

Ecotherapy Is A New Kind of Mental Health Treatment

More local practitioners than ever are using outdoor therapeutic techniques.



THE THERAPEUTIC GARDEN AT THE ITALIAN HOME. PHOTO PROVIDED TO BOSTONMAGAZINE.COM

Forget lying on a black leather couch under fluorescent lighting. A new wave of therapy is making use of the great outdoors.

Ecotherapy, as it's known, refers to any type of mental health work that makes nature a major part of the treatment, from wilderness excursions to traditional counseling done outdoors. More local practitioners than ever—like Abbie Hausermann, founder of Dedham's [High Peaks](#) therapeutic mentoring center—are turning to the technique.

“As opposed to sitting in an office, it usually takes place outside and really emphasizes the client’s connection to nature, and how nature can sometimes be used as a metaphor for challenging events or things that come up in life,” Hausermann says of her practice. “People get to experience the benefit of nature and being outside while getting some clinical and professional service.”

Hausermann says she uses the same therapeutic techniques she always has—she just employs them in places like the Blue Hills Reservation in Milton and Francis William Bird Park in Walpole. This summer, she'll also begin offering wilderness quests, consisting of three-day therapeutic camping journeys, to help teach teenagers self-sufficiency, self-confidence, and how to unplug from technology.

Though Hausermann recommends ecotherapy to any patient, she says it's especially valuable for children who may be uncomfortable in a traditional office setting. "I think it can help remove the power dynamic between the therapist and the patient," she says. "I also think it's helpful that you're not making direct eye contact and you're able to be outside and be more active."

That principle also guides the work of Jason Torres, director of foundation relations at the [Italian Home For Children](#), a behavioral health center in Jamaica Plain. Torres recently started a therapeutic garden for children at the Italian Home, with the goal of using the outdoors to improve mental health treatment while simultaneously teaching children about and providing them with healthy food. A free CSA share program may be in the works soon, too.

"It provides a great place for clinicians and our residential counselors to engage kids in difficult topics," Torres says. "As they form that bond with the garden and with their provider and that relationship deepens, they open up more, and you can tackle more of the difficult issues they have to process while they're here."

In addition to facilitating counseling sessions, Torres says working in the garden provides children with a safe space. "It's a consistent space, a space where they can work and have input on and make an impression on [something], and it becomes an environment that's collaborative," he says. "I've had multiple children express to me that it's one of the only safe spaces that they feel belongs to them."

In the end, Torres says, ecotherapy in general is addressing our culture's need to get back to nature. "There's a lot of people in a lot of different areas coming to the same conclusion," he says. "The more outside time, the more engagement with nature, and the more access to healthy food [people have], the better off they are."

Link: <http://www.bostonmagazine.com/health/blog/2015/08/04/eco-therapy-boston/>



Could Gardening Offer the Key to a Happier, Healthier Life?

by Mary Beth Albright

My grandmother used to say, “I’ve never seen an old gardener,” referring to how recreational gardening seems to keep people in high spirits, no matter what their condition. Research is showing that gardening appears to have disease-preventing, mental-enhancing superpowers, like meditation or eating tons of produce. Now, organizations are using that simple but powerful tool in creative ways.

This year, the Italian Home for Children in Boston, which serves children who have experienced extreme trauma, and in many cases have been removed from their homes, launched a program using gardening's therapeutic power. The Italian Home had planted a tiny garden for years on its seven-acre property. The plot didn't produce much, but kids who resided or were schooled on campus liked to just sit by the space. "We started gathering anecdotal evidence that kids had feelings of peace and calm around the garden. At the same time, we were exploring new behavioral interventions, to incorporate more collaborative problem solving," says Jason Torres, the Italian Home's residential director. Science backs up his observations. Research in nature-assisted therapy has shown that it reduces stress and blood pressure, improves cognitive function, and can promote cooperative behavior.

Coincidentally, new CEO Imari Jeffries wanted to reassess the Italian Home's treatment of mental health. With a donation from The Nick Katsiroubas Foundation (Katsiroubas founded a major produce distribution company), the Italian Home Therapeutic Agriculture and Youth Leadership Program started last summer.

They built six garden beds and created a child-centered gardening program. "Everything in the garden is done by children: weeding, watering, harvesting, production," says Torres. "Then we cooked zucchini bread, and for the holidays we have a great crop of sweet potatoes so the kids are helping our kitchen make pies." There is an outdoor classroom, and gardening is woven through the Italian Home's kindergarten-through-eighth-grade curriculum, whether kids reside at the school or not, whether they are there for 30 days or for years.

Gardening has received a lot of attention lately as a new way to provide physical activity, purpose, fresh food, and therapeutic benefits to populations in need, including those in the U.S. prison system. Insight Garden Program is a privately funded group that provides prisons with gardening services, tended by low-risk inmates. The organization reports substantial

improvement in prisoner behavior at facilities where the program is allowed in.



Prisoners participating in a garden program work together to amend the soil. Photograph courtesy Insight Garden Program.

But to go from private funding to public policy takes substantial research-proven benefits, and many analysts are working on that. There are lots of theories about why gardening has a profound positive impact: Some say dirt has microbes that enter the body through skin contact and calm the nervous system. Some say the sense of accomplishment prevents depression and anti-social behavior. But most prisons will allow only lowest-risk prisoners to participate in gardening (no violent backgrounds, gang involvement, or violations—after all, they are giving people rakes and such). So some critics argue that the prison pool is skewed.

Sander van der Linden, professor at Princeton University, studies green prison programs. When I questioned him about whether the low recidivism rates of prisoners in gardening programs were skewed by the prisoner selection system, he replied: “Even when using the most conservative

estimates I could find, I still found large and significant differences—there is definitely something unique about green prison programs.” Rikers Island’s green programs, he points out, yielded a huge decrease in prisoner rearrest rates, and it has one of America’s most violent prison populations.

The attendant benefits are many. Perhaps most important, prisoners are decreasing the stress hormone cortisol and learning a new skill that provides a positive identity. As Jeffries says, “The first thing people ask after your name, is what you do for a living. I want people coming out of prison to be able to say, I’m a grower. I’m a producer.”

The Italian Home for Children wants to expand its growing program into the kitchen, too. Says Torres: “We aren’t in the business of neuroscience but better quality food creates real chemical reactions in your body—brain development and function—that are supported by quality nutrition. This isn’t just about having a better outlook on life.”

The Italian Home for Children is also hoping to expand its program with greenhouses, and it is partnering with the Boston Food Forest Coalition to create urban public food space that all citizens can participate in and benefit from—edible gardens and orchards, for example.

“We want a sea change in how people talk about food and mental health, and make the connection between mental health, poverty, food deserts, and addiction. Food is both controversial, and the most neutral way we can begin to talk about mental health,” says Torres. “Growing food together is inside of people and what we want to return to. It’s inevitable.”