

Outdoor and Adventure Therapy... What, Why and Where next?

Introduction

Photograph by Jed Wright

Kaye Richards, Cathryn Carpenter & Nevin Harper guest editors for JAOEL* set the scene to the current special issue on outdoor and adventure therapy and the re-launch of the IOL special interest group TOPSIG with an event in January, 2012.

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Setting the Scene

The current issue of JAEOL examines theoretical and international perspectives in outdoor and adventure therapy, reflecting the growing application of adventure education and outdoor learning experiences for desired psychotherapeutic and psychological benefits. This can be seen in structured psychotherapy taking place outdoors, or practice utilising the therapeutic qualities derived from doing and being outdoors for general mental health benefits.


Given the World Health Organisation's prediction that within the next ten years (by 2020) depression will be the second largest cause of ill health ^(21,13) the need for psychological therapies to actively respond to these concerns is greater than ever. This need is further supported with clinically diagnosed mental health disorders becoming more prominent in young people

across the world. For example, 10% of children under 16 years old in the UK are reported to have such conditions ⁽⁹⁾, and in Australia ^(1,2) 26.4% of young people aged 16 - 24 years are reported to have a mental illness, along with intentional self-harm or suicide being ranked as the 10th leading cause of all deaths in 2008. Thus, improving the mental health of populations with effective intervention and prevention strategies is imperative, especially for any endeavour that promotes human development.

The description of

'health as a state of balance including the self, others and the environment'
(Herrman, Saxena & Moodie, 2005, p.23)

offers a helpful starting point in considering the relevance that outdoor and adventure experiences can have in addressing a range of psychological wellbeing and mental health needs.



The psychological benefits of taking part in outdoor and adventurous activities is not new – there has been a long held view that taking part in these activities can have a positive impact on an individual's self-esteem and self-efficacy ⁽¹²⁾. Other reported psychological, physical and sociological benefits of outdoor experiences and interventions include: recovery from mental fatigue, concentration restoration, improved healing for patients who previously had not responded to treatment, enhanced positive outlook on life, and increased ability to cope with and recover from stress, illness and injury. ^(17,4). It is these identified benefits that have led to outdoor and adventure being more widely used as a psychological therapy for addressing a range of clinical and health conditions. For example, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety, and eating disorders. These developments reflect the emergence of what has now become commonly termed 'adventure therapy'.

Definitions of Outdoor and Adventure Therapy

It is helpful to recognise that different terms are used to describe work which falls under the broader umbrella of 'adventure therapy'.

Other terms used include:

- Adventure Based Counselling, ⁽²⁶⁾
- Wilderness Therapy, ⁽⁸⁾
- Wilderness Adventure Therapy,
- Therapeutic Outdoor Programming, ⁽¹⁸⁾
- Bush Adventure Therapy (Australia), ⁽⁶⁾ and
- Outdoor Behavioural Health Care - a term that describes a treatment programme with the focus on behavioural change within mental health practices in North America.

More recently the terms

- Nature Based Therapy, ⁽⁵⁾
- EcoTherapy ⁽⁷⁾ and
- Horticultural Therapy, ⁽²⁷⁾.

have also been coined and these approaches reflect a greater emphasis on a connection with the natural world as a key therapeutic ingredient, along with a response to environmental crises and sustainability agendas.

Some practitioners, however, might be inclined to use the term **outdoor adventure therapy**, whereby the emphasis of journeying in the outdoors and the adventure experience, as well as connection with the natural environment are collectively embraced as part of the psychotherapeutic process. Further terms that capture different aspects of the therapy process


outdoors will inevitably continue to emerge, indicating that there is not necessarily one term that encapsulates a collective understanding of what adventure therapy is across international practices and different cultural contexts.

The distinction between deliberate intentional psychotherapeutic programmes located outdoors and those outdoors programmes that achieve therapeutic benefits, but do not necessarily reflect structured psychotherapeutic strategies, has continued to fuel a debate about whether there should be a definitive boundary and definition that determines practice entitled to be described as 'adventure therapy'. The integration of psychotherapeutic theory and practices in the outdoors is an important dimension in developing the field. However, as we understand more international practices that tackle the imbued nature of psychological distress, it is important to encourage openness so as to offer a variety of theoretical approaches that enable practitioners to tailor programmes and interventions to meet the unique needs of their clientele.

International Developments

The building of an international identity for adventure therapy has seen increasing activity since 1997, with the International Adventure Therapy Conference series developing debate, reporting on research and sharing practice ^(14, 23, 3, 20, 22). These developments point to the need for broadness of theoretical and practical considerations, and a willingness to look outside narrow definitions as the field continues to build its foundations.

An important shift in the developing landscape of adventure therapy is the growing acknowledgment from mainstream counselling and psychotherapy that taking therapy outdoors is a worthy new horizon in counselling practice ⁽¹⁹⁾. Consequently, as research and related professional practice agendas build ⁽¹⁰⁾, the focus on developing a 'body' of research, best practices, licensure, and accreditation of adventure therapy programmes and practitioners has generated a growing perception by many that the very essence of adventure therapy is being lost in this process, and it is in danger of losing its 'soul' ⁽²⁵⁾. However, by understanding the psychological and ecological processes of adventure therapy we can understand more fully what constitutes its 'soul'. The papers in the JAEOL special issue indicate that the 'soul' of adventure therapy is in fact at the heart of building theoretical knowledge and its associated research endeavours.



It could be argued that outdoor and adventure therapy is poised at a crossroad.



As researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and clients we can all shape the future of outdoor and adventure therapy, contributing perspectives from our unique place in the world. Attempts to define or distil the essential elements within these approaches seem fated to develop continuums of practice. Challenges, like reconciling the tensions about definitions, require a holistic integrated complimentary approach that is inclusive of many of the opposing aspects of the experience that are evident across different practices. For example: adrenaline and action, as well as rest and reflection; intentional therapy and therapeutic outcomes, as well as therapeutic benefits for all; nature as location and nature as co-therapist. Whilst the six papers in the JAEOL special issue of course do not synthesise a comprehensive exploration of diverse international practices, they do recognise some of the different stances that can be taken when exploring theoretical and international perspectives and encourage us to remain critical as we move forward

Looking forward

It could be argued that outdoor and adventure therapy is poised at a crossroad. Future pathways may lead towards the development of its professional status and of more inclusive and broader understandings of its methodologies for achieving psychological change. A core value that seems to transcend all debates and theoretical, philosophical and practical discussions is that of optimism and hope, with the belief that outdoor and adventure therapy can make a real difference in people's lives. However, working towards making this difference we have to face the real challenges ahead of us. What is clear from the papers in this special issue is that irrelevant of which path is taken, a strategic research agenda is urgently called for. Any response to this call needs to ensure it responds proactively to the current climate and future demands of international diversity, as well as responding effectively and efficiently to the needs of those in psychological distress. It might just be that against the current resistance it faces, research and the deeper understandings, along with challenges to understandings, it can bring will become the 'soul' that nourishes the future potential of outdoor and adventure therapies around the world. ■

INTERESTED TO FIND OUT MORE ON ADVENTURE THERAPY?

The IOL Therapeutic Outdoor Practitioners Special Interest Group (TOPSIG) are hosting an event on 6-8th January, 2012 (Snowdonia, Blue Peris Mountain Centre)

'Adventure Therapy: exploring professional issues in working therapeutically outdoors'

Led by Dr Kaye Richards (Liverpool John Moores University) and other speakers to be confirmed.

This IOL TOPSIG residential weekend will examine a range of issues in the development and practice of working therapeutically outdoors. This will offer an opportunity to reflect on ethical, theoretical and professional issues in the application of adventure therapy. The aim of the weekend is to provide a forum for professionals to share ideas and developments in outdoor therapeutic practice, enabling practitioners to reflect on their current and future activities in this growing arena of outdoor work.

The weekend will include a mixture of forums, presentations and workshops and will provide an opportunity for networking with like minded professionals. Also, a new TOPSIG committee and strategy will be planned as part of the weekend activities, so this will be an ideal opportunity for anyone with an interest in adventure therapy to become more involved.

FULL BOARD: INCLUDES meals and dormitory accomm. (Friday evening social to after lunch Sunday).

NO B&B INCLUDES: meals but no bed. (Friday evening social - after lunch Sunday).

You can, if you prefer, choose to arrive on Saturday morning at 9.30 if that is more convenient for you.

FULL BOARD

- IOL TOPSIG Members (subsidised rate) £70.00
- IOL Non TOPSIG Members (discounted rate) £90.00
- Non IOL members £150.00

NO B&B

- IOL TOPSIG Members (subsidised rate) £50.00
- IOL Non TOPSIG Members (discounted rate) £85.00
- Non IOL members £120.00

See: <http://www.outdoor-learning.org/Default.aspx?tabid=105>

Also: **6th International Adventure Therapy Conference**, 26-30th September 2012. Czech Republic.

See: <http://www.6iatc.eu/> for more information.



The papers in the Outdoor and Adventure Therapy special issue of JAEOL include:

- Restoring wilderness and adventure therapies: Healing places and selves in an era of environmental crises: Alette Willis (UK)
- Crossing the Threshold Mindfully: Exploring Rites of Passage Models in Adventure Therapy: Julian Norris (Canada)
- The meanings of outdoor physical activity for bereaved young people in the United Kingdom: Insights from an ethnographic study: Joanne Brewer and Andrew Sparkes (UK)

- Practical Implications for Applied Metaphor in Adventure Therapy: Gary Hartford (Canada)
- Developing the therapeutic potential of embodied cognition and metaphors in nature based therapy: lessons from theory to practice: Sus S. Corazon, Ulrika K. Stigsdotter & Theresa S.S. Schilhab (Norway)
- Cultural Bridging through Shared Adventure: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Adventure Therapy in response to a crisis situation following an Earthquake in China Christine L. Norton and Chi-Mou Hsieh (America and Taiwan)

For more details and to download each paper please see: <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/jaeol>

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Author's Notes



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Psychologist of the British Psychological Society and has written and edited a number of publications on outdoor education, adventure therapy, and counselling and psychotherapy. She organised and chaired the Fifth International Adventure Therapy Conference (UK, 2009) and recently took over as the Lead for IOL's Therapeutic Outdoor Practitioners Special Interest Group (TOPISG).



Dr Cathryn Carpenter is an independent consultant who writes curriculum and develops research and evaluation projects with a number of Australian Universities and not for profit organisations. An educator for more than

30 years she has taught in secondary and tertiary settings as well as with commercial outdoor companies. She has been involved in the development of Outdoor Education and Bush Adventure Therapy in Australia, and recently chaired the Adventure Therapy International Congress (2006 - 2009).



Dr. Nevin J. Harper is the National Research Coordinator for Outward Bound Canada and Faculty member in the School for Sport & Exercise Education at Camosun College (Canada). Nevin has been a practitioner,

manager, consultant, trainer and researcher in the outdoor adventure field since 1990 when he left competitive sports and discovered a passion for outdoor pursuits. He is the Canadian representative on the International Adventure Therapy Committee and founder of the Canadian Adventure Therapy Symposium.