

WEAVING CONNECTIONS BACK TO THE WORLD

DISCONNECTION IN A CONNECTED WORLD

Although we live in an increasingly connected world, paradoxically there is a growing recognition of a developing social crisis. This is manifesting itself directly through increases in reported levels of isolation and loneliness, a compromising of positive and pro-social behaviours, general social skills, and the fragmentation of community and trust.

It is not just our personal lives and communities that are fragmented, we are experiencing a significant increase in disconnection from the world around us. This loss of our individual and collective interaction with natural world is increasingly recognised as having detrimental effects on our mental and physical health.

E.O. Wilson drew attention to this with his Biophilia Hypothesis (1984) which was based on Erich Fromm's psychological proposition from the 1960s about the important fundamental affinity between humans and nature.

Much research has occurred since then, for example, to quote *The Lancet* (2024) "evidence that nature improves mental health is available from randomised controlled trials, longitudinal studies, and involuntary nature deprivation during COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Such evidence includes cognitive, affective, behavioural, physiological, and neurological measures across demographics and life histories."



¹ (Biophilia, The Human Bond with other Species, E O Wilson, 1984)
² Nature-based mental health: research and implementation agenda
www.thelancet.com/planetary-health Vol 8 August 2024



NATURAL SOLUTIONS

This affinity with nature is being reflected in the increasing engagement of nature-based modalities as part of, or to support, individual healing, therapy or simply general wellbeing. Just taking a 20-minute walk in nature is proven to have a positive

effect on the human condition. Yasmin Rufo (2025) in an article for the BBC, summarises these benefits:

- You unconsciously relax;
- Your hormones reboot;
- The relaxing benefit of natural "scent" and "smell"; and,
- Good bacteria and microbiomes for your gut.

Bratman et al (2024) found that:

- frequency of nature contact was significantly associated with lesser emotional ill-being and greater emotional well-being;
- effective emotion regulation was significantly associated with lesser emotional ill-being and greater emotional well-being; and,
- the associations of higher frequency of nature contact with these benefits were partly explained via emotional regulation.

Diverse outdoor solutions offer these benefits, such as animal assisted (including equines), social-farming and horticultural

activities, or meditative practices such as "forest bathing." Increasingly therapists and other mental health practitioners are engaging these approaches to support their clients.

Animal Assisted Services (AAS) are structured interactions and interventions between animals and humans that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education, and human services for the purpose of therapeutic benefits in humans.

Similarly, services such as horticultural therapy, or the broader model of meaningful activity under the social farming approach provide environments where therapeutic benefit can be derived from structured nature-based activity. In an article in *Vet Record*, Robin Asquith from Camphill Village Trust highlights some client-groups that can benefit "... those with learning disabilities, mental health issues, dementia or problems with substance misuse, as well as adult offenders and ex-service personnel."

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cvg0yvdjgn5o>
"Associations of nature contact with emotional ill-being and well-being: the role of emotion regulation"
COGNITION AND EMOTION 2024, VOL. 38, NO. 5, 748-767 Routledge
<https://bvajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1136/vr.m279>

RECOGNISED BENEFIT



Connection is at the heart of these activities, not just with nature, but importantly with self and others. They create safe opportunities for clients to be, feel present with, and acknowledged by, another.

They provide safe spaces that can boost social engagement, in nature, with animals and the handlers and facilitators involved, fostering such beneficial outcomes as stronger communication, social connection, self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Outdoor activities – particularly those involving animal interaction – are recognised to increase levels of oxytocin (and serotonin) and so reduce heart rate and blood-pressure, as well as creating a foundation for connection and bonding with others.

Animal Assisted Services are based on the strong non-judgemental and authentic bonds that can develop between people and animals. These often facilitate feelings of trust, calmness and personal safety. They can enable a service-user/client to obtain greater clarity and understanding around challenging circumstances or situations, facilitating a more objective and compassionate perspective, or momentary feelings of lighter mood or pleasure.

These spaces provide what Fine et al (2015) cite as Social Capital, being the value that exists within our relationships. The presence of animal facilitates lower barriers to conversation. Quite simply as Fine et al put it, "they encourage people to talk to each other."

Simply the presence of a dog in a therapy room is recognised as enabling greater client openness, or in the equine assisted space, the quiet focussed brushing of a horse can often facilitate a deeper level of sharing between clients and therapist.

From our own work, AAHEP/Athena has reported benefits from its own work with residents in cared-for communities:

- "I gained knowledge with regards to how horses react to humans, and how our own emotions and feelings can affect how the horses respond to humans."
- "... dealing with the horses made me more confident with speaking to individuals. The sessions made me more relaxed and able to communicate"
- "It has helped me to see how I am in social situations and has given me tools to improve. I gradually found it easier and easier to talk"



RECOGNISING A DISTINCT PRACTICE

Being a qualified psychotherapist or counsellor does not automatically make someone competent, safe, or accountable to deliver Animal/Equine Assisted or Nature-based Services. It is not just counselling outdoors. It is a distinct, specialist field that introduces additional layers of complexity, risk, and responsibility.

There is a dual competency requirement that must encompass both human psychological and therapeutic practice, as well as animal behaviour, welfare, and safe handling.

Those that provide Animal and Equine Assisted, and/or Nature-based, Services require appropriate training, the ability to assess and mitigate risk, hold specific insurance and have in place policies and procedures that recognise these broader experiential practices.

BEST PRACTICE AND A HOME FOR PRACTITIONERS

Acknowledging these distinct practices means that there is a requirement for aligned standards of ethics and professional practice (as well as the specific needs that cover animal welfare). For this reason, the Association for Animals, Horticultural and

Equine Practitioners "AAHEP®" holds a register under the Professional Standard Authority's (PSA) accredited register programme in the UK.

AAHEP® aims to serve as a focal point for public, professionals and commissioning bodies alike that seek to engage these services, providing confidence in professional and ethical standards. Further, this means working with regulators and other accredited registers to support both the appropriate governance of roles and titles.



accredited register