



Ecotherapy

Explains what ecotherapy is, how to get involved in a programme, and what to do if no ecotherapy is available in your area.

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What is ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy is a formal type of therapeutic treatment which involves doing outdoor activities in nature. There isn't one single definition of ecotherapy, but it's often used to describe a regular, structured activity that:

- is led by **trained professionals** (sometimes therapists), who are there to support you
- focuses on **doing an activity**, rather than on your health
- takes place in a **green environment**
- is related to **exploring and appreciating** the natural world
- involves **spending time with other people**, although you can always choose to interact at your own pace.

You might do an ecotherapy programme on its own, or alongside other treatments such as [talking therapies](#), arts and creative therapies or [medication](#).

“As someone who's socially anxious, I've found it much easier to chat to people and make friends when you have a practical task to do together. You have easy common ground and there's never pressure to chat if you don't feel like it. I've got to know some of the best people I've ever known whilst de-lousing chickens and cleaning donkey hooves. This kind of work is extremely bonding.”

Different terms for ecotherapy

People sometimes use different words to describe ecotherapy, depending on whether the activity has an emphasis on exercise, gardening (also known as horticulture) or therapy. Phrases you might hear include:

- green exercise
- green care
- green therapy
- horticultural therapy.

These terms are often used to describe a whole range of outdoor activities, but may also refer to a [specific type of ecotherapy programme](#).

“Being at a supported gardening project has transformed my life and saved the life of my partner who had attempted suicide four times before she regained hope.”

What happens in ecotherapy?

Ecotherapy can take place in both rural and urban settings, including parks, gardens, farms and woodlands. It involves varying amounts of physical activity, depending on the type of programme. It can include activities that focus on:

- **working in nature**, such as a conservation project, gardening or farming
- **experiencing nature**, such as enjoying the views on a walk or cycling through woodland
- **spending time with others in nature**, such as preparing and sharing meals together.

Some ecotherapy sessions follow a set structure. Others can be more informal, or vary depending on the time of year and what work needs doing. People in the group may or may not have experience of mental health problems, but the main focus is usually working together on the shared activity.

What types of ecotherapy programme are there?

Ecotherapy programmes can involve a wide range of activities. For example:

- **Adventure therapy** involves doing adventurous physical activities in a group, such as rafting, rock climbing or caving.
- **Animal-assisted interventions** involve being in spaces such as farms where you come into contact with animals and spend relaxed time feeding or petting them.
- **Animal-assisted therapy** involves building a therapeutic relationship with animals, such as horses or dogs.
- **Care farming**, or therapeutic farming activities, involves looking after farm animals, growing crops or helping to manage woodland. Find out more from [Social Farms & Gardens](#).
- **Environmental conservation** involves protecting and caring for natural spaces. [The Conservation Volunteers](#) run local one-off and ongoing projects. You can also join [Green Gyms](#), which combine physical exercise with conservation tasks.
- **Green exercise therapy** involves doing exercise in green spaces. For example, walking, running or cycling. Find out more from [Walking for Health](#) and the [Ramblers](#).

- **Nature arts and crafts**, or doing art in or with nature. Can include creating art in green space, using the environment as inspiration or using natural materials such as wood, grass or clay.
- **Social and therapeutic horticulture** involves gardening, growing food, or spending time around flowers or plants. It can take place in allotments or community gardens, or inside buildings like village halls or libraries. Find out more from [Carry on Gardening](#), [Groundwork](#) and [Thrive](#).
- **Wilderness therapy** involves spending time in the wild and doing activities together in a group. For example, making shelters and hiking. Find out more from [The Wilderness Foundation](#).

“I have depression, anxiety and BPD. Doing ecotherapy has allowed me somewhere that's my safe place, a place of my own. Where I can be quiet and peaceful. The act of growing and caring for something else helps me stop thinking about what is going on in my head.”

How can I get involved in an ecotherapy programme?

If you'd like to find an ecotherapy programme in your local area, you could:

- **Contact your local Mind** to ask if they run any ecotherapy programmes you could join. Find your [nearest local Mind](#) on our online search page.
- **Explore what different organisations offer.** See our [useful contacts](#) for details.
- **Ask your GP.** They might be able to refer you to a local programme. This is sometimes called 'social prescribing' or 'green prescribing'. See our page on [talking to your GP about your mental health](#) for tips.

Some ecotherapy programmes need you to have a referral. This might need to come from your GP, or they may accept a referral from another professional you see regularly. The cost of ecotherapy programmes varies, although some are free.

What if there isn't a programme near me?

If you can't find any ecotherapy programmes in your local area, you could:

- Ask your [local Mind](#) if they are able to get funding to start one.

- Look for nature-based groups or classes, such as walking groups or community gardens. Your local library or community noticeboard might have details.
- Look for therapeutic communities in your area and see if they include ecotherapy. For more information, see the [list of providers](#) on the [Consortium of Therapeutic Communities](#) website.

“I do ecotherapy to get sunlight onto my skin and into my mind. It shines light through the dark fog of depression.”

Aside from ecotherapy, there are lots of things you can do more generally in nature or with nature to support your mental health. For tips on this see our information on [nature and mental health](#) and [ideas to try in nature](#).

Useful contacts

Mind's services

- [Mind's helplines](#) provide information and support by phone and email.
- [Local Minds](#) offer face-to-face services across England and Wales. These services include talking therapies, peer support and advocacy.
- [Side by Side](#) is Mind's support online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

We've collected together some useful contacts in the following areas:

Gardening, farming and conservation

Carry on Gardening

carryongardening.org.uk

Help for anyone with a disability to start or continue gardening.

The Conservation Volunteers (TCV)

tcv.org.uk

Runs a network of Green Gyms across the UK.

Grow Wild

growwilduk.com (English)

growwilduk.com/cy (Welsh)

Kew Gardens outreach initiative that aims to bring people together to enjoy wildflowers and nature.

National Allotment Society

nsalg.org.uk

National organisation that upholds the rights and interests of the UK's allotment community.

Royal Horticultural Society

rhs.org.uk

National charity for gardening and plantlife.

Social Farms & Gardens

farmgarden.org.uk

Information on care farming and community growing projects, including a network of local farms.

Thrive

thrive.org.uk

Charity that runs gardening projects for people with mental health problems.

Pets and wildlife

Big Butterfly Count

bigbutterflycount.org

Survey of butterflies in the UK.

Blue Cross

bluecross.org.uk

Animal charity that helps sick, injured and homeless pets.

Bumblebee Conservation Trust

bumblebeeconservation.org

Aims to protect and raise awareness of bumblebees.

Hedgehog Street

[01584 890801](tel:01584890801)

bighedgehogmap.org

Campaigns to help protect hedgehogs.

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)

rspca.org.uk

Animal charity working to prevent cruelty and promote kindness to animals in England and Wales.

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

rspb.org.uk

Campaigning and conservation projects to protect wildlife and restore habitats.

Places to explore

Canal and River Trust

canalrivertrust.org.uk (English)

canalrivertrust.org.uk/cymraeg (Welsh)

Looks after canals, rivers and locks in England and Wales.

Forestry England

forestryengland.uk

Works to protect England's woods and forests. Includes a searchable directory.

National Garden Scheme

ngs.org.uk

Lists gardens and walks open to the public across England and Wales.

National Parks UK

nationalparks.uk

Lists national parks across England and Wales.

National Trust

nationaltrust.org.uk

Lists walks and open gardens, parks and estates that you can visit.

Natural Resources Wales (Cyfoeth Naturiol)

naturalresourceswales.gov.uk

Oversees and protects natural sites in Wales.

Woodland Trust

woodlandtrust.org.uk

Protects trees and forests in the UK.

Walking, rambling and adventuring

Black Girls Hike

bghuk.com

Provides a safe space for Black women to explore the outdoors. Hosts nationwide group hikes, outdoor activity days and training events.

Parkrun

parkrun.org.uk

Organises free, weekly, 5km timed runs across the UK.

Ramblers

ramblers.org.uk

Supports people throughout England and Wales to spend time walking outdoors, through their programmes and community.

Walking for Health

walkingforhealth.org.uk

Supports a network of walking groups across England.

Wilderness Foundation

wildernessfoundation.org.uk

Offers facilitated courses in wilderness therapy.

Volunteering

Do-it

do-it.org

Lists UK volunteering opportunities.

Groundwork

groundwork.org.uk

Aims to help improve local communities and provides details of volunteering opportunities.

The Wildlife Trusts

wildlifetrusts.org

Organisation made up of local membership groups which care for nature sites.

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References are available on request.