



Mindful Living Blog:

Ecosomatic Practice and Ecotherapy Collection

Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	2
<u>An Introduction to Ecosomatic Practice</u>	3
<u>Ecotherapy: An Introduction</u>	8
<u>Ecotherapy: Level 1 Ecotherapy Activities</u>	13
<u>Ecotherapy: Level 2 Ecotherapy Activities</u>	17

Introduction

Welcome to the Mindful Living Blog – Ecosomatic Practice and Ecotherapy Collection!

This collection has been designed to bring together a series of articles from the Mindful Living blog, all of which centre on the theme of ecosomatic practice and ecotherapy. The articles in this guide provide an introduction and an entry point into these topics, which you can explore in your own time.

Within each article you will find information on the topic, as well as an invitation. We hope that you will find these invitations thought-provoking and use them to engage in your own process of self-exploration and mindful practice. Above all, we hope that this guide will help to inspire you as you progress on your own journey.

This downloadable guide can also be printed. Please feel free to share it with others who you think may benefit from the content it contains.

As always, we really enjoy hearing from our readers and our wider community. Please feel free to share your thoughts and experiences with us. You can connect with us via the website or by emailing anna@dunami-somatics.com.

Happy reading!

Anna and Diana

(www.dunami-somatics.com)

An Introduction to Ecosomatic Practice

Ecosomatic movement practice is a term which is gaining increasing usage, particularly within therapeutic and expressive arts. But what is ecosomatic practice? How can it be used to improve and benefit our wellbeing? In this brief introduction, we explore the key concepts underpinning ecosomatic practice and offer some suggestions for how you might begin your ecosomatic practice journey.



Photo by Anna Dako.

Somatic and Ecosomatic Practice

Somatic practice refers to activity and exercises which aim to promote and create greater unity between the mind and body. Through somatic practice, very often in the form of movement or dance practices, individuals have the opportunity to focus on their “inner life”, to learn to connect and attend to their body from within.

In somatic practice, the focus is therefore on an individual and their experience. It creates opportunities for individuals to develop self-awareness and autonomy. By listening and attending to their bodily cues, individuals have the space and opportunity to investigate and develop their embodied selves and engage in embodied experience. These bodily cues can include listening to the breath, investigating touch and sensory stimulation, perception and inner impulses, as well as movement.

Through engagement in somatic movement practice, individuals have the possibility to enhance their body-mind integration or psycho-physical experience. Furthermore, somatic movement also encourages individuals to consider the body, not only in terms of its physical processes, but also as a site of “lived consciousness” ([ISMETA](#)).



Photo by Anna Dako.

Ecosomatic practices extend the embodied experience further to also include the relationship between the individual human and the “body of the Earth” or Nature. Through practice, especially that which takes place outdoors, this outer body of Earth/Nature, can be further sensed and understood. Through our own bodies and as part of our inner experience, we can begin to attempt to rebalance and reconnect to Nature and the natural embodied world all around us.

Fundamentally, ecosomatic movement practices aim to facilitate and create greater understanding of the continuity between the individual body and its inner experience, to the outer experience in and with nature. By widening our kinaesthetic and sensory perceptions beyond our bodies and experience, so as to include our environment and our awareness and relationship with and to the outer world, we can (re)connect with all the natural beings or “bodies” within that space, including all the fauna and flora.

The Benefits of Ecosomatic Practices

Engaging in ecosomatic practice has several benefits for our bodies. In the first instance, it can help to heighten our individual sensory awareness. It also improves physical wellbeing by

improving coordination, posture and range of motion and movement. However, ecosomatic practices also offer additional benefits, in the form of movement (re)patterning. Through regular, ongoing practice, ecosomatic practice can equip individuals with tools to address and better cope with negative habitual patterning.

Practitioners such as Andrea Olsen, emphasise the benefits of somatic and other mindfulness practices for our daily lives. By introducing and regularly engaging in such practice during our daily lives, we create important opportunities for our bodies to continue to move, especially during challenging times. Similarly, Anna Halprin, emphasises the importance of using the expressive arts (including dance and movement) as a tool for healing, as well as to heighten our awareness of the environment.



Photo by Anna Dako.

Ecosomatic approaches can also be particularly effective for supporting the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. The sympathetic nervous system is responsible for governing the body's involuntary rapid response to dangerous or stressful situations (the fight or flight impulse). Meanwhile, the parasympathetic system works to calm the body down, encouraging it to rest and digest. Together, the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems work to maintain a positive baseline and support normal bodily functions.

In order for our bodies to be able to cope well with stressful events, there needs to exist homeostasis or balance within the body. Our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous

systems need to be in harmony and balance with one another. How our bodies respond to stressful situations, especially regular or ongoing stress, can significantly impact our health and wellbeing.

Through regular ecosomatic practice, individuals can learn to adapt their responses to stressful situations. In time, rather than triggering a stress response, the body can instead learn new ways to manage and handle such situations. This can be especially useful for individuals who suffer from regular bouts of anxiety and depression and has led to increased use of ecosomatic practices and strategies within therapy.

An Invitation...

We invite you to begin your individual journey into ecosomatic practices by undertaking the introductory [audio guide](#) by Anna in an outdoors location. If you're already familiar with the practice, you can use a [Movement Inspiration](#) as a point of departure from which to engage in your own explorations.



Photo by Anna Dako.

Take some time to tune into your body's impulses, using the breath as an initial guide. Open your awareness to the sounds all around you. Listen to the natural sounds of other living bodies in the natural environment. Allow yourself to connect with them, to be inspired by them and to move in response and dialogue to them.

Above all, trust yourself to respond freely to these impulses. Remember that there are no right or wrong ways to move. Give yourself permission to experiment with big and small movements and variations of speed and rhythm.

Conclude your session by engaging in some contemplative reflection. Perhaps you want to engage in some written or creative recorded response? Or maybe you simply want to take the opportunity to sit in quiet contemplation.

Ecotherapy: An Introduction

As more people begin to engage with the wider ecological crisis and turn to activities in nature to support mental and physical wellbeing, ecotherapy is gaining increasing popularity. In this article, we explore what the term means and what ecotherapy is.



Photo by Anna Dako.

What Is Ecotherapy?

Simply put, ecotherapy is the name given to a range of treatments and approaches, which aim to improve physical and mental health through interaction with and activities in nature.

Ecotherapy is sometimes also referred to as 'nature therapy' or 'green therapy'. The term ecotherapy was first coined by Clinebell in 1996, who stressed the reciprocal nature of ecotherapy. Whilst humans are able to use nature to nurture us and our wellbeing, we also have the possibility to 'reciprocate this healing connection through our ability to nurture nature' (Hinds and Jordan, 2016:1).

Indeed, one of the core concepts at the heart of ecotherapy is the notion of reciprocal healing. Whilst it is widely accepted that nature offers a range of benefits to humans, ecotherapy emphasises the interconnected relationship between humanity and the wider health of our planet. In this way, ecotherapy does not view personal and planetary wellbeing as separate, but instead as intrinsically connected. Human life, wellbeing and action is viewed as part of a greater system of interaction and therefore, our interaction with nature has the potential to benefit and heal both our selves and the natural world.



Photo by Anna Dako.

What Are the Benefits of Ecotherapy?

Although ecotherapy is still a relatively new and emerging field, elements of it have been widely practiced for centuries, particularly in more eastern practices, such as yoga, martial arts and meditation. Indeed, many licensed and trained psychologists and therapists incorporate aspects of ecotherapy into their existing practices. However, with its increased popularity and range of benefits, dedicated ecotherapists and specialists in the field are becoming more prevalent.

There is a growing body of research to support the value of ecotherapy, although much of this is based upon qualitative data. Nevertheless, the value and benefit of spending time in nature are becoming more widely recognised and accepted, especially following the tumultuous and challenging time faced by many during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The evidence so far suggests that ecotherapy provides individuals with improved self-esteem, improved physical and mental health and improved mood. In particular, ecotherapy has been found to be highly beneficial in supporting individuals who suffer from anxiety and depression. Additionally, it has been found to help prevent deteriorating mental health conditions and to reduce physiological stress.

Importantly, as ecotherapy is usually undertaken outdoors in natural spaces (as opposed to more traditional therapies which often take place in an office), it also offers individuals the

opportunity to get some fresh air, engage in a physical activity, which improves their physical health, promotes exercise and encourages healthy eating habits to form. Many of the activities undertaken during ecotherapy sessions also involve interaction, which helps individuals to fight against feelings of isolation and to become engaged in activities or projects which are part of a wider community, thereby promoting social inclusion.



Photo by Anna Dako.

The Two Levels of Ecotherapy

In her essay *'The Many Ecotherapies'* Linda Buzzell states that two levels of ecotherapy are currently practiced.

Level 1, Buzzell claims, is a more human-focused, results-orientated and nature-based therapy which places the improved mental and physical health of humans at its centre. Level 1 ecotherapies focus on using nature primarily for the benefit of humans.

On the other hand, Level 2 ecotherapies instead focus on the understanding that 'we are all a part of nature and embedded in the whole' (Buzzell, 2016:71). Level 2 approaches focus instead on healing the relationship between the human psyche and nature, and in so doing, cultivating the sense of interconnectedness between humans and nature. Activities functioning at level 2 aim to not only provide benefit to the individual or group undertaking it, but to also support and benefit the non-human world. Ecotherapy activities functioning at Level 2 work by considering the wider ecological crisis and developing a deeper understanding and awareness that the wellbeing of humans is inherently connected to wider planetary wellbeing.

However, Buzzell stresses that there isn't one size - or activity - to suit everyone. Different groups and individuals will respond better to different approaches and types of activity. For many people, it may be essential to begin with Level 1 activities. However, ultimately, the aim of ecotherapy is to promote and foster the reciprocal nature of healing, thereby developing a deeper understanding and relationship to nature, which ultimately benefits individuals and the wider environment.



Photo by Anna Dako.

An Invitation....

Ecotherapy stresses the relationship between humans and the natural world. We invite you to visit a natural environment you feel deeply connected to. Take the opportunity to truly slow down and simply listen. Open your auditory awareness to all the sounds around you. As you listen, allow your focus to settle on your breath. Slowly, try to find balance between the rhythm of your breath and the natural environment around you.

Take a moment to express your gratitude to the natural world around you. This may be silent and a moment of personal reflection, an audible verbal expression (in words, poetry, through song, or simply guttural sounds, for example), or a physical act of expression. Find a form of expression which feels true to your self and the natural space you are in.

Taking the time to simply listen to the natural world around us is a first, baby step in helping us to cultivate a deeper relationship with the natural world, as well as allowing us to begin to become more aware of the value of the natural spaces all around us.

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References:

Jordan, Martin and Hinds, Joe (ed.) (2016), *Ecotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, London: Palgrave.

Buzzell, Linda (2016) 'The Many Ecotherapies' in Jordan, Martin and Hinds, Joe (ed.) *Ecotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, London: Palgrave, pp. 70-80.

Ecotherapy: Level 1 Ecoterapy Activities

Ecotherapy is the term used to describe a range of treatments and approaches, which aim to improve physical and mental health through interaction with and activities in nature. In this article, we explore what activities are considered Level 1 and how these can be used to support wellbeing.



Photo by Anna Dako.

What Constitutes Level 1 Ecoterapy?

In her essay, entitled '*The Many Ecoterapies*', Linda Buzzell claims that there exist two levels of ecoterapy. The first of these, Level 1, is 'described as human-centred nature therapy' (Buzzell, 2016:70), the focus of which is 'often based on a traditional Western world view that values humanity well above the rest of nature' (Buzzell, 2016:71).

Ecoterapy activities and experiences which function at Level 1, Buzzell claims, have become more prevalent. Additionally, there is a growing body of research which supports the effectiveness of such approaches in promoting physical and mental wellbeing. As such, there has been a rise in demand for Level 1 ecoterapy activities.

The biggest criticism levied at Level 1 ecoterapies, however, is that they have a tendency to focus upon the human benefit, whilst not providing the same level of consideration towards nature. As such, there is a danger that we fail to fully connect with nature, both personally

and more widely, on a cultural level. Instead, we use nature for our own gain, without giving something meaningful back in return.

However, whilst Buzzell states that Level 2 ecotherapies are the ones practitioners should be striving towards, she also acknowledges that it is sometimes necessary to begin with Level 1 approaches and activities. In this way, practitioners and individuals can learn to work towards Level 2 activities and experiences, which are deeper and more reciprocal in nature.

Examples Of Level 1 Ecotherapies

There are many different types of ecotherapy programmes available, offering a variety of activities for individuals to choose from. Moreover, for many people, undertaking these activities at Level 1 has proven highly beneficial and rewarding. As a result, many people have been able to better cope with and overcome a range of mental health and wellbeing issues.

Animal assisted therapy is one of the most popular types of ecotherapy on offer. This technique involves individuals building a therapeutic relationship with an animal, very often dogs or horses. **Animal assisted interventions** are also another popular activity, in which individuals go to spaces where they come into contact with animals, such as at a farm. Individuals can then enjoy some relaxing time feeding or petting the animals. Similarly **care farming** (or therapeutic farming activities) involve people looking after farm animals, as well as helping to grow crops or manage woodland.



Conservation is another increasingly popular ecotherapy technique. This approach, sometimes referred to as 'Green Gyms' combines caring for and protecting natural outdoors spaces with physical exercise. For more adventurous individuals, **adventure therapy** is also an option. This technique involves participants doing adventurous physical activities as part of a group. Activities include rock climbing, caving and rafting.

Green exercise therapy is probably one of the better-known forms of ecotherapy, which primarily involves undertaking exercise outdoors in green spaces. Individuals may go running, cycling or even simply walking outdoors.

For those more interested in arts and creative expression, **nature arts and crafts** are another option. This involves doing art either in nature, or with it. Individuals can use the environment for inspiration to create their own artwork, create art specifically in/for green outdoor spaces, or even using natural objects and materials to create the artwork (for example, leaves, grass, clay and wood).



Photo by Anna Dako.

Group activities are also a popular option, particularly for individuals who struggle with social anxiety or isolation issues. These sessions can help individuals to regain confidence and become part of a supportive community. **Social and therapeutic horticulture**, which involves gardening work, is a particularly good activity. These sessions often involve growing food in allotments, community centres or inside community buildings, such as libraries and village

halls. They also offer participants the opportunity to gain valuable work experience (including selling the community grown produce) and even gain qualifications.



Alternatively, **wilderness therapy**, is another popular group activity. Wilderness therapy focuses on spending time in the wild, whilst doing activities together as a part of a group. Activities can include hiking or making shelters, for example.

Most importantly perhaps, individuals are not limited to only type of activity. Rather, there are a variety of activities on offer at Level 1 which ensure that there is something for everyone to choose from. Furthermore, Level 1 activities provide an important first step for individuals who are struggling or who may never have engaged in such practices before.

An Invitation...

Ecotherapy is a practice which has much to offer individuals at all stages of their life. We invite you to try one Level 1 ecotherapy activity from the examples above.

You may choose to undertake the activity alone, as part of an organised session or even as a whole family. If you have children, consider taking a family walk and collecting natural materials with which to create a piece of artwork. Alternatively, go on a hike, pausing to enjoy a picnic and appreciating the sounds and smells of the natural environment all around you.

Ecotherapy: Level 2 Ecotherapy Activities

Whilst there has been an increase in the number of Level 1 ecotherapy practices and activities on offer, these are primarily focused on the human experience and the benefits that such activities provide for the individual. However, ecotherapy practices and activities which function at Level 2, instead go deeper, seeking ways to create a more reciprocal experience, in which humans not only benefit from nature, but in so doing, provide something back to the natural world.

In this article, we explore what Level 2 ecotherapies are and some examples of these, as well as considering how we may bridge the gap between Level 1 and Level 2 experiences.



Photo by Anna Dako.

What Constitutes Level 2 Ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy at Level 2 focuses on the “whole-systems” approach. Within Level 2 practices, ecotherapy moves away from the human-centred approach and instead, considers the wider connection between humans and nature. As Linda Buzzell states, Level 2 ecotherapies focus on a “wider approach rooted in the ecologically based, whole systems understanding that there can be no true human health on a sick planet” (Buzzell, 2016:71).

As such, when practicing activities at Level 2, the focus is instead upon cultivating an understanding that humans are a part of nature, not superior to it. Therefore, in order to heal ourselves, the health and wellbeing of the natural environment must also be taken into consideration. Moreover, such activities also seek to consider the different ways in which a

practice can be used to address wider ecological concerns, as well as the needs of the human/self engaged in the practice. At its core, Level 2 ecotherapy aims to cultivate and heal the human-nature relationship.

Examples of Level 2 Ecotherapies

The difference between activities conducted at Level 1 and Level 2 is not simply black and white. Instead, it can be considered in terms of a scale. Many of the activities practiced at Level 1 can be also be used at Level 2. It is the shift in how these are undertaken and the wider connection and context of the activity which allows it to transform from a Level 1 to a Level 2 practice.

Some of the most common examples of ecotherapy activities practiced at Level 2 include **slowing down and engaging in active listening**. Rather than simply imposing our presence upon a natural environment, Level 2 ecotherapies encourage us to first take the time to pause and attempt to deeply engage with the natural environment. By taking the time at the start to try to empathise with the natural space we have a better chance of truly connecting with it on a deeper level.

Active listening is a common grounding activity for many therapies, but the focus is often on the self, listening only to one's breath and focusing on the experience within oneself. However, at Level 2 this listening and awareness is open and expanded to the natural setting instead. In so doing, practitioners can seek to find balance and connection with the natural setting itself. In the [audio guides](#) created by Dr Anna Dako, this is an aspect which is often explored and is yet another example of Level 2 ecotherapy in practice.



Photo by Anna Dako.

Another common practice is to **seek permission** to the particular aspect of the environment we are hoping to connect to/with, before we begin. This enables the practitioner to establish a relationship of mutual respect, equal value and importance with the environment.

Additionally, many people also engage in the practice of **showing gratitude** to the natural environment. This may be a simple moment of acknowledgement, as the individual takes the time to realise the value that the natural world around them has to offer. However, it can also include the giving of gifts to the natural space, showing reverence and even engaging in reciprocal service. At Level 2, there is increased awareness that what happens to the planet is of extreme importance to what happens to humans. If the natural world is providing a healing service, then we can provide a similar reciprocal service by engaging in healing practices of a space or of the animals that inhabit it. As such, partaking in volunteer programmes or community activities which seek to restore and repair natural spaces is one way to achieve this.

Animal-assisted therapy, which is often practiced at Level 1, also offers the potential to be practiced at Level 2. The difference at Level 2 is that the wellbeing and consent of the animals used is thoroughly considered and sought. For example, instead of capturing animals and using them for therapeutic purposes, at Level 2, the activity might instead focus on helping or rescuing animals. Instead of forcing animals to engage with humans, animals are allowed to choose which humans to interact with and to form connections and relationships based on choice. This not only allows for respect and compassion of the animals, but ultimately leads to a much richer and more positive experience for both the animals and the humans involved in the activity.



Photo by Anna Dako.

Horticultural therapies are also able to be practiced at Level 2. Whilst school and community gardens are often primarily focused on the social benefits and the production of local food, by engaging in rewilding practices, the activities can then be extended into Level 2. For instance, instead of simply planting or cultivating food with only human need and consumption in mind, groups can instead consider growing plants and vegetables which are ideal and important for the local ecosystems to develop and thrive. By considering the positive impact that horticultural practices have to offer the environment, we are able to engage in a reciprocal act of healing and support.

Moving From Level 1 to Level 2 Activities

Level 2 ecotherapies are the activities we ought to be striving for. However, it can be a challenge to simply start at this level. By beginning with Level 1 activities, individuals have the opportunity to learn to engage with their natural selves and to connect with their inner nature. With practice, they can then learn to shift, deepen and expand their awareness to the wider world round them. In this way, we can learn to reconnect not only with our selves, but also with nature itself. In so doing, we can achieve a better understanding (intellectually, emotionally and kinaesthetically) of the interconnectedness of all things.

Somatic practice is a particularly good example of this. For many people, it begins with Level 1 activities. However, somatic practice, including the audio guides and [Walks to Wellbeing](#) devised by Dr Anna Dako for example, allow for a natural progression into Level 2 activities to evolve.



Photo by Anna Dako.

By engaging in Level 2 ecotherapy activities we have the opportunity to learn to view ourselves as an equal part of the natural world and not above or removed from it. In this way, Level 2 ecotherapies allow us to develop the skills, not only to support ourselves, but also our environment. More importantly, such experiences help to better equip us to make more conscious choices about our daily habits and to find more sustainable ways of living in cooperation with the natural world.

An Invitation...

We invite you to join us in considering what you can do to reconnect with nature on a deeper level. What can you offer nature that is meaningful and supportive? Perhaps you can plant a native species in your garden to help support the local ecosystem? Maybe you can engage in a local clean-up of your local nature reserve?



Photo by Anna Dako.

Or perhaps you can use this opportunity as the trigger to truly learn how to better reconnect with nature in a more in-depth way by engaging in some embodied practice, such as [Felt Thinking](#).

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