

Abstract

Title – Experiencing Creation: Correlations Between Meditative Forest Experiences and Mental Health

Program of Study – Professional Counseling – online program

Presentation Type – Remote Oral Presentation

Subtype – Textual or Investigative

Mentor(s) and Mentor Email – Dr. Michael Takacs – mstakacs@liberty.edu and Dr. Joy Mwendwa – jmmaweu@liberty.edu

Student name and email – Carolyn Stapp - cstapp@liberty.edu

Abstract: This presentation examines the healing potential of intentional therapeutic activities in natural settings. There is a need in the mental health field to incorporate holistic intervention techniques that work with the current accepted counseling practices. It has been shown that experiences in nature can have a positive effect on mood and physical health. Within the past five years, there have been several studies published that explore the link between forest therapy activities and the reduction of symptoms for clients dealing with depression and anxiety. Quantitative research has also been conducted on the impact being present nature can have on physical and mental symptoms of anxiety. This presentation examines what types of activities in natural settings produce measurable symptom relief for mental health clients. The type of mental health conditions that may benefit from forest therapy type practices are also explored. In addition, an investigation is made about the potential for utilizing meditative prayer as an alternative to the current spiritual practices that are often a part of forest therapy. For this study, only full text peer reviewed articles, published on or before February 15, 2014, were used in the research. There are many potential benefits to utilizing God's great creation for healing and restoration, and this presentation seeks to identify the most effective methods for forest therapy

practices.

Christian worldview integration: My Christian worldview is central to my interest in the subject of forest experiences and their impact on mental health. In my life, I have encountered many people who are suffering from various mental health conditions and are not being treated effectively. A multifaceted holistic approach to treatment is often more effective where the needs of the whole person are addressed: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual factors. As a follower of Christ, I believe that we are called to minister to the hurting and the broken people of this world. For myself, that means receiving the training to become an effective counselor and pursuing research on ways to enhance the therapeutic process.

During my time working on ecological restoration projects, I met many individuals who were experiencing symptom relief for conditions such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. I became interested in exploring the therapeutic benefits of working in the forest. When I began researching the topic, I discovered that the practices of forest bathing and forest therapy were yielding positive quantifiable results for mental health patients that participated in these guided activities. I believe that Christian spirituality could easily be incorporated into these types of intervention techniques. What I hope to discover in my research, is how this could be done and who would benefit from this type of therapy. I can also see the potential for using forest therapy activities with counseling groups. It appears that meditative prayer would work well as part of the therapeutic process in forest therapy. These practices could be used in tandem with a comprehensive treatment plan for conditions like anxiety and depression.

We can see the reflection of God's goodness in the world around us. Man first encountered God in a garden, and it makes sense to me that we might find healing in the forest, immersed in his creation. The development of intentional therapeutic techniques of forest bathing and forest therapy are recent, but the benefits of appreciating beautiful natural

settings is not a new concept. My desire is to explore ways to integrate Christian faith into therapeutic forest experiences.