

Activity: Nature Goal: Psychological/Emotional Populations: Mental Health

TH Activity Plan – Salty Moods & Salty Plants

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Photo by L. Fleming, NC State Extension, Prairie Restorations, The Spruce



ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants take a walk outdoors observing, & discussing salt tolerant plants, resiliency & human mood reactions.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Expand horticultural knowledge; strengthen reasoning skills; match plant photos to live plants

Physical: Increase physical exercise; increase intake of fresh air; practice walking on uneven surfaces

Psychological/Emotional: Identify coping strategies for mood disruptions; reduce negative thoughts; practice self-regulation

Sensory: Use all 5 primary senses to explore plants

Social: Listen patiently & with tolerance when others speak; practice cooperative work within a group

Materials

Plant specimens

Optional: photos

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Confirm outdoor area is accessible, safe & available for the session.
2. Facilitator begins session by having plant specimens on table or gathering spot to excite participants. Photos or live salt tolerant plants are introduced along with their adaptive characteristics. The session seeks to relate salt tolerant plant characteristics metaphors to salty moods.
3. Facilitator leads a discussion about resiliency, reactions to conditions for plants & humans (stressors, weather, conflicts) & coping mechanisms. Using plants that are able to withstand salt water/wind/weather conditions as examples, facilitator prompts participants to share/discuss challenges (mood or other), followed by ideas for improving resiliency, and coping strategies.
4. Facilitator leads the walk outdoors, asking participants to identify, observe & discuss salt tolerant plants that had been previously discussed.
5. Participants are asked to analyze characteristics of salt tolerant plants that may be informative to human mood, behavior & reactions.
6. Conclude session by asking participants to suggest at least one coping mechanism when dealing with moods, salty or other. This can include walking & connecting with nature.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: What does being salty mean? And how can this relate to plants for a TH session? For populations with mood challenges, diagnosed or undiagnosed, using plant metaphors can be a palatable way to discuss and consider very complex mental health issues that have physiological factors. The term “salty” is being used more commonly to describe reactions, moods and behaviors that are unreasonable, angry, annoyed, upset or uncooperative (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2025). So using this as a mood descriptor, discussing mood disruptions, dysfunction and coping mechanisms can offer a more light-hearted discussion for mood conditions that often make people uncomfortable and defensive. Salt tolerant plants, noted for their

ability to withstand salty conditions with high degree of resiliency can provide an interesting plant metaphor. Plant and human characteristics can inform one another. Salt tolerant plants are resilient to many conditions and are able to withstand and thrive in adverse situations. This theme can be important for a TH session.

Mood disorders are mental health conditions that affect a person's emotional reaction, state and responses and can include depression, mania or other extreme emotions. These can cause a disconnect between behavior and thoughts, often negatively, affecting a person's ability to function normally. "According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*, mood disorders have been broadly categorized as bipolar disorders and depressive disorders" (Spijker & Claes, 2014). They also include major depressive disorder, cyclothymic disorder, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, substance-induced mood disorder, and persistent depressive disorder in the psychiatric field. ADHD is not classified as a mood disorder however it can cause difficulty regulating emotions. Also called affective disorders, mood is an important aspect of emotional health, described as the internal pervasive and sustained feeling tone. Behavior includes manic symptoms with associated diminished need for sleep, grandiosity, distractibility, and increased/pressured speech (Spijker & Claes, 2014). Conversely, Irritable mood can also present with these symptoms, and reckless behavior. Disruptive mood dysregulation disorder in adolescents and children may present with frequent anger outbursts. Note that these descriptions are simplistic for these psychiatrically complex diagnosed mood challenges.

Research has identified physiological connections - patients with mood disorders have enlarged amygdala on brain imaging, substantiating abnormalities in this brain area leads to mood disorders (Kloiber et al., 2020). And as noted above, less severe mood challenges can be related to other factors. If TH sessions are delivered for clinically diagnosed mood disorders, co-treatment with other health professionals is recommended.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. Touching plants is not recommended for specimens that are toxic, thorny or sappy.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: [Salt tolerance](#) is a trait some plant have, important for surviving and thriving in coastal areas. There are varying degrees of salt tolerance.

Spotted Joe-Pye-Weed ([Eupatorium maculatum](#)) can tolerate some salt but leaves may burn

Common Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) is moderately salt tolerant & cold tolerant to -37C

Bee Balm (*Monarda didyma*) with red, pink, light-purple & white blooms can tolerate salt & rough conditions

Tall Phlox ([Phlox paniculata](#)) is salt, drought & pollution tolerant



Spotted Joe-pye-weed



Yarrow



Bee Balm



Tall Phlox

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

Merriam-Webster Dictionary. (2025). [Wordplay-How did English get so salty?](#)

Sekhon, S., & Gupta, V. (2020). *Mood disorder*. StatPearls Publishing.

Spijker, J., & Claes, S. (2014). [Mood disorders in the DSM-5]. *Tijdschr Psychiatr.*, 56(3).

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TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2024.