

Experience Walking Therapy

The value of harmonizing with nature.

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KEY POINTS

- Walking outside produces a visual spontaneity that can inspire both a therapist and client and help them resolve problems.
- The outdoor environment is where our biological rhythms harmonize beyond cultural constraints so we can forgive and find solutions.
- Take a walk with another, be it a therapist or friend, to explore the gift of being interdependent with nature.

"Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike." — John Muir

I am often seen with different people walking through the parks near my office or along the river's edge. I am a systemic psychotherapist, however since the name is not the thing, it includes using different resources such as mutually walking with others. Labels are limiting and hinder our potential of having a wider lens, which to me is "zooming in and out" to gain perspective. And what better opportunity to experience this than being in nature?

The effectiveness of taking therapy outdoors

Given the constraints imposed by insurance and the confines of physical office space, I am an advocate of taking psychotherapy, when possible, outdoors. Why? Because it is effective! I find myself longing to be closer to nature, when appropriate, with those who have asked me to assist them in making a difference in their lives. It is hard not to imagine not feeling better when outdoors. I started doing this over 35 years ago as I found that people with certain temperaments and learning styles respond better to

therapy when not in an enclosed room. There are definite positive benefits to walking, and it can be enhanced by a professional therapist if needed. This is a valuable alternative to traditional psychotherapy.



Forest Walking © Kenneth Silvestri

I still do therapy in-person and virtually including with families and couples, however whenever there is the opportunity to hear, "Hey could we go for a walk?" I am ready. Although my walking sessions are mostly one on one, I have had success walking with more than one person. I am a firm believer that it takes two to know one and healing is in between those in relationships. It does not necessarily have to involve much talking, especially since 90 percent of communication is non-verbal, the value of being outside is an amazing mending context and offers a chance to mutually learn with another. I nevertheless am a nudge when outside with others by reminding them to use their peripheral vision. This

underscores the importance to pause and view what nature offers, such as ancient trees, cloud formations, and life's comings and goings.

Advocating to tune into what each different moment has to offer is essential in this context of larger contexts especially as it is a living example of how differences came about. Walking and being outside produces spontaneity and visual scenes which helps create an improvisational priming of inspiration and resolution of problems. Inevitably a text comes my way prior to a follow-up appointment: "Let's meet in the park" or "Let's walk and talk."

Over the years, I have found tree-lined pathways, gardens, and parks that allow me to use poetic prompts related to each environment we pass through. Be it up hills, near Victorian houses, or taking shortcuts through quiet pleasant neighborhoods, there are

always seasonal nuances. I am lucky that my community has so many secret places to enjoy with exceptional foliage. I also have access to trails along the river, around a lake, or out on a mile-long pier, all of which are inviting and close by.



WalkingTherapy © Kenneth Silvestri

I am known by some as "The Walking Therapist." I was not always sure if that was acceptable until I came across several articles describing it as an official form of psychotherapy. Even though the map is not the territory, I said, "okay that makes sense." I could come out of the closet, so to speak. There are several books that helped me formulate this as an effective endeavor, two of which were:

- *The Nature Fix, Your Guide to Forest Bathing: Experience the Healing Power of Nature* by Florence Williams and
- *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate — Discoveries From a Secret World*, by Peter Wohlleben.

I should have known the power of nature and specifically trees. O Sensei, the founder of the martial art Aikido, ("The way of harmony") that I practice, would interact with them as a spiritual exercise. Aikido has always been especially important to me because it depends on a context that supports the very sacred relationships that are the core of mutual learning.

There is an abundance of legitimate value to being in nature. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson summed it up by saying, "The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think." He also believed that "It is in nature where we can understand the problems that us humans inflict on ourselves."

Yes, I am a walking participant-observer with others, sometimes stopping to sit beneath a tree, or just being in nature to allow for those liminal transitional edges to experience a beginner's mind that may never have been imagined. It is part of the collective reservoir of all things that exist. Even when I am in an office with families, couples, or conducting workshops, I encourage all to learn from each other as it occurs in the messy but beautiful actions of a forest.

When you find yourself in need of some personal problem solving or to recharge your emotional being, seek out a place in nature and create a warm loving collaboration that can grow exponentially through shared synchrony. Take advantage to collectively join and find yourself being simultaneously part of a wholeness. This is where our biological rhythms harmonize beyond cultural constraints to forgive and find solutions.

Nature offers an ideal place to heal our pains, overcome contradictions and double binds. It is also where we can develop an understanding of how it is to be wise. So, make a choice when in need of rekindling your sense of self. Take a walk with another, be it a therapist or friend depending on what it is you need, and accept the fruits of mutual learning and the gift of being interdependent with nature.