



53044 RR #213 Ardrossan, Alberta, T8G 2C4 Ph: (780) 809-1047 Fax: (780) 809-1046  
Email: [info@dreamcatcherassociation.com](mailto:info@dreamcatcherassociation.com) Website: <https://www.dreamcatcherassociation.com>

## NATURAL ASSISTED THERAPY (NAT)

Written by: Eileen Bona  
53044 RR #213 Ardrossan, Alberta  
T8G 2C4 780-809-1047  
[eileen@dreamcatcherassociation.com](mailto:eileen@dreamcatcherassociation.com)

**What it is.** “Nature assisted therapy (NAT) is the use of plants, natural materials, and the outdoor environment to improve health. NAT covers a variety of activities. These include therapeutic horticulture such as gardening and plant-related activities to improve wellbeing and wilderness or outdoor adventure excursions.” Mental Health Wiki

According to research, just being in nature is essential to our mental and physical health. Nature therapy or NAT refers to the therapeutic value of being in a natural setting. This can be a walk in the woods, a trip to the garden, snowshoeing in the countryside, visiting a farm, camping, sitting at a fire pit, walking on a beach, and much more. Often, this form of nature therapy can be done just by itself, with the individual partaking in a natural activity for stress relief, relaxation or healing, and balancing.

Other times, NAT can be implemented by a person with the intent to help someone reach goals, such as a therapist, who is working in the natural environment to help their clients heal, reach new potentials, and/or develop self-esteem, confidence or vocational skills, etc. There can be many therapeutic goals carried out in a natural environment and, if these goals are attempted through nature assisted activities, then this is referred to as nature assisted therapy (NAT).

NAT is an umbrella for all nature based forms of therapy and so includes wilderness training and/or outdoor adventures, horticulture and Natural Environmental Therapy (NET). To some extent, it also encompasses AAT if there are animals present in the natural environment and aiding in the process of healing. An example could be listening to birds singing which can augment the serene peacefulness of the place, watching wildlife at work or play like beavers building a dam or frolicking deer, or interacting with or observing farm animals. These interactions and observations can be therapeutic in a passive way or can be purposefully “used” as mediums for healing if they are drawn upon or implemented purposefully, by a therapist with goals for a client. Thus there are two views:

Therapist “uses” nature as a medium for healing  
Nature itself is the therapist

**Nature Assisted Therapy (NAT) and the Client** NAT can offer many avenues:

- Encourage touching experiences that are comfortable, acceptable, and non-threatening; it encourages as much touch as possible
- Giving to the plant, the natural environment is therapeutic
- Care for and/or nurture animals, build empathy, and etc.
- Express feelings by providing a safe environment to open up
- Learn skills to help increase confidence and self-worth

## Dreamcatcher Psychology 101: Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI)

### Basic Principles and Applications

· Share memories and life experience with an animal (or plant) which can be easier than opening up to another human being - natural settings provide a therapeutic listener ex) animals, plants · Learn nurturing, care, and gentle touch · Learn responsibility · Deal with loss through the reality that plants can die · Learn vocational and life skills (for example, Time/Anger Management, organization) · Learn coping and basic survival skills (wilderness training) · Increase relaxation, decrease anxiety/stress NAT can be done individually or in group sessions, and is most effective when participant(s) are actively involved. Keep in mind that not all clients will be engaged. There is not ONE therapy that works for all people.

Nature can often aid in treatment of mental health disorders. Nature-assisted therapy can be helpful in treating various mental health disorders, according to research from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in Alnarp, Sweden (Annerstedt & Währborg, 2011). The study involved a systematic review of 38 scientific studies covering a range of nature-assisted therapies, including horticultural therapy, wilderness therapy, adventure programs, outward bound programs and garden walks. Overall, the studies reported that nature-assisted therapy was helpful in treating schizophrenia, dementia, depression, schizoaffective disorder, alcohol dependence and other substance use disorders. Some studies found that horticultural therapy improved mood, but other studies did not find significant results. One study found that horticultural therapy combined with adventure therapy and a 12-step program, helped to reduce alcohol craving, while two other studies found that horticultural therapy combined with either psychotherapy or cooking activities helped to reduce psychotic symptoms. Several trials found that wilderness therapy, either by itself or combined with group therapy or counselling, resulted in significant improvements in behaviour among youth. The authors conclude that nature-assisted therapy “can have a significant effect on psychological, social, physical, and intellectual therapeutic goals” (Annerstedt & Währborg, 2011).

### HORTICULTURAL THERAPY

**What it is.** Horticultural therapy is a therapy program involving flowers and plants, with the primary objective being to raise the level of motivation for the client. The intent is to use the client’s natural motivation to work in gardening or florist activities to simultaneously improve the person’s mental or physical health. Horticultural therapy is implemented by a professional therapist with specific treatment goals. “Horticultural therapists are specially educated and trained members of rehabilitation teams (with doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, occupational therapists and other) who involve the client in all phases of gardening, from propagation to selling products, as a means of bringing about improvement in their life” (Horticultural therapy, 2016). Our relationship with plants goes back to the early ages when we survived off the land. Horticulture therapy, as it is known today, has been implemented for disturbed patients since as early as prehistoric times and in “insane asylums” since the early nineteenth century.

**How it works.** Horticultural therapy can include working with plants in a variety of settings from an outdoor garden to potted plants inside. Plants can receive treatment from the client which parallels their treatment. If the client is in need of being away from their family to remain safe, the client can be helped to re-pot a plant to another place which is safer and better for the plant. In other cases, the gardening may be a medium for engaging clients to attend therapy. If clients enjoy working with plants and this is the base of their therapy, then they can attend sessions where the therapists can provide the help they need in a less threatening and more rewarding way.

Horticultural therapy can help the individual:

- Gain new skills, perhaps even enough for a vocation
- Improve communication skills
- Build frustration tolerance and coping skills by presenting a challenge
- Stimulate sensory stimulation and awareness

- Build curiosity and questioning attitudes
- Experience social interaction with the therapist, the group, or with others outside the group as they share interests and accomplishments
- Learn responsibility
- Enhance or develop empathy and nurturing
- Improve motor skills
- Participate in positive group experiences
- Improve confidence and self-esteem
- Learn to relieve frustrations and aggression in an appropriate manner
- Learn about life and death cycles
- Enhance concentration
- Learn to process loss and grief
- Improve decision making
- Learn patience and delayed gratification abilities

Therapy using horticulture can take place without directly working with plants; even having an atmosphere containing plants can be useful therapeutically, but there could be problems, including failure of the project or death of the plant, expenses, allergies, accidents and injuries, getting dirty may bother some people, and having or finding the right space may prove difficult. Guidelines for success may include:

- Setting attainable goals and objectives
- Undertaking projects with which you can achieve clients' goals
- Knowing what you are doing
- Preparing for goals to change and to go with what is happening to get the best therapeutic results. How a living thing will affect our clients cannot always be controlled.
- Preparing for the total project, including clean up
- Preparing to provide simple first aid
- Preparing to deal with the death of the plant as with any loss
- Teaching about life as a role model

The best evaluation is your own response and how you and your client(s) feel about what has happened?

## **NATURAL ENVIRONMENT THERAPY (NET)**

**What it is.** Natural environment therapy is the use of therapeutic activities in natural settings and involves a variety of possible experiences from a wilderness survival trip to a walk in the garden. NET may involve wilderness camps or survival excursions exclusively, but it can also include rope courses, rock climbing, zip lining, and other similar activities. The focus of NET is to build a changed self- image and self-concept and to motivate people to learn through doing. The purpose of NET is to aid participants as they seek personal identity and "optimum" development of personal resources.

**How it works.** The natural environment provides a setting that evokes coping behaviors rather than defensive behaviors.

- Offers a feedback mechanism that is concrete, immediate, unprejudiced and impartial. People must interact

with it in a responsible, coping way to ensure survival

- Simplifies the social system and nurtures its participants through a return to the natural setting
- Allows participants learn to better understand themselves through self-discovery of these feelings and learning to deal with these feelings in an appropriate way
- Allows the individual to grow while facing the challenges of the environment and of the social group
- Provides the opportunity to reach achievable goals:
  - Gain self-confidence
  - Experience natural healing
  - Participate in group interaction and develop social skills
  - Develop communication skills
  - Enhance sense of responsibility
  - Experience the wide range of human reactions, expressed and received appropriately
  - Heighten ability to trust and be trusted
  - Release pent-up emotions
  - Improve motor skills
  - Learn about cycles of life and death
  - Become aware of functional and dysfunctional behavior patterns

Problems and concerns may relate to safety, insects, fears, weather, destruction of the natural environment, and/or getting lost. Guidelines for success should include

- Leadership with experience and expertise
- Familiarity with the place
- Preparedness for emergencies
- Someone at a base who knows where you are going
- Written permission and a physical exam. Should be included as a prerequisite · Knowledge of your participants
- Goals and expectations that are clear and SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely)
- Knowledge of the provincial and federal laws
- Participant knowledge of the guidelines, laws, rules and expectations for the journey
- Accommodations and planning to make the experience as comfortable as possible (for short journeys)

For more information and techniques on implementing NAT, Horticulture Therapy and NET, please see Chapter 8 of Nebbe, 1991. For activities in NAT, NET and Horticulture Therapy, please see Chapter 10 of Nebbe, 1991.

*Eileen Bona is a Registered Psychologist and the Owner/Founder of Dreamcatcher Nature-Assisted Therapy, a private practice that partners with animals and nature to help children, youth and adults who have neurodevelopmental disabilities or mental health diagnoses. For more information, visit online: [www.dreamcatcherassociation.com](http://www.dreamcatcherassociation.com) or call: (780) 809-1047*

## Bibliography

Annerstedt, M., & Währborg, P. (2011, June). *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 39, 371-388.

*Horticultural therapy*. (January, 2016 21). Retrieved from Wikipedia:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horticultural\\_therapy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horticultural_therapy)