

# **The Power of Outdoor Therapy for Women**

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## ***Introduction***

Humans have lived in much closer proximity to the natural world, until recently. Despite our separation from these places, there still lives an age-old connection between humans and the outdoors. Whether we're using them to re-focus or relax, create change, or reconnect the inner self with the outer body—natural settings are undeniably a place of healing. And right now, women need this more than ever. The challenges of mental health for women and girls across the United States are increasing, shown by higher depression, anxiety, mental distress, and suicide rates (United Health Foundation, 2022). There is a great need for treatment that addresses the ever-changing, demanding, consumerist, and judgemental society in which girls are being raised. Research has found that an "...increase in the trajectory of PSMU (problematic social-media use) was associated with an increase in the trajectory of depressive symptoms", which is just one piece of how the pressures to confine to our media-driven world impact young girls (Raudsepp & Kais, 2019).

The answer here lies within the bounds of outdoor, also known as adventure, therapy. According to the Australian Association for Bush Adventure Therapy, adventure therapy is "a diverse field of practice combining adventure and outdoor environments with the intention to achieve therapeutic outcomes for those involved" (Outdoor Queensland, 2023). Additionally, the book *Adventure Therapy* by Michael A. Gass, H.L. "Lee" Gillis, and Keith C. Russell, defines adventure therapy as "the prescriptive use of adventure experiences provided by mental health professionals, often conducted in natural settings that kinesthetically engage clients on cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels" (Gass et al., 2022, p. 1). In this paper, I have come to use the terms "outdoor"

and “adventure” therapy as a broad label for many forms of outdoor-based treatments and experiences including wilderness therapy, forest therapy, animal-assisted therapy, therapeutic horticulture, etc. Through my research, I have found that the participation of women in outdoor therapy programs uniquely contributes to favorable outcomes compared to traditional therapeutic approaches. This paper begins with the background of women’s relationship with the outdoors. It then describes the growing mental-health challenges women and girls are facing and the effectiveness of outdoor therapy to help prevent and treat some of the main components of this issue. Subsequently, it explores the importance of a connection to nature and the wide-ranging benefits of outdoor therapy on women’s lives.

### ***Important Terms***

**Outdoor Therapy:** Mental health care held outdoors or with an outdoor aspect included in the treatment process

**Ecopsychology:** “Ecopsychology explores humans’ psychological interdependence with the rest of nature and the implications for identity, health, and well-being” (Doherty, 2011).

**Girls, Women:** These terms refer to anyone who identifies as a woman, regardless of the sex they were assigned at birth. In this article, these terms also refer to those who are non-binary or agender and can/ would like to relate to the ideas presented.

**Ecotherapy:** “...provides individuals with an opportunity to explore their relationship with nature as a form of therapy. It stems from the belief that people are part of the web of

life and that our psyches are not isolated or separate from our environment” (Chalquist, 2018).

Biophilia: “The innate human instinct to connect with nature and other living beings” (McCain, 2020).

### ***Inclusivity Statement***

Although extensive efforts were made to find the most inclusive research that is representative of a wide range of women, many of the studies in this article are focused on white, middle to upper-class girls and women. It is important to note that the financial requirement of many outdoor therapy programs makes them inaccessible for many. Additionally, access to natural environments is a privilege. Not all people are able to be part of these spaces, are accepted and included, or feel safe in outdoor settings that lack regular notions of protection.

### ***Background Information***

The idea that humans and nature are connected and dependent on each other isn't a new set of knowledge. Since time immemorial, Indigenous cultures have known, recognized, and lived with respect for this mutual connection. It was essential to their livelihood and belief systems. Understanding the ways Indigenous people saw these connections means understanding a system of thought in which “humans and nonhuman entities are interwoven in deep relationships of kinship and reciprocal obligations” (Díaz et al., 2018). It is in this type of society where a gift-reciprocal lens on the environment is highlighted. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Kimmerer

states that when people engage with nature with a “give-and-take acknowledgment”, we “tend to respond to nature as part of ourselves, not a stranger or alien available for exploitation” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 30). This idea of nature as ‘part of themselves’ was inherent to the way Indigenous communities related to the land.

*“But to our people, it (the land) was everything; identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us. Our lands were where our responsibility to the world was enacted, sacred ground. It belonged to itself; it was a gift, not a commodity, so it could never be bought or sold” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 17).*

And yet, we now find ourselves in a society where living in a reciprocal relationship with nature is anything but common. The beliefs of Indigenous peoples failed to be absorbed by the industrialization of the changing world. Instead, our society has become predominantly capitalist and market-based, shifting our focus toward the exploitation of natural resources to fuel an ever-increasing need for growth and power. Our current values are inherently at odds with those of Indigenous beliefs. It does not seem possible to balance our dependence on things like fossil fuels, consumerist lifestyles, single-use plastics, resource contamination, or overpopulating cities— and also maintain the same sustainable connection to the natural world.

Starting in the early 1900s, psychologists, neurologists, authors, and researchers began highlighting ecopsychology as a way of understanding the human experience through that of the natural world. In 1929, Sigmund Freud wrote about the ego being more closely connected to ‘outside’ the mind, to the world around us. Thirty years later, Robert Greenway began researching the human-nature connection, summed up by a

quote from his writing - “the mind is nature, and nature, the mind” (Öztürk et al., 2022). It was Theodore Roszak who eventually coined the term ecopsychology, putting words to the work of Greenway, Freud, and others. This cumulative term defines the anthropocentric society we live in, in comparison to the ecocentric society of Indigenous cultures- and why the difference is something that needs to be remedied. With the restoration of these earth-centered ideas came the biophilia hypothesis, a theoretical approach to better understand the way humans relate to nature. Eric Fromm originally coined the term ‘biophilia’, defining it as “the passionate love of life and of all that is alive” (Fromm, 1973, p. 406). Later, Edward Wilson wrote the book *Biophilia* (1992), which explains the natural emotional connection humans have to other living things. Wilson claimed that nature is part of who we are and explains “the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life” (Wilson, 1992).

As these spaces became more commonplace and recognized for their power to enrich the human experience, the documentation of women’s experiences in these spaces began. The book *Wilderness Therapy for Women; The Power of Adventure* by Ellen Cole, Eve Erdman, and Esther Rothblum (1994), discusses the healing abilities of the outdoors and the methods of using nature to benefit women. It is a collection of writings from women in the field that draw together women’s outdoor therapy experiences and mental health. It notes that wilderness therapy may be a very effective tool for helping women, but that “its promise is not limited to being a vehicle by which women can master skills that enhance self-esteem and a sense of control. Its promise is much greater and goes beyond the personal when it is connected with the feminist

spirituality movement and reclamation of the earth as a woman's place, woman as creator and part of the spirit of the earth" (Cole et al., 1994, p. 24).

And yet it seems that the topic of women using the outdoors as a place of healing was late to the conversation, and never truly accepted. The recent history of women in the outdoors, in general, is very limited- especially when compared to that of men. We can see this in the lack of female representation in authors, outdoor leaders, and more. Archives tell stories of brave men exploring new lands, summiting mountains, and shaping the history of outdoor recreation. Edmund Hillary, Jacque Cousteau, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Alex Honnold, and Jon Krakauer are all recognizable names of the men who have been the faces of the outdoors. To this day, we see men's names like these at the forefront of the biggest businesses in the outdoor industry, their tales recounted in our blockbuster adventure documentaries, and their research, decisions, and actions deciding what the outdoors looks like for us all. Ultimately, man's place in the outdoors is more defined than women's. Really, this is another part of a bigger story: the story of gender norms and what it means to identify as a woman.

Today, women's place in the outdoors is more accepted and appreciated than ever before. Slowly, the stereotypes are changing. In 2021, more females participated in outdoor recreation than in the 2010s (Statista Research Department, 2022). The growth made here is apparent, but there's still a large, unavoidable gap. The 2021 Outdoor Recreation Report by the Outdoor Foundation found that in the United States, 81.2 million females participated in outdoor recreation, compared to 95.5 million males (Outdoor Industry Association, 2021). These statistics show that women are still not as much a part of outdoor spaces as men- whether it be because of social norms, habits

passed down through generations, accessibility, comfort levels, or perceived importance of other aspects of life. This has left women disconnected from the places that we have innate tendencies to be part of, disconnected from the parts of ourselves that crave our roots. Women's connection to nature is an essential aspect of promoting well-being, healing from trauma, and encouraging self-growth.

### ***Mental Health for Women***

Focusing on the mental-wellbeing needs of girls and women isn't simply an interest; it's a necessity. It is widely known that "there are gender differences in rates of depression and anxiety disorders, with women more likely to experience these disorders than men" (Zahn-Waxler et al., 2008). Globally, women are almost twice as likely to have major depression than men, which shows that these variations extend past race, culture, diet, education, etc, and that "the differential risk may primarily stem from biological sex differences" (Albert, 2015). Up until puberty, boys and girls have similar rates of mental disorders, however, after this stage girls are twice as likely to have major depression than boys (Albert, 2015). Stark biological differences, then, seem to be a large part of the challenges of mental health for women and girls.

Not only do women more commonly experience mental health issues, but the challenges of these issues are also increasing. Some factors that are part of this shift and have been used to determine global health in the past include "increased stress and loneliness, physical shifts to more sedentary lifestyles" and "certain aspects of urbanization and loss of many avenues for experiencing nature on a regular basis" (Albert, 2015). These changes in societies and lifestyles may look different between



cultures, but nonetheless, result in increased pressures for women. Moreover, western society has placed value on women that have a certain look and weight. The recent social-media epidemic, consumer culture, and earlier sexualization are leaving girls depressed, with poor self-esteem, and lacking confidence (Euling et al., 2008). These standards of acceptance are currently doing more harm than good. We can see this highlighted again in an article from the Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, which completed a systematic review of worldwide mental health problems among adolescents and found that more and more adolescent girls are internalizing, or dealing with their negative emotions by turning inwards rather than acting outwardly (Bor et al., 2014). This is a concerning finding because when we can't see rising mental health issues, they're harder to remedy.

Between 2017-2018 and 2019-2020, the number of women ages 18-44 with depression increased by 5%- meaning that it now affects nearly 14.9 million women in the United States (Health of Women and Children Report, 2022). Frequent mental distress also increased in the same period by 14%- now affecting about 10.9 million women (Health of Women and Children Report, 2022). The same report noted that "teen suicide has risen dramatically over the past decade," with a 29% increase between 2012-2014 and 2018-2020 (from 8.4 to 10.8 death in 100,000 adolescents ages 15-19) (Health of Women and Children Report, 2022). These numbers provide insight into how many women and girls are impacted by these specific mental health issues- leaving the broader number of all females affected by other mental health illnesses nearly unimaginable. Additionally, the growth in these statistics shows that current methods of supporting women with mental health illnesses may not be as

effective as they need to be. The need for more options and awareness of effective treatments is massively important as it is clear that girls and women are one of the nation's at-risk populations. It is important that females, then, have ample access to successful and prominent therapeutic methods, as well as the natural spaces that are known to improve our well-being.

### ***Connection To Nature***

Nature is an essential part of a healthy livelihood, and yet we find ourselves farther from it as society advances into a more modern, indoor-based world. In an attempt to remedy this, nature is often used in combination with therapeutic methods. In an umbrella review titled *Nature's Role in Outdoor Therapies*, 14 carefully selected studies were evaluated to understand how nature specifically impacts the therapeutic process, thereby showing the importance of a connection to these outdoor settings. The studies on wilderness therapy programs showed that nature was part of the "positive treatment effects in the areas of self-esteem, locus of control, behavioral changes, personal effectiveness, clinical symptomatology, and interpersonal skills" (Harper et al., 2021). Additionally, the outdoor aspect of therapy programs was found to create a better understanding of the self through grounding or the feeling of calm, being present, and being in control of one's emotions. These perceptions connect to physical aspects like reduced blood pressure, boosted immunity, and calming of the autonomic nervous system (Harper et al., 2021). The multitude and dimensions of the effects nature can have on people make it stand out as an essential tool for helping others heal.

Health and well-being are elevated from participation in outdoor and adventure sports in part due to the environment in which these activities take place. Knowing that nature can have positive impacts on people's well-being is promising when we're looking at more extreme mental health issues commonly treated by different outdoor therapies. Improvements in mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and behavioral disorders have been linked to time spent outdoors (Harper, 2017).

*“Natural environments enhance the impact of physical activity by increasing motivation, enabling emotional regulation, brain growth, recovery capability and protection from disease; and possess unique qualities unrelated to physical activity, such as restorative capabilities and stress-reduction which directly impact our health and wellbeing” (Brymer et al., 2021).*

In our modern world, society has found itself farther from its connection to nature than ever before. It has become entirely normal to go through a day without spending time outside- other than a walk from the car to a building. A recent study from the EPA found that Americans spend approximately 90% of their lives indoors (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2021). Knowing what we do about how essential the outdoors are, this statistic is concerning. This wall we have created between our daily lives and the natural world is causing problems in emotional regulation, stress, depression, and anxiety (Gass et al., 2012). As was discussed earlier with the founding ideas of biophilia, natural human tendencies include a strong connection to the outdoors. Common society has diverged from these inclinations, instead emphasizing consumerism, technology, and typical notions of success. It's no wonder then, why nature is so therapeutic to us; we have been separated from what feels the most natural to us.

*“There is a lost or forgotten aspect of self-identity that strives to reconnect with nature. The more isolated humans become from the natural world, the more difficult it becomes for them to grasp or understand the struggle with which they are engaged. This causes anxiety, which results in abnormal or irrational behavior and a desire to reconcile the internal conflict. What once was a self-identity derived from a deep and profound relationship to the natural world is now shaped by a highly industrialized technological society driven by consumption” (Gass et al., 2012).*

For younger generations, this connection to nature may never be built at all; therefore, they never possess the self-identity brought by nature. Nature-deficit disorder, a theory coined by Richard Louv, argues that people (children especially) are spending less and less time in nature leading to the same issues we know nature to be able to help with. The paradox here is striking.

It’s clear that our roots as a human race are closely tied to nature, and this is especially true for women. In her book *Saltwater in the Blood* (2021), professional surfer and scientist Easkey Britton describes women’s innate connection to nature through the earth’s natural cycles that mirror those of females. “Women, especially, have this incredible inbuilt intelligence system that directly links to the natural cycles and rhythms of the world” (Easkey, 2021, p. 173). She explains how she’s seen these cycles suppressed or ignored entirely in modern living to better fit with what society demands of us. Training too hard, ignoring the body’s need for change in diet, affecting the menstrual cycle with medication, etc. all lead us farther from our connections to earth’s cycles. These cycles are the natural tendencies of the earth that closely mirror the cycles in women’s bodies, including tides, the light and dark of the day, lunar cycles, and the seasons. Easkey argues, through her own experiences and research, that only

by being open to syncing with these natural cycles and intentionally being part of natural spaces can we heal and reconnect to the world around us.

### ***Outdoor therapy as an effective form of intervention***

Recent studies have found forms of outdoor therapies to be effective interventions for youth and adults both as preventative and treatment measures for mental health and behavioral issues (Gass et al., 2022). *Adventure therapy: Theory, Research, and Practice* by Michael Gass, Gil Hallows, H.L. Gillis, and Keith Russell is among the most prominent of these studies, highlighting the benefits of using nature to guide therapeutic approaches to create change in the lives of individuals (Gass et al., 2022). People's response to natural environments in outdoor therapy settings has been shown to "increase an individual's awareness of self and feelings of wellbeing whilst creating a sense of connection with others and the world" (Richards & Peel, 2005). Through this lens, it is clear that using the outdoors to aid in therapy can help create outcomes different from typical approaches.

Numerous studies, theories, and articles have concluded that outdoor therapy's main role is to enable change in individuals. Change, in this context, looks like self-growth; a positive change that occurs within someone, when characteristics they once held are inferior to who they have become. A factor-ingredient model (Gass et al., 2020) depicts the unique factors present in outdoor therapy programs that lead to treatment outcomes for a variety of mental health illnesses. A combination of a motivated learner, a prescribed physical environment, a social environment, an adventure-based experience, the role of the instructor, success or mastery, and transfer

of learning are woven together to create an individualized approach (Gass et al., 2012) (Table 1). Many of these factors are absent from traditional treatment programs, allowing outdoor therapy to reach individuals for whom 'normal' therapeutic settings have not previously worked.

Table 1: Key Ingredients of the AT Process Integrated within the Walsh and Golins (1976) Framework (Gass et al., 2012)

Process Factor	Ingredients
Motivated learner or program participant	Self-efficacy Resilience Stages of contemplation Self-determination theory External to internal locus of control
Prescribed physical environment	Physical exercise Nature as a restorative environment Neutral Disrupts familiar patterns Intensive and action oriented Appropriately challenging Positive stress Experiential
Social environment	Small group-based model Ten-person group dynamic Reciprocity dynamic Enriched assessment Therapeutic factors of group therapy
Adventure-based experience	Organized, concrete, sequential, and achievable Continuous and evolving Psychosocial and motor skill development Development of self Frame and metaphor Motivating
Role of the instructor	Solution focused Therapeutic relationship Core conditions of change
Success or mastery	Intra- and interpersonal growth Reorganization of life's meaning
Transfer	Transfer of learning

Another important factor for the effectiveness of outdoor adventure programs is that many of the characteristics of resilient people match the anticipated outcomes from these types of programs. Being a resilient person allows someone to deal with their current situations, but also sets them up for future endeavors by helping them seek

success in a wide range of environments, creating peace with the unfamiliar, and not falling into the 'status quo' (Ungar et al., 2005).

In a study where clients who had completed a wilderness therapy program were asked what the effects of the treatment were for them, the most common response was a "desire to change behavior" followed by "a desire to discontinue drugs and alcohol", and then a "desire to be a better person" (Russell & Phillips-Miller, 2002). This study gave participants the option to choose neutral or negative effects, so based on the positive responses it's not difficult to see the short-term benefits of programs like Wilderness Therapy. In addition, OAS (Outdoor Adventure Sports) approaches to therapy were found to be more successful than other mental-health programs with similar goals (Brymer et al., 2021). In the article titled "Health and Wellbeing in an Outdoor and Adventure Sports Context," Brymer provides the reasoning behind using outdoor adventure sports as means to improve health and well-being. Through these experiences, Brymer offers, people can find new learning methods, giving individuals a way to grow outside of where they may have been struggling in their 'normal' lives.

Studies like these add to the substantial research showing the short-term benefits of outdoor therapy. The field is working through gaining a better understanding of the long-term benefits of this work, and how to best aid a transition back from the "field" to home, ensuring that the positive changes last.

Interestingly, these positive changes may be good for more than an individual's well-being. Not only is outdoor therapy an effective form of treatment for humans- it can also have significant impacts on the environment. The link between a person's mental well-being and their views on sustainability has been researched to show that when

people are more connected to their environment, they are more likely to be mentally healthy and have a more sustainable mindset. This means that outdoor therapy may be essential for our current time of environmental crisis, as it can “offer the potential to address this problem (environmental decline) by emphasizing both the social and physical environments and the role each plays in fostering health. The connection between a healthy ecology and healthy humans is discovered through these kinds of outdoor programs” (Ungar et al., 2005). With the destruction of our climate at the forefront of many people’s minds, the answer to slowing the effects of climate change may lie in connecting the health of women with the health of the environment. When we can teach people about themselves using the outdoors, we can create a connection that can promote a place for healing for both people and the earth (Willis, 2011).

### ***Women in Outdoor Therapy***

Outdoor therapy experiences uniquely affect women due to the opportunities they offer for self-growth specifically targeted in areas where women have been found to struggle the most, namely depression, anxiety, and self-confidence (Bor et al., 2014). The benefits of outdoor-based therapy have proven to align with the needs of girls and women, giving women who may be struggling with mental health or behavioral issues an escape from stereotypes, gender norms, and the “occasional harmful messages of mainstream culture” (Barr-Wilson et al., 2016). These programs, and the participation of women in the outdoors, can have substantial effects on the mental health of females. Outdoor spaces are important for girls, especially as they come of age and feel burdened and judged by the expectations of family, friends, and who they interact with



online. Exposing women to the outdoors at a young age has been found to boost self-confidence and a positive body image by providing them with a place where typical beauty standards are pushed into the background (Barr-Wilson et al., 2016). As discussed earlier, adolescent girls are more likely to internalize their struggles than adolescent boys, who generally display these more outwardly. According to a study by Michael Ungar for the Journal of Social Work, “Connecting to a group and nature breaks the artificial boundary between one’s self and something larger than one’s self. When this connection is nurtured in a natural environment, nature too is experienced as an extension of the individual” (Ungar et al., 2005). In this sense, providing girls and women with natural experiences may be able to aid the girls in portraying negative and positive emotions when they feel more connected to “something larger than themselves”, leading to lower rates of internalizing (Ungar et al., 2005). In addition, many trauma-informed WT programs emphasize safety, cohesion, and emotional stability, three aspects that are known to help stimulate healing in women who have experienced trauma. Many studies have come to conclude that there are numerous ways these approaches to therapy can and will impact females.

*“Ewert, Mitten, and Overholt (2014) reported outdoor adventure programs to offer creative opportunities for achieving health benefits associated with the natural environment. Relatedly, Russell and Farnum (2004) found that being in nature and the sense of removal in a wilderness setting was rejuvenating, uplifting, and therapeutic for underserved adolescent girls. Away from their everyday lives and immersed in a wilderness setting for an extended time, adolescent girls had an opportunity to attain physical, social, emotional, and cognitive benefits (Russell & Farnum, 2004)” (Barr-Wilson et al., 2016).*

Changes like these were also seen in a study by Christine L. Norton where she uses adventure therapy to see if she can reach an at-risk population of homeless women. The study, among the first of its type, highlights the ways that women experience strong relationship-building in outdoor therapy programs. Norton notes that this was seen between clients as well as between clients and clinicians and that the “non-hierarchical therapeutic relationship that can be created in adventure therapy through shared experiences between the client and the clinician often provides experiential opportunities for mental health professionals to help participants recognize personal strengths, which can also help create an authentic relationship that participants might not experience in traditional therapeutic settings” (Koperski et al., 2015). Natural environments can provide a break between the judgemental, expectation-filled world that women find themselves a part of, being judged and judging one another simply out of expected notions of what success and happiness are supposed to look like.

### ***Conclusion***

If there was ever a place that facilitates healing for women, it is among our natural spaces. Although the outdoors haven’t always been an escape or a “woman’s place”, these stereotypes are rapidly changing. It is becoming widely accepted that women need the outdoors, just as much as the outdoors need them. Women’s lengthy separation from our natural tendencies to be part of nature leads them to find benefits by reacquainting these places and themselves through therapeutic processes. As national trends show women of all ages’ mental health considerably worsening, a

solution is needed to remedy this growing population. And not only does outdoor immersion support mental health, it also serves to prevent girls and women from low-self esteem, depression, anxiety, and internalizing. When we look to outdoor therapy programs for the answer to these growing mental health concerns, we see benefits ranging from increased confidence to stress reduction, emotional regulation and less internalizing, improved relationships, and a stronger sense of identity. Women are uniquely affected by outdoor therapy when the outdoors become protected spots for them to find self-growth and healing.

*“This morning when I stood on the river bank, the sun was making all golden the edge of the clouds in the west. There was a blue sky above Shumo, but snowflakes were blown thick and fast from the canyon until they hit the mesas. As they shut out the world and made for me a hushed place in their midst, I was very near the source of things” (Edith Warner, 1991).*

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