

**Activity: Plant Care/Maintenance**    **Goal: Psychological/Emotional**  
**Populations: All but dementia**

## TH Activity Plan – Pruning Your Fears

Text by Christene Tashjian, HTR & John Murphy, HTR

Photos by J. Murphy



### Materials

A plant(s) in need of pruning  
Pruner for each participant  
Handout on basic pruning techniques  
Personal journals or writing paper & pens  
Compost bucket  
Gloves, wipes, tool sanitizer



**ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:** Participants will prune a plant/tree (or simulate pruning) to symbolize removing barriers to one's self-healing.

### THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

**Cognitive/Intellectual:** Learn the basics of plant pruning & composting

**Physical:** Improve hand strength using pruners

**Psychological/Emotional:** Experience & begin to recognize what a safe outlet for physical expression of fear is & can be

**Sensory:** Improve modulation of fear through hands-on physical activities & exertion; practice this as coping strategy

**Social:** Work in a supportive plant-based environment; practice positive peer interactions & communication with others

### STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparations:** Gather plants and pruners and place on table with chairs in a circle around table.
2. Facilitator begins session by discussing the reasons for pruning. Demonstrate the proper pruning technique for an overgrown plant. Provide handout on basic pruning techniques (see link below).
3. Discuss the symbolism of pruning a plant to 'pruning a person', pruning out emotions that are no longer positive (fear, anger, rage), and are barriers to one's healing journey. *Pruning is the removal or reduction of certain plant parts that are not required, that are no longer effective, or that are of no use to the plant. It is done to redirect energy for the development of flowers, fruits, or remaining limbs. Pruning essentially involves removing plant parts to improve the health or ornamental value of the plant.*
4. Allow 5-10 minutes for participants to write in their journals about someone or something they currently fear & the desire to work through that fear.
5. Ask participants to consciously think of the person/thing/event that needs to be removed as they prune branches from plant. Restate the purpose of pruning to connect it to their acts of pruning the plant.
6. After pruning is complete, invite each participant to share their biggest fear that was the focus of their pruning. Some may prefer to listen & not share. Note the similarities and differences among the stated fears.

7. Ask participants to share how it felt to consciously prune each fear and to state ways their emotional health may improve from this activity. Optional to write vs voice fears, strategies etc.
8. Discuss options for what to do with the pruned parts (compost, repot, trash).

**APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS:** This activity is most applicable for populations adolescents to adults who have experienced some trauma or adversity and who have the cognitive skills to discuss the topic of fear, anger or rage as it relates to their life. It is less applicable for youth or populations where sharp instruments are a concern. Pruning as a horticultural task can be used for vocational training purposes, where discussion or metaphors for pruning fear may be mentioned but is not the focus of the therapeutic horticulture session.

An extended session can include composting. Gather and put all cutting in a compost bucket for this or subsequent sessions. If composting is used as a follow-up second session, discussion about composting with a demonstration can reinforce the pruning fear theme, using the pruned branches from this initial session. Information about composting can be shared (see link below). Facilitate discussion among participants about the parallels of composting, to the fear they ‘pruned’ away. Discussions can include possible positive outcomes and results from pruning away fear, and/or turning pruned parts into productive compost, firewood etc.

**SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS:** Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. It is important to know prior to activity if it is safe for participants to handle sharp instruments. Assessment of emotional/psychological state of individual participants can guide the facilitator in determining the safety for them and fellow participants.

**NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:** If logistically it is too difficult to provide plants for pruning, an alternative is listed below. In this alternative activity, burning the ‘leaves’ can produce a more profound feeling of release for survivors of sexual assault. It may be appropriate for specialists from other health professions (trauma, mental health, social workers) to provide allied therapeutic services.

Alternative Materials

Brown paper bags (or other thick paper)

Markers

String

Hole punch

Scissors

Metal bucket or outdoor grill

Matches

**ALTERNATIVE STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:**

1. Precut paper into leaf shapes large enough to write on, or if appropriate, have participants do it.
2. Punch a hole at the stem end of leaves.
3. Have participants write their fears on the leaves.
4. With string tie leaves to branches of a tree (inside or outside).
5. Participants ‘prune’ the leaves by cutting the string.
6. Leaves can be burned, creating a metaphor for burning fears. Note that populations with fire safety concerns can rip the paper leaves/fears vs burning.

**REFERENCES/RESOURCES:**

Fair, B. (2020). General pruning techniques: Pruning trees & shrubs. NC State Extension.

<https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/general-pruning-techniques>

Hu, S. (2020). Composting 101. Natural Resources Defense Fund.

<https://www.nrdc.org/stories/composting-101#benefits>

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2023.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2023.