arts into the therapeutic process (Berger,

2014). It also relates to the concept of the sacred space, the idea of rites of passage and the three phases that comprise rituals (Berger 2014; Marcow-Speiser, 1998; Van Gennup, 1960). By recognizing people's basic need for rituals, including helping them to deal with uncertainty, loss, sickness and transitions in life, and the role modern therapy plays in the creation of secular rituals (Berger, 2014, Jennings, 2012; Marcow-Speiser, 1998), Nature Therapy incorporates and utilizes elements in nature to create rituals. It generally does not use existing rituals borrowed from various cultures, but creates them according to the culture of the group and their connection to the here and now. It utilizes the dynamics and culture of the group, links them to collective and universal phenomena present in nature (such as the changing seasons, the transitions between high and low tide, sunrise and sunset, birth and death) and uses natural elements (water, wind, fire, earth) to create rituals that are relevant to the client and group. This approach allows clients to connect their personal to their cosmic stories by giving them a feeling of acceptance, normality and oneness. It can also help people assimilate painful stories, explore their significance in general, and in cases dealing with loss, trauma and stress in particular. The use of rituals can also help participants to link mind and body, establish a sense of connectedness and oneness within themselves, with the Other, and with things larger than the self.

Methods and intervention techniques

Nature Therapy implements several unique methods and techniques. These transform the concepts presented above into practical methods for different clients and settings. Two of these methods are presented here.

Art within Nature

Art within nature refers to selected concepts and techniques from creative arts therapy methods such as Drama therapy, Dance-Movement therapy, Visual art therapy and Music therapy as integrated into Nature Therapy. It encourages the therapist to transform psychological interpretations into a creative exploratory in and with nature (Berger & Lahad 2013, Berger & Tiry, 2012). This symbolic way of working is associated with art-based therapy concepts such as fantastic and dramatic realities (Lahad 2002; Pendzik 2006), distancing (Landy 2009) and the concept of ritual that is at the core of Nature Therapy practices (Berger 2015). In this approach, metaphors and physical-sensory

experiences with nature are believed to help the individual experience the world through additional perspectives, undergo recovery processes, and create a preferred, alternative reality.

Unlike drama therapy and other expressive arts therapies, which are usually located indoors, art within nature relates to nature as a provider of creative materials or as a backdrop for dramatic happenings. It views nature as an active partner in designing the stage, the story, and the process relating to its intrinsic value and the influence of its independent dynamics. Special attention is given to environmental phenomena and changes that can be included in therapeutic references in general, and to coping with change and connecting with "the powers that be," in particular. Therefore, a story extracted from nature and the environment can merge with the recounting of a personal challenge and can be used as a healing metaphor or the basis for a spontaneous ritual; for example, burying a porcupine can help a child cope with a father dying of cancer (Berger 2007) and immersion in water can evoke processes of birth and renewal (Berger and McLeod 2006).

By linking the personal with the universal and eternal, an individual can normalize difficult experiences, put them in a wider context, and endow them with beneficial meaning (Berger 2009; Berger and McLoed 2006). Linking individual and natural or universal coping mechanisms as well as personal or psychological time with cosmic or eternal time has great therapeutic value. It connects the individual to a sense of the eternal and affords a sense of belonging and context. This is significant in therapeutic work in general, but even more so in therapy that focuses on coping with uncertainty and loss (Berger 2016a, Berger & Lahad 2013).

Building a Home in Nature

Building a home in nature draws on people's basic need to find or create a space where they feel safe and protected from uncertainty, unfamiliarity and from the dangers of the world outside. Building a camp or a home is a well-known spontaneous activity amongst children who tend to create such spaces in their homes, neighborhoods or at school. This activity takes on even greater importance in a natural setting that is not privately owned

and contains many uncertain elements. Delineating a physical site not only provides safety in terms of the powers of nature and general uncertainty, but also defines the place of the individual with reference to others and to the environment.

Working with this model includes a preparatory stage of choosing the location, followed by building the home, and planning its ongoing maintenance. The basic assumption of the model is that this active, concrete yet symbolic process facilitates observation and work on basic intra-personal and inter-personal issues, as well as on the relationship between the individual and the environment.

The story of a child whose home in nature is located in the center of the group village will differ from the story of a child whose home is on the outskirts of town, or from someone who did not build a home, or a child whose home is invisible in terms of location and shape. The boundaries of the home will hint at the individual's inner boundaries and between this person and the environment. A home lacking boundaries will tell a different tale than a home with boundaries made of prickly bushes, or a home surrounded by a brick wall. This method of observation considers the building process, the image, shape, location and size of the home as metaphorical clues about the participant's real home. Aside from the diagnostic perspective inherent to the home in nature model (Berger 2009), it allows the individual and the group to view the home and subsequently receive feedback from the others in the group. In this case, the facilitator's intervention can induce a certain type of construction that promotes specific socialization and communication processes.

Another significant aspect of the model stems from the fact that the constructed space is larger than the individual or the group. It allows entry, offers containment, and can even host other participants, unlike other therapeutic techniques in which small models of homes are built and observed from the outside. In this model, the individual can enter the constructed home, feel the containment it provides, and even look outside from within.

Building a home from natural materials teaches the participants that they can create the reality of their lives in the immediate present from pre-existing materials, thus instilling hope and a sense of control over life and its renewed creation. Ordinary visits to the home, session after session, allow the individual to encounter basic issues of control, in light of independent changes in nature that change and redesign the home. Ongoing maintenance and confrontation with the changes caused by nature develop flexibility and

creativity, as well as acceptance of imperfection and loss of control. The physical-creative-concrete construction of a home circumvents cognitive defense mechanisms, enables the observation of additional facets of the participants' life stories and helps expand coping resources.

The Code of Ethics

Any therapeutic method or profession needs to include norms and a code of ethics which governs the therapist's work methods and provides a response to philosophical and moral questions encountered in therapeutic work in general and grey areas, in particular (Casher, 2003; McLeod, 2003; Shapler, 2006). This professional code of ethics must be related to the professional content of the specific field and deal with its particular issues (Exler, 2007). In general, the objective of a code of ethics is to ensure the right level of professionalism and to protect the client from immoral or unethical behavior on the part of the therapist (McLeod, 2003; Peled, 2003; www .yahat. org/ ethics. asp). In most cases, the ethical code is worded and determined by a committee chosen by the umbrella organization of the therapeutic field representing its members. The field of Nature Therapy is new and has not yet undergone this process (for a proposed code see Berger 2009, 2015).

The Nature Therapy method is practiced in ways similar to art therapy, but in contrast to art therapy, Nature Therapy takes place in an open, natural setting, a space not owned by the therapist, which has its own value, dynamic and life. This difference heightens the importance of ethical behavior in three main areas. The first has to do with therapist-client relations. This is connected to issues of intimacy, physical limits, physical touch and physical-emotional security, whose importance is heightened in encounters located in an open space and involving experiential and body work. Since these issues are also dealt with in expressive therapy and other mind-body therapies, Nature Therapy could adopt the ethical code defined by "Yahat" and modify it for work in the open.

The second area relates to the artistic process and its products. This is connected to issues of control and preservation of the artistic products made during therapy as well as issues of ownership. For example, the rain, the sea or a stream can change or wash away the work setting, and destroy and/or change the artistic product, which can thus disappear during therapy or from one session to the next. This raises issues concerning the client's

trust in the therapist. For these reasons, at the beginning of the therapeutic process, the therapist should describe the possible effects of natural events on the work setting, and the work products that are beyond the control of both the therapist and the client. Another concern is the question of ownership of the artistic products. For example, at the end of a creative process which was spread over dozens of square meters and included work with barbed wire and trash collected from a wooded area which also served as a pasture for cattle, the question was raised as to who the artistic installation belonged to. Some participants hoped it could be roped off until the next meeting. Clearly the installation was part of the environment and not roping it off could have harmed the animals in the area, the original occupants. Others felt that the installation and its setting had become theirs and that wanted to leave it untouched. This issue was closely connected to questions of control, physical limits and perception of space for the clients, and these came up in the therapeutic discussion and advanced it. At the same time, these issues can be seen as philosophical questions linked to perceptions of the relationship between humans and nature, which has broader implications for ethics in nature in general.

Relations with nature

This is specific to the Nature Therapy method and demands separate treatment. It touches on deep philosophical and ecological issues connected to mutual relations between humans and nature and the hierarchy that exists between them. Just as therapists adhere to obvious and unstated rules of conduct such as not stealing from clients or engaging in improper sexual behavior, it seems unnecessary to define rules governing people's respect for nature, in particular in Nature Therapy. Nevertheless, a code of ethics should include trash collection and disposal, the prohibition to pick wildflowers, the prohibition against making a campfire except in places where it is permitted, walking on marked paths, not entering reserves, and the like. Any ethical code related to nature must touch on complex grey areas that go beyond national laws, and perceptions of collective morality. For instance, during the therapeutic process, if a client wants to break branches off a tree, mark a path to the top of a hill or clear away stones from a rocky area in order to build "a home in nature," should the therapist allow the client to do these things? Is it moral or ethical? Isn't an activity in which a client actually uses elements of nature for his/her own needs exploitation, destruction of a natural habitat, or a possible form of damage to the flora and fauna of the natural environment in which s/he is working and which supplies him/her with a hospitable setting for his/her development and work? When a group goes

into the desert and tries to distance itself from civilization, is hiking on unmarked paths and sleeping outdoors, rather than remaining in a designated official campsite, ethical? If they light a fire in places not defined as campfire sites using the sparse desert vegetation which exists in the area, are those acts unethical? These are in fact topics that can be addressed in therapy and advance clients' personal and group processes.

The writing of a code of ethics is a mission that should be entrusted to a professional association. Clearly these issues should be raised at an early stage of work in Nature Therapy with clients. In this way, the expectations will be coordinated, and dealing with the issues will become part of the therapeutic contract and help define the boundaries in which the therapy takes place.

From theory to practice – an example from practice

The example below highlights the implementation of these concepts in actual therapy.

Playing in the Mud

Ron, a successful doctor, was having problems coping with the burdens which had developed while integrating a demanding career and his family life. After medication had not helped him overcome his digestive ailments, he turned to a more holistic treatment. During the first two meetings, which took place in a room, Ron described his stomach as "a hot wet sponge" which was "unpleasant to the touch". When he was asked to provide more details, he described his stomach as disgusting mud which was unpleasant to touch and unpleasant to be in. He said that on previous occasions when he had sought treatment, he was always dumbfounded when talk of the "mud" turned personal or intrusive. "I avoid touching that place. I feel like my space is being violated," he said. Searching for a way to bypass the verbal and cognitive obstacles, Ron was asked if he would be interested in holding sessions creatively in nature. He was not enthusiastic about the idea but in the hope that the treatment would help him, he agreed. A quiet spot on the riverbank was chosen and Ron was told to take his time and to get to know the area while the therapist remained in the background as a silent witness. At the beginning, the idea of taking his time and doing nothing seemed strange to him and superfluous. He felt the same about not speaking and not interacting with the therapist and even, as he described it, ignoring him. After the rationale was explained to him which related to the

concept of the triangular relationship, he began to enjoy being in nature for itself. He had a swim and even fell asleep on the bank. In conversations during each session and at the end, Ron said that he was enjoying them and that they were relaxing him. "I don't really understand what the connection is between why I came for treatment and what we are doing here, but it's nice to have a place to go to where I don't have to "deliver the goods" and I can "do nothing". It's a new and special experience for me." Later, when the relationship between him and the therapist and with nature deepened, when they got to know each other better and felt secure, Ron was encouraged to investigate the feeling of hot dry sand while he was digging in it with his hands. At the beginning, he recoiled, using branches and stones as tools and even asked the therapist to do it with him.

When he joined in, Ron gradually began to play and create in the wet sand and mud, while the therapist gradually took a step backwards and witnessed what he was doing, and from time to time, brought him a stick to dig with or water from the river, like a father with a young child. At the beginning, Ron held back and, laughingly criticized: "What am I, a child? That's what I am paying you for?" As time went by, he appeared to be enjoying the childlike nature of the activity, the spontaneous physical play and the creativity. When Ron found a place where he felt safe and secure enough to enter the muddy spot and touch it, he began to talk about painful childhood memories and how he felt that they were affecting his relationships with his own children. While playing in the mud and covering his body and primarily his stomach with it, he mused about the link between his wounds and his difficulties with closeness and intimacy, and his professional choices, not just the decision to become a doctor but also his choices related to the intensity of his life which prevented him from spending much time at home with his wife and children, and thus avoid his fear which was gradually being revealed of emotional and physical closeness. At this stage, the spontaneous physical and sensory play was replaced by more structured creativity. Ron drew figures and portrayed his childhood experiences in the mud and while relating to them, and shared stories and experiences from his childhood. This was significant not only because he interpreted these experiences as affecting his current life but also because it enabled him to feel greater closeness, sharing and intimacy, to give it a grounding and to enjoy the primordial sensory experiences which, as a child, he was "forbidden" to experience. After three months of working in nature, the therapy ended with a feeling of partnership. "I live very close to this spot, and at the same time, I was so far from it. I'll come back here alone and

maybe with the children as well," he said at the final meeting.

From practice to theory

Ron's story illustrates the applications of the concepts of touching nature and the way direct contact with nature can help people be in contact with their pent-up feelings, connect with them and express them. It demonstrates the significance and the value of individuals' non-verbal physical-sensory encounter with nature, and the way this playful creative encounter can elicit repressed memories, give them a space, and with the help of the therapist's witnessing and mediation, endow them with renewed meaning which can help make desirable changes in their lives. This is associated with the concept of the triangular therapist-client-nature relationship and illustrates the changes and transitions in the therapist's stance that range from working directly with the client and taking a more active and dominant position (when nature is in the background), and stepping back to be a witness to the encounter between client and nature. The example also shows how the concept of choosing the right space is used, the ties between the client's story and the location selected for the sessions. This story also illustrates the relationship between Nature Therapy and art therapy, the way working in nature can provide a stimulus and a basis for physical and sensory work anchored in the body, and from there, to implicational-verbal work through artistic representations created in the here and now from natural materials.

Provisions for the Journey – Discussion and Conclusion

This article presented the basic concepts, methods and ethics of Nature Therapy and highlighted their applications for practice. Due to space limitations, not all of the concepts and methods of Nature Therapy were detailed, nor the connections between Nature Therapy and Art Therapy (Berger 2016b) and other postmodern approaches (Berger 2009). Despite the vast amounts of activity that have taken place in the field of Nature Therapy, its academic recognition, the training programs, and the many articles, book chapters and books, it is still a nascent discipline and further research is needed for its continued development. It is hoped that more practitioners will incorporate nature into their work and use these encounters to benefit both people and nature.

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