Ecotherapy: Nature connection helps clients on path to healing

Carolyn Schuyler, LCSW, was the first program director of The Women’s Initiative and continues to be a board member today. In 2017, Schuyler founded Wildrock, a nonprofit that provides educational, recreational, and therapeutic programs in nature. Partnering with The Women’s Initiative, Wildrock has connected our clients with chances to explore ecotherapy. As one client shared about a half-day retreat at Wildrock’s nature center: “I had an amazing day of calm and connection with nature and new friends. It was a day of healing.”

What is ecotherapy? Who can benefit from it?

Carolyn Schuyler: Ecotherapy supports people in developing a reciprocal, healing relationship with the natural world. The work can take many forms—equine therapy, horticulture therapy, expressive art nature, the Japanese practice of Shinrin-yoku (“forest bathing”), stewardship practices, deep appreciation and observational practices, and scientific inquiry. I believe ecotherapy is at its best when people are not only receiving the broad range of social, emotional, cognitive and physical benefits of spending time in nature but also giving back to nature. Ecotherapy practices can help people develop an embodied understanding that their own well-being is inextricably tied to the well-being of nature. There is now a robust body of research revealing that a connection to nature is an important predictor of subjective well-being and ecological behavior.

How did your interest in ecotherapy develop?

I grew up with the freedom to play with my sister in a fossil-rich creek and forest area by my house. I believe my own adult happiness is fed by the reservoir of positive experience I had spending long, relaxed periods outdoors early in life. I have noticed in my years of being a therapist that this was true for many of my clients, too. Time and time again, I heard people telling me that their most hopeful, empowering experiences were times when they were immersed in nature.

How does ecotherapy fit into the overall mission of The Women’s Initiative?

The Women’s Initiative provides many avenues to support the resilience of women. Given the strong research supporting nature connection as a means for reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression and trauma, it makes perfect sense that TWI would support women in exploring nature connection as a form of self-care. When I opened Wildrock, I came to TWI and offered to run Nature Nurture retreats. This started a wonderful collaboration that has now expanded to TWI offering walking groups in town and workshops at the office to support people in strengthening a healing relationship with nature. Having helped found TWI when I first moved to Charlottesville 11 years ago, it felt fitting to start ecotherapy work with TWI in this new chapter of my career.

How can clients incorporate ecotherapy practices into their healing process?

It can be as simple as women putting pictures of nature up around their desk at work (even looking at pictures of nature has been found to improve productivity and reduce stress). It may mean that women take regular mindful walks, find a special location in nature to visit repeatedly, or help with local stewardship initiatives, such as planting pollinator gardens. On our
retreats, we provide women with a list of experiences that are evidence-based approaches to ecotherapy.

**Tell us about your vision for the partnership between TWI and Wildrock.**
I hope that we will continue to offer Wildrock retreats in the fall and spring, workshops on how to incorporate nature connection into a treatment plan, and regular in-town meet-ups to support ecotherapy practices. I would love to do a research study to explore how practices specifically impact anxiety.