

# Parks & Rec. Agencies Can Provide Resources for Mental Health Programs

Edited by John Rainey



**O**ne in five adults in the U.S. experience some form of mental health issue like depression or anxiety every week. In addition, mental ill-health is one of the most common causes of disease worldwide – it's also on the rise. That's why it is essential to find ways to improve our mental health and sense of well-being.

One approach to this problem is a type of therapy that is becoming more popular: "eco-therapy" or nature-based therapies, which advocates claim can improve mental and physical well-being. This type of formal therapeutic treatment involves being active in natural spaces.

Although programs vary, most include a regular, structured activity that:

- is therapist led
- focuses on an outdoor activity (such as hiking or gardening), rather than just exercise
- takes place in a natural environment
- involves interacting with and exploring the natural world, and
- encourages social interaction.

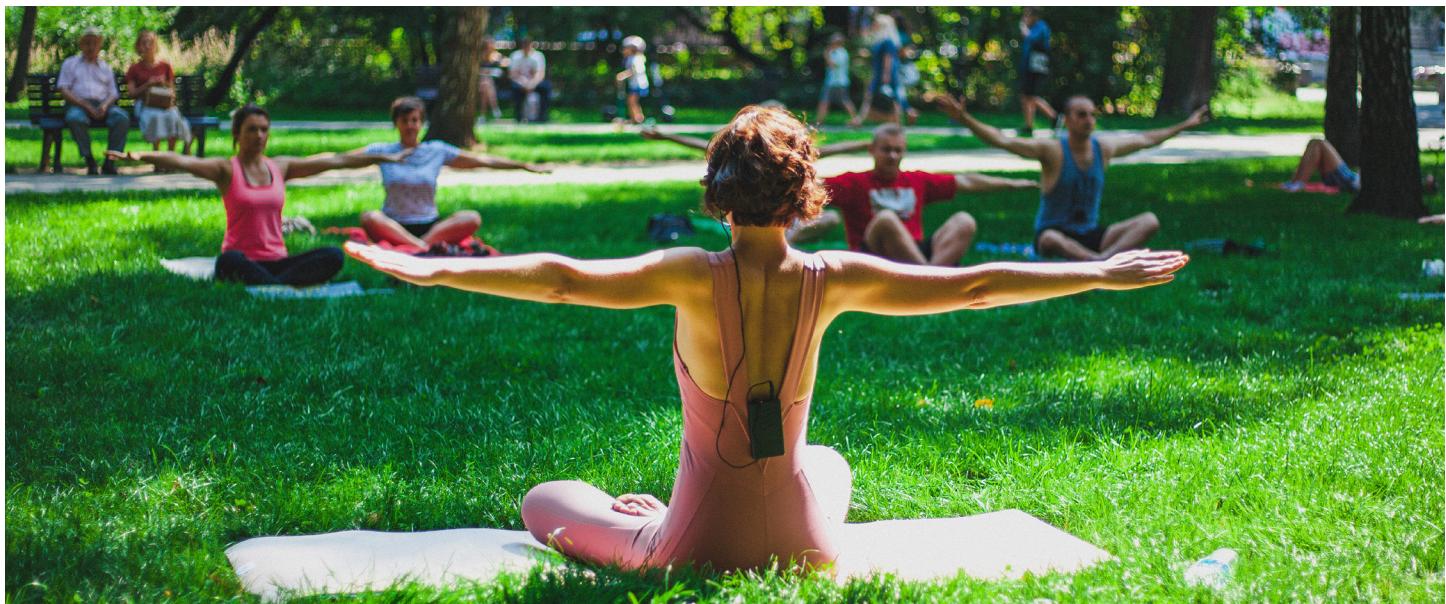
The key difference between ecotherapy and recreation is the presence of a trained practitioner or therapist.

One innovative program in Boulder, Colorado, is called Pathways, which is run by the local hospital, Boulder Community Health (BCH), in collaboration with the City of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks Department. The Pathways program provides a range of guided outdoor activities held in natural spaces throughout the Boulder area. These activities can include:

- Breath-work practices
- Movement therapy
- Guided meditations
- Immersive experiences in nature and open space
- Hands-on interactions at a working farm

The program uses mindfulness-based techniques, coupled with nature-based care, to engage patients in outdoor activities that build resilience and help overcome mental health challenges.

Pathways patients participate in group therapy sessions that support positive relationships and social connections. "The combination of hands-on, nature-based activities and group therapy sessions works to enhance each patient's social health, which is integral to physical and mental well-being. Connecting patients to each other, activities and organizations in the community can help overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness while also fostering a sense of meaning and purpose in life," says Dr. Robert Vissers, President and CEO of BCH.



The Pathways program is designed to help adults with:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Dual diagnosis: substance abuse with mood disorder
- Trauma-related disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Treatment-resistant conditions

#### Benefits of Nature-Based Care

Many studies have shown the transformative power of being in nature and its effects on a person's overall well-being. Pathways' approach and curriculum were created with the intent of harnessing the amazing natural resources that the community has to offer. Patients can experience positive effects such as:

- Stress reduction
- Reduced blood pressure
- A more focused mind
- Greater control over attention
- Enhanced creativity

Along with the above benefits, the Pathways' approach helps patients:

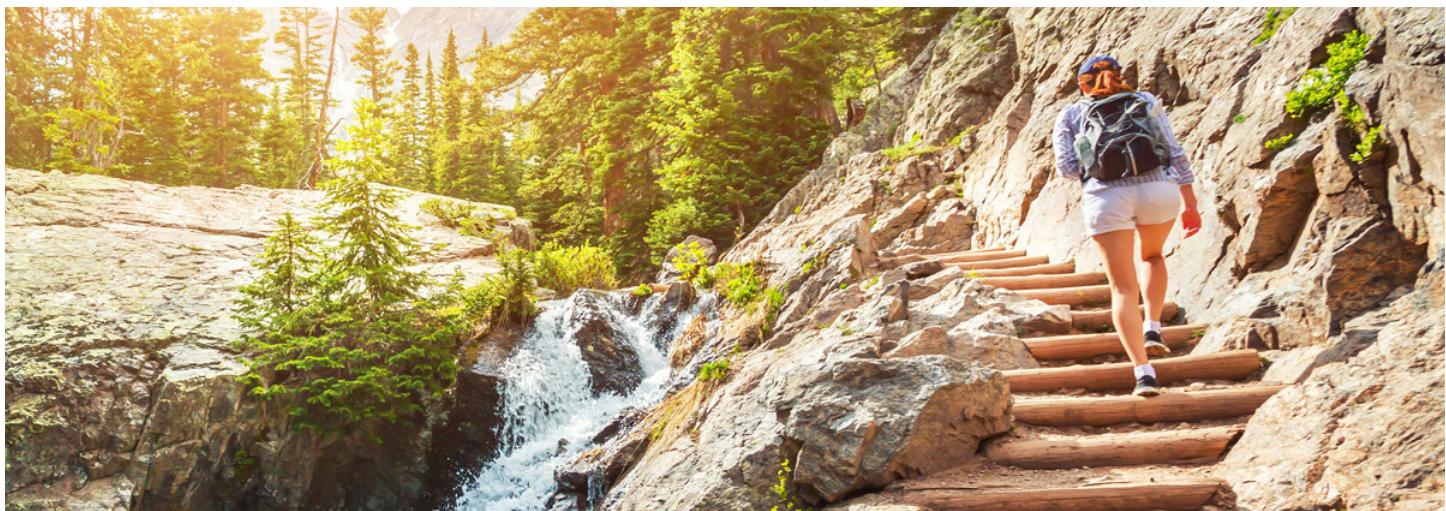
- Recognize and understand their mental health issues
- Find positive solutions to address these issues
- Connect with others with similar issues
- Create new experiences in nature that aid in well-being

"Connecting patients to each other, to meaningful activities and supportive community organizations, can

help overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness," said Dr. Wesley Tate, the psychiatrist who developed the Pathways approach.

In a 2019 article in Parks and Recreation Magazine, authors Barbara Heller and Molly Young detailed a number of nature-based programs and mental health programs from agencies around the country. In one, "according to Bob Fonte, park director of the Stark County Park District in Canton, Ohio, the district partnered with Stark Mental Health Addiction and Recovery, a local mental health agency, to create a "Mindfulness Walk," consisting of a trail with 10 stations. The Walk was designed in partnership with mental health professionals and built with the help of several scout groups and park district staff. The stations, which include a Zen sand garden, a musical instrument, stacking stones and a labyrinth, promote relaxation, focus and awareness, reflection and embracing the present moment. In addition, a public relations campaign was launched when the Walk opened in June 2019. Fonte hopes this program will be an added benefit to the community, which has dealt with an increased number of suicide deaths in a local high school over the past two years."

Nature-based interventions for mental health are becoming more common around the world. In the United Kingdom (UK) there is increasing interest in the relationship between natural outdoor spaces and human health and well-being. Some of this work involves using nature as the setting for health interventions, for example outdoor exercise programs. Other initiatives position nature explicitly as



the source of betterment, including ecotherapy programs. In all examples, nature is understood to hold therapeutic potential, and the relationship between experiencing nature and being healthier is the focus.

One UK study called “A Dose of Nature”, looked at eight different nature-based interventions (programs) for health and well-being. They all had common features including a partnership between health staff who prescribe, local agencies or organizations who own and/or managing natural assets, and practitioners or therapists who run the programs. Most of the programs ran for 10-12 weeks and involved small groups of participants (4-10). The analysis found that people who had participated in any type of ecotherapy program had significant improvements in self-esteem, well-being and social inclusion from the start of their treatment, and also felt more connected to nature. Participants also had significant improvements in mood, with feelings of anger, tension, depression, and confusion reduced after just one ecotherapy session.

There is a huge body of scientific research demonstrating that exposure to nature can significantly improve mental health and well-being. (<https://www.doseofnature.org.uk/studies1> <https://www.doseofnature.org.uk/the-science#1604399081>) Hundreds of studies conducted over a period of forty years have shown that time spent engaging with natural environments can:

- reduce depression
- reduce anxiety
- reduce stress
- reduce mental fatigue

- reduce anger and aggression
- improve mood
- improve sleep
- improve cognitive functioning
- improve creativity
- boost immune functioning
- increase longevity
- increase energy
- increase sense of gratitude, generosity and selflessness
- reduce symptoms associated with ADHD, trauma and addiction
- improve quality of life for those suffering from Alzheimer’s and dementia
- increase sense of wonder and awe

As Dr. Teresa Penbrooke, CEO of GreenPlay, LLC wrote in an NRPA Blog: “As park and recreation professionals, we know in our hearts that good mental health is often related to having access to the outdoors and greenspace. Research over the years has shown that when people are more stressed, anxious and socially isolated, as we have been due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, having access to parks, trails and natural areas becomes even more important.” (<https://www.nrpa.org/blog/access-to-parks-and-the-outdoors-is-crucial-for-mental-health-in-our-communities/>)

For the health of your community, Parks and Recreation Departments may want to consider reaching out to their local medical providers to offer assistance with developing ecotherapy programs in your area.

GreenPlay typically includes analysis of “access to nature” in community systems plans. This topic is also often a key

**“When we are in harmony with the natural world we can begin to heal. Our nervous system can rest itself, our bodies and minds can go back to how they ought to be. No longer out of kilter with nature, but once again in tune with it, we are refreshed and restored.”**

*— Dr Qing Li, Associate Professor  
at the Medical School in Tokyo*



theme for the GP RED Healthy Communities Research Group ([www.gpred.org](http://www.gpred.org)), and at the GP RED SHIFT Summit ([www.gpred.org/shift](http://www.gpred.org/shift)). Additional resources and qualified nature and forest therapy guides can be found through the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy (ANFT) at <https://www.natureandforesttherapy.org/>.

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