

Evidence Based Practice Day
Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, Recreation Therapy Program
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The Utilization of Wilderness Therapy in Achieving Mental Health Outcomes with Adolescents

Search Terms: Adolescent AND mental health AND adventure therapy; outpatient AND mental health AND wilderness; therapeutic recreation AND mental health AND outdoor
Years: 1989-2012
Databases: Psych Info and Academic One File
Number of Articles: 32

Summary of Research Findings:

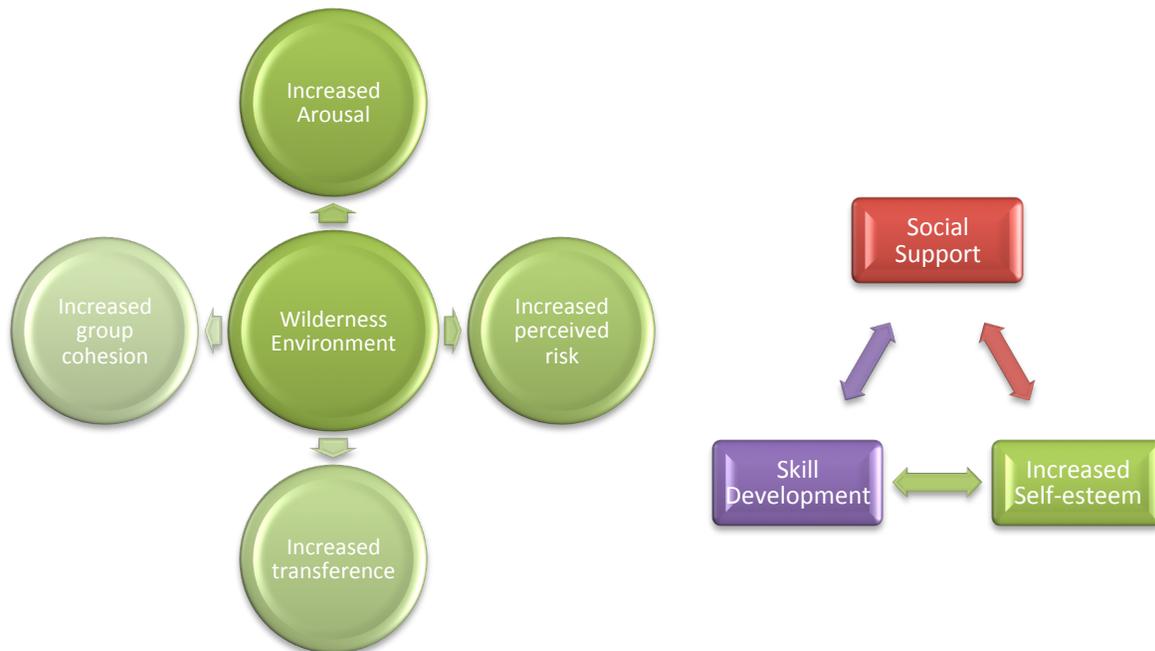
Wilderness therapy offers participants the unique opportunity to connect with nature, peers, and themselves while being supported by therapeutic staff and, hopefully, their families. Multiple studies have shown that wilderness therapy has a significant positive impact on mental health of adolescents, such as increased self-esteem, increased internal locus of control, positively altered self-perception, positive transference to real life situations, and increased social competence (Cook, 2008; Gillespie, 2009; Eikenaes, Gude, & Hoffart, 2006; Harper & Cooley, 2007; Kyriakopoulos, 2011; Romi & Kohan, 2004; Schell, Cotton, & Luxmoore, 2012). One strong area of focus in wilderness therapy pertains to the theory that outdoor, group adventure therapy, helps promote self-esteem in adolescents struggling with mental and behavioral issues. Cook (2008) explains that self-esteem improves through wilderness therapy intervention due to participants' ability to be themselves within a wilderness setting. The ability to freely and confidently express emotions is shown to be fundamental in shaping self-esteem. Cook (2008) discovered that activities promoting high levels of social support, a core component of wilderness therapy, results in significant increases in self-esteem and social competence. Increased social support and positive peer interactions have proven to be significant components of wilderness therapy that promote positive mental health outcomes. Kyriakopoulos's (2011) study supports how socialization through wilderness experiences could produce such positive effects. At the conclusion of the study, participants reported that working together with their peers throughout the outdoor excursion led to feelings of mutual care and reliance, which increased feelings of trust and reduced anxieties about being in the group.

Schell et al. (2012) concludes that the combined effects wilderness therapy, which includes ongoing group support, keeping personal goals of clients in mind, and carefully structuring activities, facilitates positive and successful experiences for participants in such interventions. Schell et al. (2012) continues to explain how sequencing activities in a particular way can help participants achieve a sense of mastery and accomplishment, which can lead to altered ways of thinking and behaving. Therefore, empowering participants with responsibilities and instilling them with a sense of optimism through their own accomplishments can positively affect self-perception (Schell et al. 2012). Kyriakopoulos (2011) reports that the outdoor experience reinforced participants' positive self-perceptions due to successfully overcoming obstacles which they initially perceived as insurmountable. The perceived risk of the outdoor environment increased participants' cognitive and emotional arousal, which helped to facilitate personal growth and instill confidence in their abilities to deal with stressful situations. Participants expressed that their wilderness achievements felt important, and consequently, they were motivated to transfer their significant outdoor experiences to real-life situations. Lifestyle changes included increasing participation in physical activities, which could help aid overall mental health.

Knowledge Translation Plan:

Elements of wilderness therapy can be utilized in non-wilderness settings. An inpatient adolescent mental and behavioral health program is one such setting within which wilderness therapy methods could prove to be successful treatment tools. Recreation therapists have the unique perspective, knowledge, and skills necessary to implement wilderness therapy methods in a meaningful way within the inpatient setting. The most basic concept of wilderness therapy is that participants experience a connection to nature throughout the program. Recreation therapists can provide patients with significant opportunities to interact with the wilderness by facilitating a variety of outdoor based leisure activities. By connecting with the outdoors and overcoming natural obstacles encountered throughout their experiences, participants have the opportunity to increase their self perceptions by contradicting previously held negative self-assessments. This can in turn improve their mental health status (Kyriakopoulos,

2011). The perceived risk of outdoor environments can contribute to personal development by increasing cognitive and emotional arousal, which helps facilitate learning, personal growth, and transference of experiences to real life situations (Kyriakopoulos, 2011). Therefore, participants would not only reap the benefits of individual outdoor experiences, but may also be able to apply their new perspectives on a daily basis. Similar to wilderness therapy programs, inpatient programs offer participants the opportunity to interact with peers continuously for an extended period of time. Consequently, participants will be able to carry over their social support from the outdoor experiences into daily life.



References:

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