

# Nature's Healing Powers

## Therapeutic options rooted in the great outdoors

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*@deenakshaffer*



Getting outdoors in nature is not only good for our bodies, but it's also good for our minds.

Therapies like adventure-based counselling (ABC) and ecotherapy support healing and wellness by bringing our relationship with nature front and centre.

### **Nature as healing partner**

ABC and ecotherapy view nature as a partner in the therapeutic process. Practitioners of these holistic modalities recognize the “potential healing power of natural environments.” Clients report benefits such as feelings of deepened interconnectedness, lowered stress, and improved attention and mood.

### **The rise of ABC and ecotherapy**

ABC and ecotherapy both have historical roots in using wilderness to treat disease, the most notable example being sanatoriums for the treatment of tuberculosis. Across Canada, and the globe, wild locales, farms, and green spaces are being employed to support psychological well-being.

## The variety of ABC

ABC can run individually or in groups, and be grounded in a range of approaches, such as cognitive behavioural, narrative, or gestalt therapies. It can also take place in a variety of locations and incorporate different activities, including tending to farm animals, hiking, and climbing ropes courses.

Clients learn and grow from taking thoughtful risks, often called “challenge by choice.” The empowering effects of ABC can include strengthened resilience and coping. When participants feel the success of paddling, camping, or homesteading, for example, self-worth and confidence soar. And these accomplishments transfer to all other areas of life.

## The uplift of ecotherapy

Sister to ABC, ecotherapy also nurtures uplift by connecting to nature. “Imagine ... lying in a flower-filled meadow in summer; birds are singing and you can smell wild roses nearby. Up above, the sky is a deep blue and bright clouds drift across your field of view,” writes Andy McGeeney in *With Nature in Mind* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016). “Ecotherapy is about creating a deeper connection to nature and feeling better for it.”

In nature, clients can experience healing through reflection, contemplation, and peacefulness.

## Get outside, get well

Ecotherapy and ABC are compelling alternatives to traditional office-bound services. Fiddlehead Care Farm (FCF), for example, is a 50-acre accessible organic farm in rural Ontario. At FCF, co-founders Stephanie Deaken, a registered social worker, and Breanne Mathers, a certified child life specialist, support children, youth, and young adults with autism, ADHD, and brain injuries by engaging with plants and animals.

## Animals in action

“Animals do not judge or have expectations,” explain Deaken and Mathers. “They’re nonthreatening and provide unconditional love. We’ve had many instances when clients have confided to animals feelings, events, worries, and stressors they’ve not told anyone else.”



The serene, nonclinical landscape of FCF provides a nurturing environment to plant, grow, harvest, hike, and play. “Our modalities tend to be more active and less intimidating than an office-based therapy experience.”

## **More about ecotherapy and ABC**

### **How do you find ecotherapy or ABC practitioners?**

- Research by asking friends or your health care practitioner, visiting a nature club, and searching online.
- To find the right practitioner, property, and therapeutic approach for your needs, ask for a tour or about possible open houses.

### **How much does ecotherapy or ABC cost?**

- Each organization and practitioner charges differently; individual and group sessions vary, as do day and residential programs, so it’s best to ask ahead about cost.
- Many insurance plans provide coverage for formal therapy sessions, and recreation-based activities may be eligible for government financial assistance, so don’t be shy about asking.

- Practitioners might be able to provide some financial assistance to reduce barriers to participation, so check into the organization's nonprofit status, sliding scales, bursaries, and funding.

## What can you incorporate into your life right now?

- Spend unscheduled time in wild spaces. Just being, just sitting, can slow down our nervous systems, root us in the present moment, and help lower stress.
- Try to get your daily dose of "vitamin N." Just 15 minutes immersed in nature can improve short-term memory, reduce inflammation, hone concentration, and increase creativity and positive mental health effects.

## Farming and recovery

David and Deborah Cooper, suicide loss survivors, are in the process of establishing Eli's Place Residential Treatment Centre to provide long-term eco-therapeutic residential treatment in Ontario for young adults living with serious mental illness and substance use issues.

Inspired by the century-old Gould House in Massachusetts, which supports clients experiencing depression, bipolar disorder, schizoaffective disorder, and schizophrenia, Eli's Place is based upon a farm recovery model.

Caring for animals, beekeeping, food harvesting, egg collecting, food preparing, and trail clearing can "give residents purpose and meaning, in community, to take responsibility for themselves, others, and the land."

The Coopers describe how being engaged in nature "inspires dignity, self-worth, and pride in doing for oneself, others, and the environment," in turn promoting healing, rehabilitation, and independence.

## Nature as co-therapist

Human-Nature Counselling in BC offers individual and family counselling for children, youth, and adults in local parks and private farms. Co-founder Katy Rose, registered clinical counsellor, highlights how clients can "experience and practice changes rather than just talking about them. Nature itself acts as 'co-therapist,' mirror, and metaphor reflecting clients' inner processes."

## Vitamin N

Richard Louv, who coined the phrase "nature deficit disorder," describes in his book [Vitamin N](#) (Algonquin Books, 2016) a keynote in which he raised a pill bottle and suggested to the doctors

that they “consider prescribing vitamin N ... as an antidote to ... our societal disconnect from the natural world.”

Indeed, vitamin N (“N” for nature), which lies at the heart of adventure-based counselling and ecotherapy, might be a helpful option for you or someone you know who is struggling to cope with stress, grief, or a mental health issue or illness.

As Rose says, nature “acts as a powerful resource to ... process difficult emotions. Nature can bring a sense of play, belonging, and aliveness that clients may have lost.”



Written By *Deena Kara Shaffer, PhD @deenakshaffer*

Deena Kara Shaffer is a mother of two girls, learning specialist at Ryerson University, poet, freelance education and health writer, and nature lover. She also holds a PhD in nature-based pedagogy.