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**The Benefits of 'Nature' as a Tool in  
Improving Mental Health and Maintaining  
Psychological Well-being: An Ecological  
Dynamics Analysis.**

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# Outline

- ❖ **Research Brief**
- ❖ **Defining Key Terms**
- ❖ **Theoretical Background**
- ❖ **Therapeutic Landscapes**
- ❖ **Ecological Dynamics**
- ❖ **Potential Pilot Study & Research Questions**
- ❖ **References**



# Current Position

## ❖ My Background

## ❖ Research Brief:

*Explore the impacts of green and blue spaces as alternatives to traditional therapeutic landscapes used within formal counselling or psychotherapy*



# Defining Key Terms

## 'Mental Health'

*“Mental Health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”*

(World Health Organisation, 2014)

## 'Mental Disorders'

*“Mental disorders comprise a broad range of problems, with different symptoms. However, they are generally characterised by some combination of abnormal thoughts, emotions, behaviour and relationships with others”*

(World Health Organisation, 2016)

## 'Nature'

*“The phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations”*

(Oxford Dictionary, 2016)

# Theoretical Background

## ❖ Theories

- **Biophilia**  
(Fromm, 1964; Wilson, 1984)
- **Attention Restoration Theory**  
(Kaplan & Talbot, 1983)  
(Berto, 2005)
- **Topophilia**  
(Tuan, 1974)
- **Gaia Theory**  
Proposed by James Lovelock  
(Margulis & Sagan, 1993)

## ❖ Evidence

- **Health:**  
Cancer; immune system  
(Li et al, 2008)
- **Mental Health:**  
Depression; Anxiety; Self-esteem  
(Chalquist, 2009)
- **Green space:**  
Stress; Self-esteem  
(Peacock et al 2007)
- **Blue space:**  
Well-being  
(Miller et al, 2012; Volker & Kistemann, 2011)



# Therapeutic Landscapes

*“places which have attained an enduring reputation for achieving physical, mental and spiritual healing”*

(Gesler, 1993:171).

- ❖ Gesler examined the healing and health promoting attributes of natural and built environments within a framework that considered their social and symbolic importance as well as their physical effects on the human body and mind. (Curtis,2010)
- ❖ Fits with theories such as Biophilia, Attention Restoration and Topophilia
- ❖ However, places may be healing for one person and not be for another (Williams, 2007).





# Ecological Dynamics

- ❖ Based on the theories of Ecological Psychology and Dynamical Systems
- ❖ Constraints are factors which can relate to the individual, task or environment and affordances are opportunities for behaviour
- ❖ Considers how an individual interacts with the environment and what may constrain this interaction

**Example**  
Natural environment of a mountain affords opportunity for behaviour of climbing but this to understand natural phenomena, when applied to human behaviour it views the task performer as a complex, neurobiological system which is composed in turn gives opportunities for psychological behaviours such as anxiety or elation. (Brymer, Davids & Mallabon, 2014).



## Individual

Allergies

Level of affiliation with nature

Previous experience

Personality type



## Environmental

Natural light

Smells e.g. cut grass

Sounds e.g. bird song

Trees to provide shade

Social



## Task

Confidentiality

Change in therapist/client dynamic

Time away

Set goals

These factors can afford behaviour or constrain it

# Potential Pilot Study & Research

## Questions

### Outline:

- ❖ Online survey of therapists



United Kingdom



Norway



Japan

### Methodology:

- ❖ Online questionnaire, questions based around affordances and constraints.

### Justification:

- ❖ Few studies have investigated how widespread nature-therapy is
- ❖ It will be interesting to look at the United Kingdom's results alongside two countries who have national philosophies of outdoor living

### Impact:

- ❖ This will give a snapshot of the use of nature-therapy and may identify why therapists are not using it

- ❖ **What are the benefits of outdoor therapy?**

Conduct case studies of adults and children receiving outdoor therapy in the UK.  
This has not been done before using ecological dynamics

- ❖ **Can nature therapy provide long term coping mechanisms?**

There is limited research into the long term effects of nature-therapy

- ❖ **Are representations of nature enough?**

Would people prefer a nature-themed therapy room over a traditional one if given the choice?  
Less postoperative anxiety if looking at pictures of open water (Ulrich and Lunden, 1990).  
Faster recovery from surgery if a view of a natural setting than an urban one (Ulrich, 1984)



**Any  
Questions?**

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# References: Images

❖ Cover/background image:

Bridge House Hotel, (2016), *Grasmere* [online] Available at: [http://www.bridgehousegrasmere.co.uk/grasmere\\_history.htm](http://www.bridgehousegrasmere.co.uk/grasmere_history.htm) [Accessed 3 July 2016].

❖ Woman on ecological dynamics diagram:

King of Wallpapers (2016) *Woman* [online] Available at: <http://kingofwallpapers.com/woman.html> [Accessed 2 July 2016]

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❖ Psychiatrist's Office

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❖ Therapy Room

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❖ Paediatrician's Room

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❖ Sunset image on questions slide:

Andrew Watson (2016) *Derwent Water Sunset* [online] Available at: <https://m.flickr.com/#/photos/andrewwatson/8169> [Accessed 28 June 2016]