THE IMPACT OF A NATURE-BASED RETREAT ON THE SELF-CARE AND PEER SUPPORT INTENTIONS OF STUDENTS ENROLLED ON POST GRADUATE TRAINING IN EDUCATIONAL AND CHILD PSYCHOLOGY IN IRELAND: A PILOT STUDY

Therese Brophy
Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education,
Mary Immaculate College (MIC) (Ireland)

Abstract

Time spent in nature is purported to impact positively on nature connection and psychological restoration. This paper reports on the impact of a nature-based retreat on the peer support and self-care intentions of a cohort of educational psychologists in training in Ireland. Opportunities for the group to meet in person were significantly curtailed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The nature-based retreat facilitated re-engagement as a group in a socially -distanced manner. The retreat took place at a location in the Mid-West of Ireland in early Autumn. The habitat included flora and fauna, a river, a pond, a woodland area comprised of re-forested and re-wilded woodland and natural buildings. The retreat was comprised of individual, pair and group tasks, including nature connection activities. Following the retreat, participants (*n*=10) were invited to complete a survey to access their views on the impact of the retreat on their intentions with regard to self-care and peer support. Findings from the survey indicated that participants were positive about the experience of the group, nature-based retreat in terms of self-care and peer support prioritization and intentions. A conceptual framework for understanding nature-based self-care is proposed. Directions for future research are considered, particularly in the domains of professional training in educational psychology, self-care and peer support practices, and the potential of nature-based settings in other areas of EP practice.

Keywords: Educational psychology, nature connection, self-care, peer support.

1. Introduction

In order to qualify as an Educational and Child Psychologist in Ireland, trainees are required to complete a three-year Professional Doctorate programme, accredited by the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI). Programmes are typically comprised of research, academic and placement components. The Psychological Society of Ireland Code of Professional Ethics (2019) outlines four over-arching ethical principles that guide professional practice; Respect for the rights and dignity of the person, Competence, Responsibility and Integrity. The ethical principle of Integrity emphasises the importance of recognising professional limitations, and states that psychologists should:

4.1.1 Engage in self-care activities which help to avoid conditions (for example, burnout, addictions) which could result in impaired judgement and interfere with their ability to benefit and not harm others.

4.1.2 Seek emotional support and/or supervision from colleagues when feeling stressed or vulnerable due to professional dilemmas (PSI, 2019).

The two standards outlined above highlight an ethical imperative for psychologists to prioritise self-care and peer support. These standards are endorsed in other studies that explore wellbeing and self-care for psychologists (Collins & Cassill, 2021).

2. Self-care in professional psychology training

Butler et al (2019) define self-care in line with the *Oxford Living Dictionary* definition as 'the practice of taking action to preserve or improve one's own health, well-being and happiness, in particular during periods of stress' (p. 107). They propose six key domains of self-care; Physical, Professional/Workplace, Relationship, Emotional, Psychological and Spiritual. There is an emerging

recognition of the importance of self-care for psychologists in training, with a burgeoning body of research exploring how to embed self-care at an early stage of professional psychology training to instill life-long self-care practices, to mitigate against burn-out and to promote psychologist retention in the field. In the context of clinical psychology training, Pakenham & Stafford-Brown (2012) identified a range of stressors associated with training including the multiple demands associated with academic, research and practice-based requirements of training and reported positively on the impact of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) training as an intervention (Pakenham, 2017). Mindfulness-based strategies have also been found to improve the self-care of clinical psychology trainees. Pintado (2019) reported on the impact of an eight-week mindfulness programme with a small sample of clinical psychology trainees (*n*=8). Participants reported changes in awareness of physical sensations, well-being, sensory perception and integration. Increased bodily awareness of unpleasant sensations and self-compassion, synchronicity with others and increased self-compassion were also reported.

3. Self-care in educational and school psychology

In a US-based study exploring burnout for professional school psychologists, Schilling et al (2018) found that 90% of participants reported feelings of burnout at some point in their role as a school psychologist. In a review of the literature, Flood et al (2023) found that the main self-care strategies identified for school psychologists were mindfulness-based (e.g. yoga, deep breathing) and/or didactic instruction (e.g. goal-setting, positive self-talk). The authors concluded that more research on self-care for school psychologists was needed, with a particular focus on effective practices and interventions to promote self-care. This review focused on practicing school psychologists. The multiple demands outlined by Packenham and colleagues for Clinical Psychology trainees are also a feature of Educational and Child Psychology training, while financial stress has been identified as an additional stressor for EPs in training in some contexts, given variation in the funding supports available (Myers, 2012). In the context of educational and counseling psychology training, O'Halloran & O'Halloran (2001) underlined the importance of self-care for students as well as instructors, particularly in relation to emotionally difficult course material. Within the spiritual domain, O'Halloran & O'Halloran highlighted connecting with nature as a potentially vital self-care strategy. More recently, Butler et al (2019) made a distinction between faith-based and secular spirituality, and posited a role for connecting with nature within the secular spiritual domain.

4. Nature connection

A number of studies have established the benefits of time in nature, and connection to nature for physical and psychological wellbeing. There are a number of theories put forward for the impact of nature connection on wellbeing. The biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) contends that humans have evolved with nature, and have an innate drive to connect with the natural world. Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan, 1995) posits that nature restores cognitive resources such as attention and concentration via activation of involuntary attention, allowing effortful, directed attention to recover. The Stress Reduction hypothesis proposes that time spent in nature activates a stress lowering physiological response (APA, 2020). This hypothesis is supported by studies measuring the physiological responses of participants (heart rate, blood pressure, cortisol levels) in studies of stress and nature (Bakir-Demir et al, 2021; Ulrich et.al. 1991). More recently, Grahn et al (2021) proposed the Calm and Connection Theory, hypothesizing that experiences in nature activate emotional and psychophysiological reactions, including the oxytocinergic system.

5. The current study

Additional challenges to self-care and peer support emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, with intermittent periods of lockdown and a pivot to online lectures and research activity, remote placement experiences and imposed isolation from peers. In response to these challenges, participants were invited to attend an afternoon nature-based retreat to supplement the programme structures in place to promote a culture of self-care. This study outlines the development and preliminary evaluation of a nature-based retreat, carried out with a cohort of post-graduate students in educational and child psychology in the Mid-West region of Ireland with the goal of prioritising self-care and peer support. This pilot study aimed to explore the impact of a nature-based retreat on the self-care and peer support intentions of a group of educational and child psychologists in training. Self-care incorporates ideas of mental and physical wellness. To date, studies on self-care in professional psychology training have placed a greater focus on psychological strategies (ACT, mindfulness). The nature connection literature has established the benefits of time in nature for physical and psychological wellbeing (Barragan-Jason et al, 2023). Therefore, a group,

nature-based retreat was considered worthy of exploration as a potential approach to addressing self-care needs in a more holistic way.

This study is framed within the 'people and nature' paradigm, which espouses a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature (Mace, 2014). In addition, the nature connection literature makes a distinction between 'green' and blue' spaces. Green spaces are environments characterised by the presence of green foliage, grass and trees. Blue spaces are environments characterised by the presence of water features (Loureiro et al, 2021). This study took place in an environment containing both green (trees, grass and foliage) and blue spaces (river and pond). The retreat took place in the Mid-West of Ireland. The habitat included a river, a pond, a woodland area comprised of re-forested and re-wilded woodland. Wildlife included birdlife, bees, donkeys, chickens and dogs. The buildings were natural buildings, constructed using cob building materials and techniques.

6. Procedure

The retreat was hosted by a member of the programme team and two colleagues. The group was met by a member of the programme team, provided with a brief orientation to the site and accompanied to a riverside seating area to meet with their peers. Participants were requested to put away their mobile phones upon arrival. At the riverside, the group was informed that the focus for the day was self-care and peer support. Participants were asked to note a sit-spot to which they could return after the silent walk and group work. Participants then proceeded on a silent walk to a woodland camp area under a parachute. The group based itself here for pair and group activities. Trainees were invited to discuss their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. They then engaged in pair-work to discuss self-care strategies and were encouraged to 'walk-and-talk' during this activity. Self-care strategies were then shared in the main group. Small group discussion was then facilitated with a focus on peer support, followed by a full-group discussion on how the group could support each other in the coming academic year. Trainees then went to their selected sit spot where they took ten minutes for independent reflection, and to consider a personal commitment to self-care and peer support for the coming year. The participants then re-convened in the onsite cob cottage for refreshments. Finally, the group returned to the riverside to close the retreat. Following the retreat, consent was sought from attendees to participate in an evaluation of the pilot via a short survey.

7. Study measure

Participants completed a 7-item survey to access their views on the impact of the nature-based retreat on their self-care and peer support prioritisation and intentions. Four survey questions (Qs 1,2,4 &5) were posed on a 5-point likert scale. Three open-ended questions (Qs 3,6 &7) were also posed to allow participants to elaborate on their responses (See Appendix 1 for survey questions).

8. Results

The survey findings are discussed under the headings of self-care and peer support. Likert scale questions were analysed descriptively, while open-ended questions were organised using a deductive thematic approach, informed by the six self-care domains outlined by Butler et al (2019), with a seventh theme labelled 'intentions'. The response rate was 100%, with all 10 participants responding to the survey. The seven themes were labelled: Physical, Professional/ Workplace, Relationship/ Peer support, Emotional, Psychological, Spiritual and Intentions. An example of a response under the theme of 'Psychological' was:

'I really enjoyed the silent walk, not using phones, and the overall setting. I actually found it quite restorative. Would definitely do it again'.

9. Self-care

60% of participants rated the retreat as extremely effective for the prioritisation of self-care, with a further 30% of likert ratings at 4/5, and one respondent neutral (3/5) on this point. A question on the likelihood of participants to prioritise self-care in the coming academic year following the retreat suggested that 40% rated it extremely likely, 50% rated it as very likely (4/5) and one respondent neutral (3/5). Participants were then asked about the impact of the retreat on how they thought about self-care. Participants appreciated the nature-based setting and the physical activity involved. Responses indicated self-care benefits across all six domains of self-care identified by Butler et al (2019). Enhanced intentions to prioritise self-care were communicated. Participants also noted that the nature-based setting facilitated the opportunity to reflect, and commented positively on the silence, the sounds of nature and the absence of phones.

10. Peer support

When asked about the impact of the retreat on the prioritisation of peer support, 60% of participants rated the retreat as extremely effective. 10% rated it very effective (4/5) with 30% neutral on this question (3/5). Only 1 participant considered it 'extremely likely' that they would prioritise peer support in the coming academic year, while 60% rated it as very likely (4/5), with 30% neutral on this point. Responses to open ended questions on peer support indicated a degree of reflection on peer engagement as a group, with mixed views expressed. The realisation that concerns, stresses and worries related to EP training were shared was valued by more than one participant. Some participants identified an opportunity for a follow-up to strengthen peer engagement as a group who are going through the shared experience of EP training.

11. Discussion and conclusions

Overall, the findings suggest that participants were positive about the experience of the group, nature-based retreat in terms of self-care and peer support. The descriptive statistics indicated a tentative trend towards participants' anticipation of challenges in maintaining self-care and peer support practices. Deductive thematic analysis indicated that the group, nature-based format has the potential to impact on a broader range of self-care domains than physical and psychological, and therefore might offer enhanced, or indeed additive benefits when implemented alongside classroom-based psychological interventions such as ACT and mindfulness. Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual framework to structure our understanding of the potential benefits of group format, nature-based self-care initiatives.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Group, Nature-based Self-Care for Psychologists in Training.
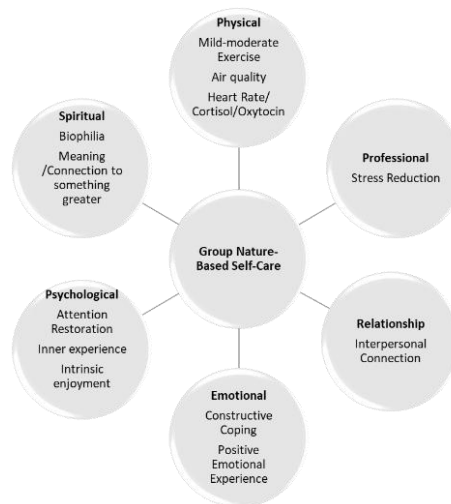
The limitations of this small-scale pilot study are noted and future studies are needed to further explore the potential of nature-based self-care interventions for professional EPs and EPs in training. The pattern of responses also indicates that maintenance of self-care and peer support prioritisation and intentions requires further study. The proposed framework in Figure 1 may provide a structure within which to explore this area in future research. Future studies should also consider accessibility so that any nature-based self-care retreat is as accessible as possible to all participants. Ziede and Norcross (2020) contend that work is needed in terms of the 'psychological healthiness' of our professional psychology training programmes, and suggest a number of evidence-informed strategies to improve training and to support a paradigmatic shift towards 'life-affirming, health-oriented' training experiences. The current study indicates the potential for nature-based self-care in educational psychology training, and for professionals in the field, as part of a shift towards a culture of life-affirming, health-oriented approaches to training and practice in educational psychology.

References

American Psychological Association. (2020). Nurtured by nature. Monitor on Psychology, 51(3). https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/04/nurtured-nature (Kirsten Weir)

Bakir-Demir, T., Berument, S. K., & Akkaya, S. (2021). Nature connectedness boosts the bright side of emotion regulation, which in turn reduces stress. Journal of Environmental Psychology, 76, 101642.

Barragan-Jason, G., Loreau, M., de Mazancourt, C., Singer, M. C., & Parmesan, C. (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.

Butler, L. D., Mercer, K. A., McClain-Meeder, K., Horne, D. M., & Dudley, M. (2019). Six domains of self-care: Attending to the whole person. Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 29(1), 107-124.

Collins, M. H., & Cassill, C. K. (2022). Psychological wellness and self-care: an ethical and professional imperative. Ethics & Behavior, 32(7), 634-646.

Flood, S., Phillips, S., Goodwin, K., McConnell, R., Matthews, L., & Graves, S. (2023). An Examination of Self-Care Research in School Psychology. Contemporary School Psychology, 1-10.

Grahn, P., Ottosson, J., & Uvnäs-Moberg, K. (2021). The oxytocinergic system as a mediator of anti-stress and instorative effects induced by nature: The calm and connection theory. Frontiers in psychology, 12, 617814.

Huynh, T., & Torquati, J. C. (2019). Examining connection to nature and mindfulness at promoting psychological well-being. Journal of Environmental Psychology, 66, 101370.Joye, Y., & De Block, A. (2011). 'Nature and I are two': A critical examination of the biophilia hypothesis. Environmental Values, 20(2), 189-215.

Kaplan, S. (1995). The restorative benefits of nature: Toward an integrative framework. Journal of environmental psychology, 15(3), 169-182.

Kellert, S. R., & Wilson, E. O. (Eds.). (1995). The biophilia hypothesis. Island press.

Loureiro, Nuno, Luís Calmeiro, Adilson Marques, Diego Gomez-Baya, and Margarida Gaspar de Matos. 2021. "The Role of Blue and Green Exercise in Planetary Health and Well-Being" Sustainability 13, no. 19: 10829. https://doi.org/10.3390/su131910829

Mace, G.M., 2014. Whose conservation? Science 345, 1558–1560. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1254704.

Myers, S. B., Sweeney, A. C., Popick, V., Wesley, K., Bordfeld, A.,& Fingerhut, R. (2012). Self-care practices and perceived stress levels among psychology graduate students. Training and Education in Professional Psychology, 6(1), 55–66. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026534

Pakenham, K. I., & Stafford-Brown, J. (2012). Stress in clinical psychology trainees: Current research status and future directions. Australian Psychologist, 47, 147–155. doi:10.1111/ j.1742-9544.2012.00070.x

Pakenham, K. I. (2017). Training in acceptance and commitment therapy fosters self-care in clinical psychology trainees. Clinical Psychologist, 21(3), 186-194.

Pintado, S. (2019). Changes in body awareness and self-compassion in clinical psychology trainees through a mindfulness program. Complementary therapies in clinical practice, 34, 229-234.Psychological Society of Ireland. (2019).

Schilling, E. J., Randolph, M. & Boan-Lenzo, C. (2018). Job burn-out in school psychology: How big is the problem? Contemporary School Psychology, 22, 324–331. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-017-0138-x

Ulrich, R. S., Simons, R. F., Losito, B. D., Fiorito, E., Miles, M. A., & Zelson, M. (1991). Stress recovery during exposure to natural and urban environments. Journal of environmental psychology, 11(3), 201-230.

Wilson, E. O. (1984). Biophilia. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ziede, J. S., & Norcross, J. C. (2020). Personal therapy and self-care in the making of psychologists. The Journal of psychology, 154(8), 585-618.

Appendix 1. Nature-Retreat Survey Questions

How effective did you find the nature-based retreat in terms of the prioritisation of self-care?
How would you rate the likelihood that you will prioritise self-care in the coming academic year following the nature-based retreat?
Please describe any impact of the nature-based environment on how you thought about self-care
How effective did you find the nature-based retreat in terms of prioritising peer support?
How would you rate the likelihood that you will prioritise peer support in the coming academic year following the nature-based retreat?
Please describe any impact of the nature-based environment on how you thought about peer support
Please add any other comments you may have on the nature-based retreat, including your thoughts on any particularly effective aspects of the day and anything that could be improved. In your response. You can include feedback on activities including the silent walk, sit-spot, full group/small-group discussion