

# A Dose of Nature

## Nature Prescriptions for Chronic Health Problems

### Running Nature Prescription Groups: A Note on Best Practice

#### Introduction

A Nature Prescription Group facilitator needs to work actively with patient-participants, health staff and other stakeholders.

A Nature Prescription group is held in natural spaces such as parks, woods, gardens, beaches or upland areas. The organisations that own and manage these areas need to be fully engaged (these may be local authorities, wildlife trusts, charities from the large to the small, or private owners).

#### Practical considerations

Facilitators and/or their agencies need to have **full insurance** protection for patient-participants, their staff, and volunteers. A minimum of £5 million cover for both public and employee liability is recommended, but facilitators should consider their insurance needs with regard to the nature of the work, the location, and their own experience. Particularly we encourage facilitators to consider their insurance needs if they are working in managed spaces such as parks and gardens, or beyond such areas.

It is recommended that a group consist of a **maximum of 12** patient-participants referred from health services such as GPs, CPNs, practice nurses or other health care professionals.

A **ratio** of one facilitator to six patient-participants should generally not be exceeded during low to medium risk activities. However it is accepted that this may vary up or down, depending on the nature of the risk and the needs of the patient-participants, to a minimum of 1:4 and a maximum of 1:12.

**Transport** arrangements need to be made clear early on. Sometimes patient-participants are able to share lifts, or sometimes it is best to provide transport from one meeting place (e.g. from each participating surgery).

The ability for **the group to come together** is important. Sometimes, but not always, this will require some of shelter (temporary structures such as a suspended tarpaulin can be very helpful).

It is vital to consider **safety and comfort**. Risk assessments suitable for the specific location and activities involved, should be carried out before each

session, and group facilitators should ensure they have additional sources with them that include dry clothes and sanitary products.

**Scheduling** of the sessions should be weekly, for 12 weeks. Sessions should be at least two hours long in total, to include transportation time. The precise timing of the sessions can be fixed beforehand (weekend mornings, on average, tend to be the most practicable). However, there is a case for remaining flexible and allowing patient-participants to agree scheduling amongst themselves, within practical limitations.

Nature Prescription groups can run at **any time of year, and in any weather**. Whilst it is important to ensure that patient-participants are adequately equipped for the range of conditions that can be met outdoors, cold, wet and windy weather often, perhaps counter-intuitively, provide the greatest opportunities for patient benefit.

## **Structure and format**

When initiating a Nature Prescription group, ideally a long lead-in time should be planned in order to ensure the service is well known in and around participating surgeries. Leaflets or other literature need to be thorough and clear. The service should be known about as widely as possible, especially amongst local health workers.

A referral can involve either the patient-participant contacting the group facilitator, or vice versa (with the patient-participant's permission, of course). An initial telephone conversation, or ideally face to face meeting, should be held to discuss the patient-participant's expectations, fears, needs (including physical limitations) and experience of nature. It also provides the opportunity to fill in pre-intervention questionnaires.

It is also recommended that, if possible, a group meets informally before the sessions begin, perhaps at the referring GP surgery. It is recognised that joining a group can be quite a hard step for many, and this is one way to ease the process. In this way a high retention rate can be achieved.

Sessions are iterative, building on the needs of each participant every week. While there is the potential for participants to support the management of the land for the landowner and for the benefit of conservation, the focus needs to be on the needs of each participant.

It is likely that, during the course of the group, individuals will request time alone with the group facilitator. This can be managed informally, or in a more structured way with slots being made available for patient-participants to book.

## **Activities**

All activities are voluntary, people can opt out and just sit (for example, by a fire), or carry on with something they particularly like to do. Generally, as the course progresses, sessions tend to become less and less structured as people's skills and confidence grow.

Activities range from arts in nature, games and physical movement across the site, learning about ecology and systems, walking in silence, developing sense awareness and group sharing, as well as carrying out some practical conservation tasks. Food or tea may be prepared, especially if an open fire is an option.

The common emphasis in all these activities is facilitating a deeper engagement with natural processes and phenomena.

## **Qualifications and experience**

There is no single Nature Prescription qualification and group facilitators have come to it from different directions. Ideally group facilitators should be able to demonstrate qualifications and experiences that include: interpersonal and therapeutic skills; environmental/ecological skills; and practical skills. It is this combination that makes Nature Prescription different. The following lists are not requirements, but ideally group facilitators should be able to demonstrate two or more from each category:

Interpersonal and therapeutic:

- compassionate personality with evidence of empathy
- recent experience of working with vulnerable adults
- experience as a counsellor, psychotherapist or ecotherapist

Environmental/ecological:

- Forest School Practitioner Level 3
- experience in ecology, botany, conservation management or environmental education
- outdoor skills training or wilderness leadership

Practical:

- Royal Life Saving Society Water Safety Training
- outdoor First Aid training
- horticulture or arboriculture
- risk assessment
- questionnaire and survey administration

## **Partnership**

A Nature Prescription group is a partnership between the facilitators, the health professionals who refer patient-participants, the owners and managers of the land that the group uses, and the patient-participants themselves.

Health professionals in particular need to be engaged early in the process. Working through key individuals (e.g. surgery partners and practice managers), in order to reach as many staff as possible, is important.

## **Legacy**

Nature Prescription facilitation can involve follow-on work with patient-participants in different ways, and it is important to recognise, maximise and capture this. For example, a facilitator may become aware of additional health social issues with individual patient-participants, and will need to find a way of ensuring, with consent, that these are followed up.

Nature Prescription groups often result in some individuals wanting to continue their nature practice, either for their own pleasure and wellbeing or to gain new skills and qualifications. Empowering people to use their new-found skills and interests is an important outcomes of Nature Prescription.

All patient-participants should therefore complete pre- and post-course questionnaires. The Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Well Being Scale is one suitable survey. Budget and time should also be set aside for follow up contacts, three to six months after the 12 week course. Some of the legacy impacts may be quite hard to capture; they may be changes in attitude or confidence, family relations or the choosing of new life goals. An open, semi-structured interview is recommended for these. Others may be more obvious, such as changes in prescription rates or GP appointments.

## **Network**

It is highly recommended that Nature Prescription groups come together to share and learn from each others' experiences. Informal learning networks, can be found at the local, regional and national level.

**23 October 2015**