

Activity: Nature Goal: Cognitive/Intellectual Populations: All

TH Activity Plan – Would You Be a Stream or a Forest?

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Photo by L. Fleming



ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will discuss and reflect on their personalities, traits & behaviors using nature metaphors.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Self-reflect on personal traits, self-esteem & behavior as a personal growth activity; identify metaphors where human & plant characteristics are similar

Physical: Use balance skills to wade into shallow water (if safe) & walk in forested areas; increase oxygen exchange breathing fresh air with intention

Psychological/Emotional: Increase time spent outdoors as mechanism for wellbeing; increase understanding of health benefits of connecting with nature

Sensory: Use sensory engagement during the time in nature to observe, reflect and experience nature

Social: Interact in a group setting exploring a natural setting with forest & stream; share insights about nature with others; practice tolerance of others & their perspectives & feelings

Materials

Natural area, preferably with forest, trees & stream or water

Wipes

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Facilitator identifies and checks nature area that will be the site of the session, ensuring it is free of unsafe or hazardous plant or other materials.
2. Facilitator begins session by introducing the intent of the session – self-reflection using nature metaphors aligned with human traits & behaviors.
3. After identifying the boundaries of the natural area to be used in the session, facilitator asks participants to organize themselves in small groups, or if they prefer, to walk/wade as a single group.
4. Providing some ideas for aligning human & nature traits, facilitator begins with “Who would be a bird; who would prefer to be a porcupine?” Then asking “why”. Participants are then asked to share some similar human & nature attributes. Ask several of these, using nature items like sand or rock, estuary or ocean, flower or vegetable, establishing how to use nature metaphors for human behaviors or traits.
5. Ready to begin using nature exploration and nature metaphors, facilitator suggests each group stop at three locations, where the question “Would you be a stream or forest?” is raised, with participants sharing their thoughts & perspectives with each other. Practicing listening to others during this component is a skill that can be emphasized by facilitator. Perspectives might change or be expanded upon at each location.
6. Re-grouping, the facilitator asks participants questions related to self-awareness like “did you change your perspective; did you recognize similar ideas shared by group members; do you like being in nature & is this a soothing environment you might consider in the future when you are stressed?”

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: When a natural area can be accessed during a TH session, adapt session title/focus/questions to reflect the pond, meadow, walking path or garden. Ideally the area would be physically accessible by all participants. Photos can be substituted when outdoor access is not available; have some live plants, grasses or cattails for a stronger nature engagement.

Children and Youth: Using a school garden, play area or field trip location for this activity can introduce several aspects of nature's value to human health: nature as a stress buster, types of nature in the school setting (even something as small as a bird feeder or live plants in the classroom), and recognition and validation that children's anxiety does exist, and that coping strategies including being in nature can alleviate it. Using the format of questions makes the session feel like a game, with opportunities for social emotional learning, self-regulation like not running off or listening quietly as others speak, and cognitive challenges relating nature to human emotions and traits (the stream is constantly moving; the trees are tall like me; the forest has all types of trees just like classmates from different nationalities/cultures and neighborhoods).

People with Medical Conditions: [Nature Rx](#) and *social prescribing* are becoming more commonplace where medical professionals encourage time in nature. Promoting and providing a session held outdoors can be part of a formal nature Rx or not, with benefits including intentional breathing fresh air in greater amounts for people staying primarily indoors, increased melatonin production from sunlight exposure, and increased confidence walking outdoors and in natural areas.

Wellness and Social TH Programs: Using an activity like this can be used as a short interactive opening experience for professional development sessions, icebreaker engagement for a new group, or as a stand-alone activity with a variety of goals from any of the health domains incorporated into the session. Adding humor to the activity (participants – mimic a stream or forest, imitate a porcupine) can promote engagement, therapist-client alliance and just plain fun. One wonderful response when delivered during a professional development workshop – “I am a stream running through a forest”, combining the best of each.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. The natural area to be used in the session should be examined to ensure safety and to establish boundaries. If wading into shallow water is part of the session, supervision for this segment, safe access and egress determined, and towels to dry feet should be in place. This element adds some liability and should be considered carefully. Sun and weather protection should be available.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Adding humor to the session, facilitator can introduce the practice of forest bathing during the outdoor connecting with nature session. Some will have looks of surprise on their faces, not realizing [Shinrin yoku](#), also known as forest bathing, is a practice of therapeutic relaxation (not literal bathing) in a forest or natural area.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

- Barragan-Jason, G., Loreau, M., de Mazancourt, C. et al. (2023). Psychological and physical connections with nature improve both human well-being and nature conservation: A systematic review of meta-analyses. *Biological Conservation*, 277, 109842.
- Cleveland Clinic. (2024). [Forest bathing: What it is and its potential benefits.](#)
- Fleming, L. (2024). Nature connections: Research validates multiple health benefits. *Digging In*, 10(4).

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