

FIVE EXPERIENTIAL ECOTHERAPY EXERCISES

The exercises listed below are a part of the coursework for Ecotherapy: An Introduction. They are experiential in nature, allowing you to begin to access the healing power of nature by engaging in some basic ecotherapy activities.

There are no reporting requirements for these activities. By taking the post-test for the course you are certifying that you have completed all five of the activities listed below at least once.

When you have completed these activities and have studied the course materials for *Ecotherapy: An Introduction*, you may take the post-test by visiting:

<http://mindfulecotherapy.org/post-test-for-ecotherapy-an-introduction/>

Activity 1: Naming Ceremony

Most indigenous peoples from around the world named their children after things found in nature. We are familiar with this practice through the names of Native Americans like Sitting Bull or Crazy Horse. These names have obvious sources in nature, but did you know that many other names have their origins in the natural world? My middle name, “Bruce,” means “brushwood thicket.” The name “Glen” originally meant “from the fertile valley,” the name “Mary” means “wished for child,” the name “Ann” means “merciful one,” etc.

As you begin your journey into the world of ecotherapy, you may wish to select a new name for yourself that reflects this new identity.

To do this, first go outside to a natural place. The wilder, the better. If you have the time and the opportunity you may wish to do this activity in a national or state park.

Prepare yourself by taking several deep breaths, and by grounding and centering yourself. Once you feel prepared, go into the forest. Keep your attention open and accepting. Set your intention on the activity. Continue to walk in the forest until you find something that appeals to you. This could be any natural object, animal or plant that you find yourself attracted to. This thing that caught your attention shall be your new name.

For example, if you are walking on the trail and a hawk flies overhead, you might choose the name, “Flying Hawk.”

Once you have found your new name, you may wish to have a ceremony where you announce it to your family and friends. This ceremony may be as formal or as informal as you like. This is your own rite of passage, so you may craft it to meet your needs and expectations.

Now that you have your new name, use it when exploring the skills of Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy. At our workshops, selecting this name is one of the first things we do. Workshop attendees are addressed by their “nature name” for the duration of the course. This helps to reinforce the idea that attendees are becoming new people as they progress through the workbook and the course.

FIVE EXPERIENTIAL ECOTHERAPY EXERCISES

Activity 2: The River

If you have the opportunity, find a gently flowing river near you. This should be a river where the water isn't flowing too rapidly, and where the water isn't too deep. Remember, safety first! This should be a river you know well, and it's best not to do this activity alone. If you do not have access to a river, any other body of water would suffice. In the absence of any body of water, you can instead go outdoors to a fairly remote location and imagine yourself standing in a river.

Once you have found your river, go out into it. Don't go any deeper than your waist. It's preferable to find a spot on the river where nature surrounds you.

Now stand in the river and do a little mindful breathing. Inhale and exhale deeply for at least three breaths. Ground and center yourself.

Now cultivate an open and accepting attitude towards everything you are experiencing. What do you see? What do you hear? Can you feel the river's currents with your body? Are there pleasant aromas on the breeze? Enjoy the experience of being in the river right here, and right now.

When you feel at peace with your surroundings, take a mental snapshot of all you have experienced here in the river. Mentally record the river in as much detail as possible. When you have done so, you may recall and retrieve this experience the next time you are feeling stressed out.

When you are ready, leave the river and sit on the riverbank while thinking over these questions:

1. Once you were grounded and centered, did you find yourself thinking about what lies upstream or what lies downstream, or neither?
2. Once you were grounded and centered, did you find your mind wandering to your mental "to do" list of daily activities?
3. What was it about the river that made this experience different than your day-to-day life?
4. Is there a way to carry this experience with you into your day-to-day life?

FIVE EXPERIENTIAL ECOTHERAPY EXERCISES

Activity 3: The Bell Branch

The Bell Branch is a branch selected from a tree that is meaningful to you. To begin this activity, find a nearby tree that seems to call to you. It could be your birth tree, or any other tree for which you have developed an affinity.

Next, ask the tree for permission to take a branch, and wait for a reply. This reply may come as a physical manifestation in the environment (such as a gentle swaying of branches in the breeze) or just as a feeling in your heart and spirit. There is no right or wrong way to tell if the tree has given its permission. It's like being in love...you'll know it when you feel it.

When the tree has given permission, select and cut a branch about the length of your own arm. Once you have selected your branch, you may adorn it with colorful ribbons, feathers, or other decorations. This branch is also adorned with bells. Each bell tied to your Bell Branch should represent a significant event in your life. The birth of a child might deserve a bell. A wedding might also call for a bell to be tied to your bell branch, as might a graduation, the passing of a loved one, a new job, or a new home.

The Bell Branch is a living record of the significant events in your life. You may use it in your sacred space for consecration and purification, or simply as a reminder of where you've been.

Select your tree and ask its permission to take a branch, then express your thanks once permission is received. Make an offering to your tree in the spirit of gratitude, and select your branch. This offering could be in the form of a libation (an ale or other beverage poured on the ground by the tree) or a food offering for the creatures dwelling in the tree, such as bird seed or a bit of bread.

Once your branch has been selected, write or carve your name on it and decorate it with symbols that are meaningful to you. Thank your tree for granting permission to take your Bell Branch by speaking a word of thanks, a brief prayer, or by meditating for a time beneath its branches.

Each time you have a significant event in your life, add a bell to your Bell Branch.

When you shake your branch, all of the bells will remind you of all of those significant events. The music that they make will be the rites of passage of your life singing back to you.

FIVE EXPERIENTIAL ECOTHERAPY EXERCISES

Activity 4: Pilgrimage

Pilgrimages are probably as old as the human race. A pilgrimage is just a journey undertaken for a sacred or spiritual purpose. If you are participating in a course on ecotherapy, you are on a pilgrimage of a sort. Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy can be a spiritual journey to your own True Self.

This pilgrimage activity is a way to create Second Order Change in your own life. In order to do it, you must have access to some sort of hiking trail. This should be a trail that you can walk comfortably in a single day or less, unless you feel ambitious enough to make it a weekend backpacking and camping trip. The purpose of this pilgrimage is to spend at least a half a day journeying in a natural setting while contemplating your own spiritual path. Be sure to take enough food and water for the journey!

If possible, set out at dawn and return at dusk. If that much time is not available, try to do your pilgrimage for at least half a day, from dawn to noon or noon to dusk. As you walk the trail, engage in mindful breathing and mindful walking as much as possible while remaining open to everything the trail has to show you and tell you. As you walk, contemplate these six questions:

1. Who am I?
2. Who do I want to be?
3. What is my mission or purpose in life?
4. How am I living that purpose?
5. How am I not living that purpose?
6. What would I have to change about myself in order to accomplish my life's mission?

You may wish to take a journal with you. If any insights come to you as you walk, stop to write them down. If you find any place that calls to you, stop there and meditate for a while, after asking permission and giving thanks.

Try asking the questions above before you set out on your pilgrimage, and again after you return. Did your answers change? How?

FIVE EXPERIENTIAL ECOTHERAPY EXERCISES

Activity 5: Vision Quest

The Vision Quest is a time-honored rite of passage common to shamanic tribes throughout the world. It is used to determine life's purpose. The Vision Quest itself may take on many forms, but for this activity we will be using the form of the all-night vigil.

If you choose to do this activity, first find a place that calls out to you. It may be your own outdoor sacred space, or some other place that feels full of energy to you. Make sure it is a place that you will be undisturbed for the duration of the night. Dress in comfortable, loose-fitting clothing. You may wish to take a blanket with you to ward off the chill night air if you live in a temperate zone or if it is autumn or winter where you live.

When you have arrived at your sacred space, first ask permission to use the space, then make an offering and express gratitude as outlined in Activity 3: The Bell Branch. Next, sit or stand comfortably and ground and center yourself.

You may wish to perform a mindful meditation. It may help to build a campfire or to light a candle to give you a center of focus.

Once you feel you are ready, ask the Universe to reveal your life purpose to you, and wait for a reply. Sometimes this reply may come as a vision, or a dream, or just as a feeling in your spirit. Stay awake all night if possible, and greet the dawn with open acceptance.

Look for messages from the environment. Do the trees speak to you? Are you visited by any animals? A visit from your totem animal would be especially powerful at this time.

When your life's mission is revealed, greet the dawn and offer thanks.

If your mission is not revealed, try again at another time, after preparing yourself through a period of meditation, fasting, and thanksgiving.