

USING NATURAL ELEMENTS TO EXPLORE PERSONAL DYNAMICS

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Abstract

Many recent studies have explored the physical and psychological effects of nature as a source of health and well being, and have argued the importance of reconnection with nature. Based on the therapeutic aspects of nature and contact with nature, many creative methods have been developed in the field of counseling and psychotherapy to help person reconnect body, mind and spirit through direct encounter with natural elements.

The aim of this study was to evaluate the efficiency of a group creative exercise (using natural elements to design, create and explore a garden). We supposed that this kind of exercise would facilitate the access to personal resources and needs and it would reduce the negative thoughts.

In this study we used an experimental design (experimental and control group), observation, psychodiagnostic instruments (ATQ - Automatic Thinking Questionnaire), and statistical methods (Independent Samples *t* Test).

After the participation in this type of group creative exercise the participants were more aware of their present needs and resources, and experienced less intense negative automatic thoughts compared to the control group.

The experience of working with natural elements in the form of creative exercises can facilitate a direct but gentle access to personal needs and resources.

Keywords: creative methods, symbolic garden, nature.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many researches in counseling and psychotherapy have considered nature as a partner, a resource or a tool and they have explored the potential that nature or natural elements hold for emotional, psychological or spiritual healing (Taylor, 2012). Contact with nature have been associated with improved mood and self-esteem, decreased anxiety and depression, reduced blood pressure, higher functional emotions (Joye, 2006; Răban-Motounu, 2013; Vitalia, 2013).

These results explained the development and growing use of creative and experiential approaches, working in non-verbal and non-cognitive ways to better suit the characteristics of community or clinical population with different ages in the field of counseling, psychotherapy or personal optimization and development. Connection with nature, and non-verbal and creative work in nature, have proved to empower adults and older people coping with emotional and psychiatric difficulties (Berger, Tiry, 2012), to help normal and special needs children cope with stress and crisis (Berger & Lahad, 2012).

Today there is a vast array of therapy programmes based on activities and experiences obtained in natural environments, which overall can be termed nature-based therapy (Corazon, Schilhab, Stigsdotter, 2011)—from horticultural therapy in specially designed healing gardens (Anderson (2011), to wilderness therapy in large, serene nature areas (Travlou, 2006). These treatments

commonly focus on the characteristics in the environment and resources within the person that support health and well-being.

In this area of studies, Berger (2006) explored the therapeutic and educational impact that a non-verbal and experiential programme based on nature therapy had on children with learning difficulties. This research emphasized the potential of nature as a therapeutic medium facilitating the participants' process of personal development. This kind of nature therapy was an effective approach to use within a peer group framework, providing support and modeling, as well as a rich space to develop personal issues such as responsibility, communication, cooperation, creativity, curiosity and flexibility. In addition, the programme increased the participants' self-esteem, while their anxiety and aggressive behavior decreased, and the children's attitude towards nature changed from alienation and fear into one of familiarity, belonging and caring (Berger, 2006, p.145). Moreover, using metaphors to conceptualize desired therapeutic understanding in connection with the performance of activities in nature-based therapy can support the learning and change process by semantically relating cognition and bodily involvement (Corazon, Schilhab, Stigsdotter, 2011).

Other programmes expanded the concept of „healing gardens” (as spaces that are created in order to promote emotional, social, and physiologic health, to improve or to restore an individual's well-being) and focused on the benefits outdoor spaces bring to patients (such as Alzheimer's patients), staff, and visitors in healthcare practices. Anderson (2011) explored the potential benefits of using this kind of nature contact in addition to traditional methods for the treatment of depression, stress and anxiety for veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

For some psychotherapies (Unification Therapy) the use of alternative universal languages, especially those of creative expression, is the methodological basis, not only in permanent diagnostic evaluation, but also in challenging, exploring, self-analysis and therapeutic change (Mitrofan, 2012; Voicu, 2014).

Objectives:

General objective: to evaluate the efficiency of a group constructive creative improvisation (A garden in the spring) using natural elements.

Practical objectives:

- To reduce negative automatic thoughts
- To increase the awareness of personal resources and needs.

Hypotheses: We suppose that a group constructive creative improvisation (A garden in the spring) using natural elements would facilitate an increased awareness of personal resources and needs and reduced negative automatic thoughts in experimental group compared to the control group.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Method: In this study we used an experimental design. The variables of this research were: the negative automatic thoughts and awareness of personal resources and needs (dependent variables), and participation in group constructive creative improvisation (A garden in the spring) using natural elements (independent variable). Two groups were involved in this research. The participants from both groups were randomly selected. Assessments of the mentioned variables were conducted after the participation in the group creative exercise.

Psychometrical methods: ATQ - Automatic Thinking Questionnaire and Statistical methods.

Instruments: ATQ - Automatic Thinking Questionnaire is a short 15 item questionnaire assessing negative automatic thoughts. We also used natural elements (different colored flowers, green branches, green leaves, green grass, small scallops, stones).

Subjects: in this study participated 26 subjects (13 subjects in the experimental group and 13 subjects in the control group). All subjects were 3 rd grade students, in the Socio-Humanistic Faculty.

Procedure:

First, all the participants from the experimental group gathered around a table with a white piece of paper on it and they were invited to imagine that this piece of paper is a garden awaiting to be designed and explored. Then, they were invited to explore the natural elements (different colored flowers, green branches, green leaves, green grass, small scallops, stones) and to involve all of their senses in this exploration (to touch, to smell with open and closed eyes, to hear the sound they make). Students selected their preferred elements and they arranged them in the garden. During this process, they were asked to be aware of their sensations, feelings and thoughts.

At the end of designing the garden, they were provoked to explore it and to talk about their experience in this garden. They were also invited to speak about their experience working in this group.

After all the participants shared their personal and group experience, they were invited to choose their favourite place from this garden, to keep this place in mind and to sit down on the chairs in a comfortable position. Using visual imagery, students were asked to close their eyes, and to explore this special place of the garden, being aware of their sensations, emotions and thoughts. At the end of this imaginary journey, they were invited to choose three inner resources from this place.

After this experience, students were asked to write down these resources and to describe, using a few words, their experience using natural elements.

Then, they completed Automatic Thinking Questionnaire.

Participants from the control group completed the same questionnaire and they were asked to mention three resources they believed to be important for them.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Statistical analysis was used to confirm the hypothesis of this study.

Student t test (SPSS 17.00) was computed to compare test results. Independent-Samples t Test was used to test the significance of the differences between the data in the experimental and control situation. Descriptive Statistics were also performed.

Table 1: Group Statistics

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Negative thoughts	experimental	12	24,4167	6,35979	1,83591
	control	12	31,4167	6,92109	1,99795

In the comparison between the experimental and the control group, there were significant differences regarding the level of negative thoughts. When compared to the control group, the subjects from the experimental group experienced less intense negative automatic thoughts ($t=-2,580$; $p<0.05$).

Discussions

Statistical analysis has confirmed the hypothesis of this study and it has demonstrated that a group constructive creative improvisation (A garden in the spring) using natural elements reduced negative automatic thoughts in experimental group when compared to a control group. As personal inner resources the participants from the experimental group mentioned confidence, calm, hope,

freedom, relaxation, love, warmth, and happiness. They used the same words to describe their personal and group experience. These results are supported by other studies emphasizing that an expressive-creative approach using natural elements could be successfully used in group and individual settings, as a mean to develop social skills, self-confidence and self-esteem, and provide opportunities for personal exploration and expression (Anderson, 2011; Corazon, Schilhab, Stigsdotter, 2011; Polak, 2000 in Berger, 2006, 2012).

A direct encounter with natural elements can trigger emotions and sensations that were not previously touched or shared. Working with natural elements facilitated a more direct yet gentle and deeper connexion between sensorial and emotional experience. The participants had the opportunity to explore other aspects of themselves which might otherwise be difficult to access in an intensely modern lifestyle. This experience was associated with relaxation and a sense of peace and calm and it reduced the negative automatic thoughts.

4. CONCLUSIONS

A group constructive creative improvisation (A garden in the spring) using natural elements is an efficient method in exploring personal dynamic because it can facilitate the access to personal resources. These resources will be then used to cope with different problematic issues.

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