

**The Healing Power of Nature for Women Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence:
Literature Review**

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Abstract

The healing power of nature for women who have experienced domestic violence has been largely untapped in the field of counselling psychology. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the relationship between nature-based therapeutic practices and counselling for women healing from the impacts of abuse. This hermeneutic phenomenological literature review reveals five interconnected themes that describe the healing potential of nature-based practices for women who have experienced domestic violence. These themes are healing of the self, physical and psychological healing, reciprocal healing for people and nature, valuing intuition and traditional ways of knowing, and nonduality between humans and nature. This paper expands on practical applications and recommendations for counselling based on the themes and advocates for an integration of intuitive wisdom and traditional nature-based practices in the counselling process with women who have experienced domestic violence. Inviting nature to be a cotherapist can promote safety, respect, mutuality, and trust in the therapeutic relationship in opposition to the dynamics of abuse that clients have endured in their interpersonal relationships.

The Healing Power of Nature for Women Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence: Literature Review

My passion for helping women heal from the impacts of domestic violence is what impelled me to apply for graduate school. Connection to the natural world has offered me psychological refuge and intense personal growth through the completion of this master's program. The emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits that I have experienced through nature have led me to be curious about the relationship between a woman's healing journey from domestic violence and her connectedness to nature. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, I pulled on the threads connecting nature-based therapy and healing impacts for women who have experienced interpersonal violence. This process revealed a tapestry of themes that emerged from my interaction with the literature. From these themes, I have developed implications for the field of counselling psychology and recommendations for practice, which are presented in the second half of this paper.

The following literature review was guided by the exploration of two main concepts. First, this review distils the existing literature on the impact of abuse on women who have experienced interpersonal violence and the healing quality of nature-based therapy for women, to discover common themes and threads. Second, the paper unearths the unique healing potential of nature-based therapies for women who have experienced interpersonal violence.

Method

I used a hermeneutic phenomenological lens as I reviewed the literature surrounding the impact of domestic violence on women and the healing power of nature for this population (Efron & Ravid, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2015) outlined the hermeneutic phenomenological

method by explaining it involves describing the common meaning that is shared by a group of individuals who have lived experience of a phenomenon and interpreting the meaning of this lived experience. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach is appropriate for this topic as it allows the experience of a phenomenon to stand as a valid way of knowing (Cresswell & Poth, 2015).

As many survivors of domestic violence have told me, their experience is often invalidated or distrusted by friends, family, couples therapists, religious leaders, and law enforcement. Too often, their intuition and lived experiences are discredited as unreliable or even crazy, even though this experience is common to so many other survivors. By honouring my own experience and insight in the writing process, I hope to offer women who have survived interpersonal violence the confidence that their inner voice connects to wisdom and knowledge that extends beyond their individual experience.

As I read, I brought my experience and worldview into the process of identifying and refining common themes that describe the phenomenon of healing from the impact of interpersonal violence through nature interactions. When I read about ecopsychology, regenerative agriculture practices, and ecofeminism, I saw vivid connective possibilities between these fields and my work with women who have been impacted by domestic violence. When I read about the psychological benefits of nature connectedness and horticultural therapy, I did so through a lens of my own experience of healing and growth in the outdoors. The evidence base for these practices confirmed what I intuitively know, having felt the restorative power of gardening and exposure to nature.

Through the process of reading literature on domestic violence and nature-based therapy I identified important strands in other fields of study that I braided into the literature review. This

approach led me to explore research in the fields of interpersonal violence, Indigenous land-based wisdom, horticultural therapy, ecology, regenerative agriculture, ecopsychology, ecofeminism, and Jungian psychology. As I followed the strands of emerging themes, I was shaped personally and professionally by the views I interacted with. My experience of the topic also contributes to the literature through the writing of this paper—a reciprocal and cyclical process (Efron & Ravid, 2018) that I elaborate on in the following pages. This literature review is the product of a dialogue between my personal experience, beliefs and values, and the authors of the literature that I explored in the research process.

Defining Terms

I use *domestic violence*, *interpersonal violence*, and *abuse* interchangeably to speak about the attempt by an individual to manipulate and control their partner through physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, financial, or any other means to gain a sense of personal power (Cory & McAndless-Davis, 2016; Wagers, 2015).

Nature-based therapy and *nature interactions* are used in the following pages to encompass various methods that integrate contact with the natural world into the therapeutic process (Naor & Mayseless, 2017). These methods include but are not limited to Indigenous land-based practices, ecotherapy, wilderness therapy, and horticultural therapy.

Self-Positioning Statement

As a White, Mennonite, middle-class woman from rural Alberta, Canada, I undoubtedly bring a degree of bias to this research. I have had access to land, and ownership of that land, through my family farm for most of my life. When my collectivist Mennonite ancestors fled to Canada, they were given stolen Indigenous land to farm in accordance with their beliefs and values (Wiebe, 2017). This privileged, agrarian history shapes my views of land connection and

my relationship to the natural world. If left unchecked, I could project my internalized views of private land ownership and access onto the research surrounding nature-based therapy. These are views that I am actively challenging, but the dominant Canadian culture of which I am a part undoubtedly seeps into my worldview and impacts my perspective.

An evangelical Christian faith tradition taught me that humans have dominion over creation, a responsibility to steward nature, and a burden to toil against it (Kostamo, 2013). This is a belief system that I have been actively working to deconstruct as I step away from my inherited faith tradition and learn about other natural world practices. I want to be conscious of my evolving perspective on nature–human relationships and remain open to what the literature reveals. I attempt to challenge my views by exposing myself to a myriad of opinions on the topic. This activity causes me to rethink my ancestral history and challenge my ideas surrounding interpersonal trauma and the healing power of nature.

My journey towards regenerative vegetable gardening, using sustainable practices that contribute to soil and plant health without the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides (Holzman, 2018) also shapes the lens through which I read literature on this topic. Having spent the past 5 years working in biodynamic farms I have learned about soil biology and chosen seed varieties, watched plants grow from sprout to harvest, worked alongside people and animals, and felt a part of a hopeful system. Biodynamic agriculture views a farm as a living and changing organism that is linked to the larger ecosystem in which it is found (Damery, 2011). These experiences have led me to believe that interconnectedness to nature is therapeutic. The existential purpose, joy, emotional regulation, and hope that I feel when I am in a relationship with nature certainly add bias to my perspective on nature’s healing properties.

Due to my personal experience, it can feel unnecessary to provide empirical, peer-reviewed evidence to support the concept that connectedness to nature promotes healing and well-being. It is vital for me to remember that not everyone has had the privilege of experiencing nature connectedness in the same way that I have. I believe that academic literature and research can be a valuable tool for exploring the therapeutic benefits that nature offers and bringing them into mainstream consciousness. I have challenged myself to recognize my privilege of access to interactions with nature and not assume that this is an experience shared by everyone.

On the other hand, I hope to become more aware of the colonial mindset in modern psychology that is eager to absorb and validate intuitive and Indigenous wisdom and traditions. I believe that the field of psychology needs to fight the colonial temptation to empirically prove Indigenous perspectives and then take them for clinical use in Western health care. I strive to honour these traditional Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world, which do not need to be supported by evidence-based psychological science to be respected.

Another view that I hold is that vulnerable populations are worthy of the best care and psychological treatment. This includes the therapeutic environment, diversity of services available to them, and even quality of food offered to them in shelter settings. For clients to receive the best service, I believe that the people who serve them should also be supported and nurtured in their workplace. From my experience, clients receive the best care when they are offered support in a hospitable environment. In many cases, staff are overworked, facilities are old and unclean, provided food is often expired and low in nutrition, and few natural elements exist in spaces made to help vulnerable people. I think that creatively implementing gardens, green spaces, or living plants in clinics and shelters would add to therapeutic outcomes and the overall well-being of the people who work in and access these spaces' resources.

I realize that my perspective runs the risk of sounding idealistic and naïve. Bringing natural elements into urban environments costs time and money that nonprofits who serve vulnerable populations rarely have enough of. I plan to continue working with people who have experienced interpersonal violence, and I want to do my part to provide the most life-giving services to my clients. It is my hope that the themes and practices put forward in this paper can be accessible guidelines that encourage organizations to integrate nature-based methods into therapeutic programs. The natural world offers healing interactions despite financial constraints or location, and there are creative ways to invite nature into therapeutic spaces for women who have experienced domestic violence.

My work facilitating When Love Hurts groups for women who have experienced domestic violence has shaped my worldview in profound ways. When Love Hurts is a 10-week, abuse-informed program based on feminist therapy principles that was developed by Karen McAndless-Davis and Jill Cory for women who have experienced any form of domestic violence (Cory & McAndless-Davis, 2020). As I witnessed the stories of over a hundred women, I began to see the pervasive systems of abusive power and control in our culture. I have come to see that abusive violence shows up in our personal relationships and is ingrained in the structure of our religious, economic, and educational institutions. I see it in the ways that we treat the land, the plants, the animals, the air, and the water. Yet I also see hope in our shared humanity and intrinsic dependence upon one another and all things. I have had the honour of witnessing profound healing through these groups of resilient, gentle, powerful, and deeply kind women. For this reason, I believe there is potential to heal and reclaim our relationships and systems that have caused too much suffering for far too long.

Review of Literature

Many people intuitively know that connectedness to nature offers psychological benefits and that fostering this connection can increase well-being. Despite this knowledge, the concept of nature as therapy remains on the fringes of academic literature and research (Seltenrich, 2017). Horticultural therapy exists as a novel experiment in hospitals, prisons, addiction programs, and support programs for veterans (Poulsen et al., 2016; Siu et al., 2020; Stuart-Smith, 2020). It has yet to find a place in mainstream Western psychological practice. Current psychological practice is primarily restricted to a clinic's four walls and almost exclusively guided by evidence-based practice and theories (Seltenrich, 2017).

This review begins with an overview of the nature and impact of interpersonal violence against women. Next, I provide an in-depth examination of the five themes that emerged in my exploration of nature-based therapy related to the phenomenon of women healing from domestic violence: healing of the self, physical and psychological healing, reciprocal healing for people and nature, valuing intuition and traditional ways of knowing, and nonduality between humans and nature. Then I unpack those themes, which describe the unique healing potential of nature-based therapy for this population and provide a basis for the future development of a nature-based therapy program for women seeking support in the aftermath of abuse.

Nature and Impact of Interpersonal Violence Against Women

The prevalence of interpersonal violence is far-reaching, and one in four women globally will experience it in their lifetime (Pemberton & Loeb, 2020; World Health Organization, 2021). Of all murders of females globally, 38% were committed by their intimate partners, according to the World Health Organization (2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the nature of abuse internationally, increasing risk factors for abuse and prevented women from accessing

vital resources (World Health Organization, 2021). In Canada, Indigenous women experience violence in interpersonal relationships at much higher rates than do non-Indigenous women due to the historical and present context of colonization, violence, and trauma (Heidinger, 2021). Experiencing interpersonal violence can result in interpersonal trauma, which has been linked to severe mental and physical illness (Lowe et al., 2017; Maté, 2003), making it an essential topic for counsellors and psychologists to understand.

Domestic violence has been understood through the lens of power and control theory since the 1980s (Wagers et al., 2019). This feminist and sociocultural theory posits that the male perpetrator of interpersonal violence uses patriarchal power and control to manipulate his female partner (Wagers et al., 2019). Wagers (2015) stated that a more causal explanation should be used to describe interpersonal violence mechanisms specifically and that a perpetrator's desire for internal power causes them to exert manipulative control over their partner, whom they perceive as holding power in the relationship.

Wagers (2015) defined the construct of internal power as an intrinsic power that comes from acknowledging an individual's control over their own life through the direction of thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Having internal power means that an individual does not believe that outside forces are responsible for their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. In this sense, internal power means that a person has a strong sense of self that is not easily swayed by external forces. Alternatively, an individual with a low sense of internal power can use physical, emotional, financial, psychological, spiritual, and other forms of control to degrade their partner's internal control and ultimately their sense of self (Cory & McAndless-Davis, 2016; Wagers et al., 2019).

A common misconception is that interpersonal violence against women is characterized by physical force and causes physical injuries (Cory & McAndless-Davis, 2020). In reality,

women report that the damage done to their sense of self through psychological, emotional, and spiritual abuse is the most painful part of their experience of domestic violence (Cory & McAndless-Davis, 2016). The harm done to self-identity and self-esteem through the experience of intimate partner violence has been found to be longer lasting than any physical injuries (Matheson et al., 2015). This is not to disregard the hundreds of women who have lost their lives to physical intimate partner violence in Canada over the past decade (Burczycka, 2019). If a woman can escape a violent partner and avoid death, there is a long road to self-healing ahead of her.

Reconstructing one's sense of self and identity in the aftermath of interpersonal violence takes time after a woman has left an abuser. Mills (1985) explained that there are two types of loss of self through interpersonal violence. The first is a loss of self-identity through the fracturing of parts of the self that have been violated in a relationship. The second is the loss of the observing self, who has become numb or confused due to extended social isolation and physical, psychological, and emotional abuse. The cognitive fog and numbness that occurs for women who experience abuse can inhibit them from effectively creating safety plans to escape the relationship (Czerny et al., 2018). A woman's inner voice and wisdom are squashed when her observing self has been successfully cut off by an abusive partner (Cory & McAndless-Davis, 2016).

Czerny et al. (2018) discussed the process of women's healing from interpersonal violence as boundary renegotiation in the context of a relationship marked by connection and safety. Czerny et al. defined boundary renegotiation as "a process that occurs within the context of relationship, in which the relationship itself becomes the subject of renewed scrutiny in an attempt to guarantee safety and connection." (2018, p. 212) They explained that the boundary

between survivor and perpetrator is often highly permeable within an abusive relationship, allowing the perpetrator to reach into the survivor's sense of self and do them harm. This is not to say that the cause of abuse is a survivor's lack of boundaries. Attempts to implement boundaries are often disregarded by abusers or counterproductive to the survivor's safety (Czerny et al., 2018). The permeable boundary is enforced by the abuser using honeymooning, tension building, and explosion tactics (Cory & McAndless-Davis, 2016) to gain access to a survivor's internal power.

Upon exiting a violent relationship, a woman may enact rigidly closed boundaries as a self-protective mechanism (Czerny et al., 2018). From this perspective, encouraging flexible boundaries for individuals healing from interpersonal violence is an essential part of reconnecting with their self, inner voice, and intuition. With flexible boundaries in place, survivors can feel simultaneously safe and connected with people they trust. Social isolation is a highly dangerous abuse tactic that leaves women without positive relationships to rely on when they leave a violent relationship (Cory & McAndless-Davis, 2016). By encouraging the development of flexible boundaries, survivors of abuse are more likely to establish secure, healthy social relationships moving forward.

The impact of interpersonal violence on a woman's physical health should not be understated and is often linked to the emotional and psychological implications of the abuse they endured (Black, 2011). Physical impacts of interpersonal violence include acute physical injuries, head trauma, reproductive system issues, gastrointestinal issues, immune and endocrine systems issues, and somatic syndromes (Black, 2011). Many of these issues can result in chronic pain and stress on the mind and body, which can lead to other problems such as job insecurity, medication dependence, parenting challenges, and more. Black (2011) also outlined potential

mental health outcomes of interpersonal violence. These include anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, sleep disturbance, suicidality, substance use, and depression.

A 2017 cross-sectional survey of over 900 American women found that women exposed to interpersonal violence experienced significantly increased rates of negative psychological symptoms compared to women not exposed to interpersonal violence (Fedina et al., 2017). These symptoms can include depressive symptoms, increased substance use, increased suicide attempts, decreased self-esteem, posttraumatic stress, and other anxiety disorder symptoms (Devries et al., 2013; Karakurt et al., 2014; Pemberton & Loeb, 2020). Additionally, Dworkin et al. (2019) found adverse social reactions to a woman's disclosure of abuse to be especially harmful to a survivor's psychological health. This suggests that positive social supports can be a protective factor against psychopathology following interpersonal violence, although the research does not show conclusive causality.

Another factor that contributes to poor mental and physical health in domestic abuse survivors is sleep disturbance. Abusive partners often use sleep disturbance as a form of abuse, preventing women from going to sleep or purposefully waking them up in the middle of the night (Cory & McAndless-Davis, 2016). According to Gallegos et al. (2019), sleep disturbance in women who have experienced interpersonal violence can result from nightmares or insomnia related to posttraumatic stress disorder. The stress caused by an abusive partner holistically impacts a survivor long after the relationship has ended. Cory and McAndless-Davis (2020) outlined how the stress of legal fees, finances, and social pressures follow women out of the abusive partnership and even impede some women from ever leaving an abusive relationship.

Healing of the Self

The integration of nature interactions into therapy allows clients to form a secure attachment with the natural world, marked by mutual respect and understanding (Mitten, 2017). After prolonged time in a relationship marked by disrespect and blatant attempts to erode their sense of self, survivors can engage in the redevelopment of self and find a new way of being in a relationship through these safe and secure interactions with nature (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017; DelSesto, 2019).

From my perspective, experiencing a secure connection with another person may be overwhelming for a survivor after exiting an abusive relationship. For this reason, connecting with nature may be a starting point for survivors to relearn how to bring their whole selves safely into new relationships. Moore and Van Vliet (2019) conducted narrative qualitative research with female survivors of sexual assault and found that nature can aid emotional regulation, spiritual connection, and survivors' ability to be present in the here and now. Van der Kolk (2014) explained how by participating in a physical experience that contradicts the helplessness of trauma, a survivor's body and mind are allowed to transform, healing their sense of self. Nature interactions provide these opportunities for exploration, emotional engagement, and reciprocity in a nonthreatening way (DelSesto, 2019).

Simply observing the dynamic qualities of nature can inspire people and provide insight into new ways of thinking (DelSesto, 2019). Many nature-based therapists perceive nature as an external reflection of the client's self, which aids in personal insight and acceptance (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017). In this way, nature becomes an experiential metaphor for clients as they become both observers of and participants within the world around them (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017). Maybe, while planting seeds in the monotonous brown of a prairie spring, they become aware of

the hope that they are sowing for their future. Or, in watching the leaves turn orange in the fall, they may gain some understanding into their inner world and begin to wonder what the next season might bring in life, who they might become. In this way, they can gain sudden clarity or insight while engaging with or observing their natural surroundings. For survivors of abuse, witnessing nature and seeing themselves in nature may provide an effective avenue for healing their observing self, which was dismantled by their partner.

Horticultural therapy has also effectively promoted social engagement in vulnerable and isolated groups of people (Sempik et al., 2014). I believe that nature acts as a steady bridge for abuse survivors to refooster connection in countless meaningful ways. Through the development of self through nature, people are more likely to take a stance of generosity, enchantment, and openness in their interactions with themselves, other people, and the world as a whole (Bennett, 2001; DelSesto, 2019). The holistic benefits of therapeutic nature interactions promote connection with spirituality, cultivate a sense of embodied self, and, as shown in the following section, positively impact physical and psychological health (Moore & Van Vliet, 2019).

Physical and Psychological Healing

There is a burgeoning field of research supporting horticultural therapy with populations who experience the adverse physical and psychological symptoms outlined above. Horticultural therapy is an approach that uses plants and horticultural activities to promote client well-being and client goals (Canadian Horticultural Therapy Association, n.d.). Little research has been done to date on horticultural therapy with women who have experienced domestic violence. However, there is growing evidence to support the positive impact of horticultural therapy on posttraumatic stress disorder, stress, and other mental health diagnoses linked to interpersonal violence (Kim & Park, 2018; Soga et al., 2017; Siu et al., 2020). Horticultural therapy increases

well-being and engagement in meaningful activities for people who have been diagnosed with a mental illness (Siu et al., 2020). Regularly engaging in gardening practices can increase life satisfaction, overall mental and physical well-being, quality of life, and sense of community (Soga et al., 2017). Recent findings also indicate that gardening and horticultural therapy practices reduce depression and anxiety symptoms (Soga et al., 2017).

Meaningful results have come from studies on therapeutic approaches that used a garden with people who experience severe stress (Grahm et al., 2017). Findings indicate that more prolonged and more immersive periods spent in a garden result in higher recovery rates from prolonged stress (Grahm et al., 2017). Horticultural therapy with individuals healing from posttraumatic stress disorder provides a safe therapeutic container for participants to remember, mourn, and reconnect after a traumatic event (DelSesto, 2019; Wise, 2015).

Human beings experience the therapeutic benefits of nature for body and mind through all of our senses (Franco et al., 2017). The taste of nature, experienced through growing and consuming food directly from the ground, was found to have a wide range of positive impacts on well-being (Franco et al., 2017). The smells and sounds of nature have also been linked to beneficial physical and mental health outcomes for people, suggesting that humans have a holistic relationship with nature (Franco et al., 2017). Additionally, exposure to natural settings increases feelings of connectedness to nature and enables people to better reflect on their life problems and experience positive emotions (Mayer et al., 2009).

The substantial physical and mental health benefits of close contact with the land are traced back to humans' primal relationship to soil (Lowry et al., 2016). Humans evolved alongside microbes found in soil and have developed a beneficial relationship with them. These microbes aid in increased serotonin levels and promote immunoregulation and psychological

resilience for people with anxiety disorders (Lowry et al., 2016). *Mycobacterium vaccae* is the name of one of these beneficial microbes (Lowry et al., 2016); it thrives in well-composted soil and is inhaled by humans when they dig in the dirt and consume food grown in healthy soil (Lowry et al., 2016). Further research is needed draw conclusions about the positive impact that *Mycobacterium vaccae* has on humans, but research conducted on mice indicates that it may reduce anxiety and support learning (Matthews & Jenks, 2013).

Chater (2015) outlined how even the smell of wet soil, known as geosmin, can cause humans to feel pleasure and a sense of security. The scent of geosmin acted as a signpost for early humans that fertile ground was near, and therefore a food source to forage was likely. In many ways, the smell of fertile soil was a matter of survival for our ancestors. For that reason, humans can still detect geosmin in minute quantities. The smell of earth can have a pleasing effect for some people today, although most of us no longer rely on it for our survival.

Our relationship to the natural world is deep-seated, and it is clear to me how deeply connected our well-being is to the greater ecology. This ancient connection can likely help reform parts of the self that interpersonal violence has broken off and, in the process, nurture the body and mind. Deep wounds require profound healing, and nature provides a gritty, raw, transcendent recovery in a way that the four walls of a counselling room cannot.

Reciprocal Healing for People and Nature

Another fibre of research to ravel into the conversation is the reciprocal healing in people and plants that occurs when people interact with nature to heal from abuse and in turn the plants are nurtured and flourish. The atmosphere that an abusive partner creates in a relationship is one of power over their partner instead of collaborative partnership. Cory and McAndless-Davis (2016) explained how an abuser views themselves as central, superior, and deserving. Any

attempt to connect with them in a mutually beneficial way is a threat to their internal sense of entitled power. In contrast to the hierarchical relationship that abuse creates, interactions with nature cultivate a symbiotic collaboration marked by respect and mutual growth (Kimmerer, 2013).

The field of ecopsychology views human beings' health within the context of an interconnection to the well-being of the earth and the natural world (Summers & Vivian, 2018). Ecotherapy may be as simple as taking traditional talk therapy outdoors into natural settings, but the client's connection to nature is essential. Nature-based therapists or ecotherapists view the natural world as a cotherapist who offers physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits to the client (Summers & Vivian, 2018). By facilitating clients' sense of connectedness to the natural world, researchers have found that these individuals become more likely to behave in a way that sustainably cares for the environment (Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Mayer et al., 2009).

Nature-based practices such as horticultural therapy allow a reciprocal healing relationship between survivors of abuse and the natural world. By using regenerative and biodynamic practices in horticultural or nature-based therapy, survivors nurture the soil, plants, insects, and animals (Damery, 2011; Holzman, 2018). Regenerative and biodynamic practices used in nature-based therapy can include omitting the use of synthetic fertilizers and insecticides and introducing beneficial plants and animals into the ecosystem of the garden to maintain a healthy and sustainable system (Holzman, 2018). In this way, the gardener is a valuable member of an ecosystem and can contribute to the mutual thriving of all of the system's parts (Damery, 2011). In turn, the gardener receives nurturance and regeneration of their own. This type of gardening or farming requires the gardener find their place in the garden's natural order and acts intuitively to create life with the plants, insects, soil, and weather (Damery, 2011). Healing one's

identity in the aftermath of abuse requires a nurturing setting, not unlike the conditions needed for a seedling to set roots and sprout (Matheson et al., 2015). Relating to nature provides an opportunity to form a relationship that involves mutual caring and respect (Mitten, 2017). As Mitten (2017) wrote, “tending our souls and tending our soils are necessary for lush growth and healing” (p. 11).

Sanday (2002) reflected on her anthropological research studying the matriarchal society of Minangkabau in Indonesia in 1981. Sanday explained her observations of cooperation, caring, and respect for people and the land in Minangkabau culture. In South Sumatra, people are deeply connected to the land, which is passed down through the matrilineal line. The land is sacred, and the family is deeply connected to it through their matrilineal heritage. Sanday’s anthropological observations of matriarchal culture align with Françoise d’Eaubonne’s (1974) ecofeminist theory, which draws a parallel between the treatment of women and the treatment of the natural world by capitalist, patriarchal cultures. Ecofeminism merges feminist and ecological practices to support the importance and value of a reciprocal and respectful human relationship to nature (d’Eaubonne, 1974).

The parallel drawn by d’Eaubonne (1974) between the treatment of women and the treatment of the land has the potential to resonate strongly with women who have experienced domestic violence. Both bear the scars of an oppressive system of power and control. Both have been effectively made less than, only valuable according to what they can offer their abuser. Both have experienced the weight of someone’s power deficit, stripping them of their intrinsic wisdom, worth, and internal power to gain a fleeting sense of internal control. Both require healing, and I believe that they have the ability to heal each other.

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer (2013) painted a beautiful picture of an Indigenous perspective of the human relationship to land, wind, water, and sky. Kimmerer wrote about the gifts and teachings that nature offers: “Gifts from the earth or from each other establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, and to reciprocate” (2013, p. 25). She explained that Indigenous wisdom offers an understanding that gifts require reciprocity as part of a circular nature of mutual giving and receiving. What is given will eventually circle back to be received, which is evident in human treatment of the natural world and the consequences inevitably experienced when nature is not treated with respect.

This reciprocal style of relating stands in sharp contrast to the cycle of power and control that women experience in a relationship with an abusive partner. The hierarchy that an abusive person creates in a relationship does not leave room for mutual giving and receiving. Kimmerer (2013) described a process of mutual gifting and receiving within a connected relationship. In following this pattern, a woman receives gifts of healing and teaching from nature. In turn, she offers nurturance and life gifts by respectfully observing, fostering new growth, and mending the bond between humans and nature that has been lost in the dominant culture.

Valuing Intuition and Traditional Ways of Knowing

As society becomes more urbanized and industrialized, humans’ collective connection to nature and intuitive knowledge of nature’s healing potential has been dampened (DeISeeto, 2019). A human-centric perspective has pervaded Western culture and left the general population blind to the presence of natural elements in our world (Sanders, 2019; Wandersee & Schussler, 1999). Less than 2% of the Canadian population is involved in farming food (Statistics Canada, 2017) but every person in Canada needs and consumes the products of farming. Even modern farmers are primarily removed from the intimate process of plant and animal production and

care. As we distance ourselves from our food production, a vital link between humans and nature, we are losing our intuitive connection to nature and missing out on the vital benefits that flow from this relationship. These benefits include healthy and beautiful ecosystems to live and recreate in, stable and reliable weather patterns that contribute to decreases in natural disasters, and decreased physical and psychological symptoms (Stuart-Smith, 2020). I can't help but wonder if this distance from the natural world has been created, in part, by the devaluing of traditional ways of knowing and intuition as a valid source of wisdom. Instead of relying on our intuitive experience of nature connectedness, we look to experts to prove that a strong relationship to nature is beneficial for human health.

Western cultures have a lot to learn from Indigenous Peoples who carry traditional wisdom and ways of being that honour the reciprocity between nature and people (Mitten, 2017). Indigenous practices highlight the importance of receiving wisdom, healing, and teachings from plants and other natural elements (Kimmerer, 2013). Modern scientific findings confirm the entanglement of human activity in the natural world (Mitten, 2017), notably the environmental crisis created by the overconsumption of natural resources (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021). With all this scientific evidence I still see a need for acknowledging the intrinsic value of traditional Indigenous wisdom as it relates to humans' relationship with nature. Western psychology could offer a more holistic approach to mental health counselling if space was made for intuitive, traditional forms of healing in the evidence base that guides best practice.

It is not uncommon for nature-based therapists to perceive nature as a cotherapist, teacher, or guide (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017). The nature-based therapist's role is to facilitate safe interactions with nature so that clients can open up and allow their surroundings to speak to them intuitively (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017). A rigid plan does not characterize nature-based

counselling. Instead, practitioners and clients are asked to embrace the often intuitive message that nature offers (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017). This type of facilitation stands in sharp contrast to the overly controlling and manipulative nature of an abusive relationship. Instead of being told how to heal, in nature-based therapy a woman is given space to choose her own path to recovery, thus encouraging her to reconnect with and trust her intuition.

Current discourse labels intuition as a feminine trait that has been systemically devalued in favour of objective rationality (Mozeley & McPhillips, 2019), which is typically seen as a masculine trait. Intuition is an embodied and integrative way of knowing that validates individuals' relational and lived experiences (Mozeley & McPhillips, 2019). In the field of domestic violence treatment, I think we should not undersell the importance of intuitive wisdom in a person's healing and reclaiming of self. There is a need to rethink the false binary between intuition and rational thinking (Mozeley & McPhillips, 2019) and create space for both to exist in the field of psychology.

Nonduality Between Humans and Nature

It may be tempting to sell people on plants' healing power and nature using the allure of utility (Sanders, 2019). Viewing plants as valuable because of their usefulness to humans is a Western approach that objectifies the natural world for human profit instead of encouraging humans to find their place within it (Sanders, 2019). Indigenous perspectives position humans not at the centre of nature, nor above it as a steward, but within it as one of several members of creation (Redvers, 2020). Accepting this way of being in the world can help mitigate the temptation to label nature as a therapeutic tool consumed for human benefit. Using a garden to exercise control or viewing a naturescape as something consumable may lead people to miss the most therapeutic element of nature connection, which, it can be argued, is a recognition of the

reciprocal relationship between humans and nature, characterized by mutual birth, nurture, and ultimately death (Kimmerer, 2013; Mitten, 2017; Redvers, 2020).

Interacting with nature may not bring linear or rational change, but it could offer a transformational process of finding an active role in the broader ecology (DelSesto, 2019). Indigenous wisdom, ecofeminism, and ecopsychological practices offer a view of humans and nature as one (Mitten, 2017). That is to say that nature is “the entanglement of all beings” (Mitten, 2017, p. 3). Although it may seem as though humans are increasingly disconnected from nature, we are, in fact, infinitely connected and entwined with it. Nature experiences can offer a renewed awareness and curiosity about this connection (Mitten, 2017). Therapy that includes nature invites clients to participate in an interconnected and interactive relationship with nature (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017).

By refusing to inhabit a dichotomous relationship with nature, a therapist can offer a woman impacted by domestic violence the space to observe and experience a spectrum of emotions, thoughts, and situations that initially appear to be opposed to one another. In my experience facilitating support groups, it is not uncommon for a woman to simultaneously feel anger towards and unconditional love for a partner who acts abusively. Holding both rage, love, grief, and relief all at once can be distressing unless a person finds a way to integrate this spectrum of feelings. By bringing nature into the therapeutic recipe, mental health professionals will be better able to create an accepting container for women who experience interpersonal violence. Nature lets us know that everything belongs, that we belong.

Interwoven Themes

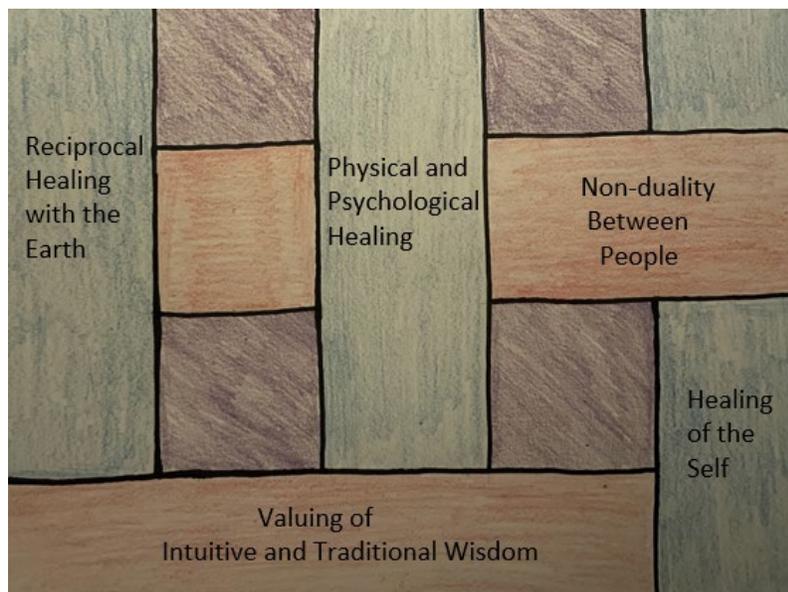
Healing of the self, physical and psychological healing, reciprocal healing for people and nature, valuing intuition and traditional ways of knowing, and nonduality between humans and

nature are the five themes that I expanded upon to describe nature's healing potential for women who have experienced interpersonal violence. These themes are inextricably linked and connected, as outlined in the review of the literature. For example, the healing of a woman's sense of self in the wake of domestic violence occurs through valuing her intuition as well as her physical and psychological healing. In healing her sense of self through observing and participating in nature, she may recognize her place within it, not above it. This realization can compel her to reciprocate with a healing gift of her own, offered to the earth through respectful land use, gardening, or other sustainable action.

Figure 1 illustrates the weaving together of these themes to create a tapestry description of nature's healing potential for women who have experienced interpersonal violence. The five themes have an organic flow in and out of one another. The unique gift that nature therapy offers women healing from domestic violence is an intuitive, reciprocal, respectful interaction that enables the reconstruction of their sense of self. The five themes are vividly juxtaposed against the destructive dynamics of an abusive relationship. Hopefully, this creative analysis opens eyes to the promising potential of integrating nature into therapeutic practice with domestic violence survivors.

Figure 1

Five Interwoven Themes Describing the Healing Potential of Nature for Women Who Have Experienced Interpersonal Violence



Women who experience domestic violence are impacted by abuse long after the relationship is done. The harm to a woman's self-perception is one of the most damaging impacts of an abusive relationship. No longer trusting her intuition or ability to make wise choices impacts her ability to heal once she has left. Nature-based therapy can offer a unique opportunity for survivors of domestic violence to heal their sense of self, mind, body, and spirit. Humans' collective relationship to the feminine and the world around us is honoured in using nature-based therapy with women who have experienced domestic violence. Regenerative nature practices and healing from interpersonal trauma require intuitive and patient reciprocity. My work as a gardener and a facilitator of support groups for women who have experienced abuse has been a spiritual, physical, and cognitively transformative experience. In these roles, I have found avenues to welcome and respect my own intuitive self. I view this as no small feat in a society

where feminine traits such as gentleness, softness, and nurturance are often neglected. The field of psychology may benefit by acknowledging the power of these qualities in practitioners and practices. There is untapped potential for healing in the human relationship to nature that can be harnessed in the context of counselling for women who have experienced domestic violence.

Implications for Counselling Psychology Practice

In this section I translate the five phenomenological themes that describe this healing potential—healing of the self, physical and psychological healing, reciprocal healing for people and nature, valuing intuition and traditional ways of knowing, and nonduality between humans and nature—into practical recommendations for the field of counselling psychology. I explore the implications of the themes for the development of nature-based therapy programs for women who have experienced domestic violence. The powerful living metaphor of a therapeutic relationship with nature is also outlined.

Nature-Based Programs for Survivors of Abuse

Inviting nature to be a cotherapist (Summers & Vivian, 2018) for survivors of abuse provides a fresh approach to counselling with this population. Transition houses and shelters have already taken to implementing green spaces, greenhouses, and horticultural programs for abuse survivors. Renzetti and Follingstad (2015) described a second-stage housing facility for women who have experienced domestic violence that integrated a greenhouse and market garden into their work with survivors. The clients are invited to participate in horticultural activities for healing, job training, and food provision for the centre. In Denmark, nature-based educational programs have been developed for women and children exposed to domestic violence (Poulsen et al., 2020). Over the course of several months staff at a domestic violence shelter created four nature-based programs. One program is designed to follow the seasons and activities are based

off seasonal natural elements. Other programs emphasize body awareness in the garden and the playful experience of nature. Staff also moved therapeutic conversations outside of the office and into the garden. They found that walking in nature and being outdoors serves as a positive distraction during difficult therapeutic conversations.

Although these examples of nature-based programming in women's shelters exist, this approach is not a common element of therapy offered to survivors of abuse. It is possible that more nature-based programming does not already exist in women's shelters and resources centres because of a lack of an evidence-based and efficacious model that the field of counselling psychology reveres. Sufficient evidence exists to support the significant benefits of nature exposure for human physical and mental health (Franco et al., 2017). Research into nature-based benefits for specific populations is emerging, and the review of literature strongly suggests that women who have experienced domestic violence could benefit significantly from nature-based practices.

Implications of the Research Themes for Program Development

The five themes distilled from the research provide a framework for future development of nature-based programs for women who have experienced interpersonal violence. The framework is flexible and can be used by different organizations that support survivors of domestic violence. Knowing that organizations who serve this population have varying funding levels, resources, settings, and access to land, flexibility is vital in developing a nature-based program that therapists can widely apply.

Healing of the Self

Insight, acceptance, clarity, connection, and personal growth are desirable outcomes for therapy programs and nature-based practices offer these in abundance (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017;

DelSesto, 2019; Sempik et al., 2014). Women healing from domestic violence experience a loss of self-identity and loss of their observing self (Mills, 1985), and nature interactions can help them rebuild in ways that talk therapy alone may not. A client with high levels of confusion and disorientation is not asked to produce rational answers when given the opportunity to be with nature. In nature-based therapy, survivors are only required to be present and receive stillness, observe their surroundings, and be open to wonder (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017). Through this way of being with nature, clients may find themselves gaining clarity into their experience (DelSesto, 2019) or an understanding that there may not be a reason or justification for they have endured. Clients may come to see that they were not responsible for the abuse and have space to heal the parts of themselves that were blamed for the violence.

Alongside their clients, therapists offering a nature-based approach to therapy will have their own journey of self-growth with nature. Nature-based therapists may bring a congruency to their practice, a presence that is open and genuine, because of their own relationship to the natural world (DelSesto, 2019). Because of their own personal growth, therapists could contribute to more positive outcomes for their clients as they genuinely believe in the healing power of nature. The evidence of this healing will be apparent to their clients through the self of the therapists, their generosity of spirit, and openness to mutual interactions. A feminist therapy approach blends easily into nature-based practices in that feminist therapists are encouraged to use self-disclosure as a means to form a transparent and egalitarian therapeutic alliance (Pemberton & Loeb, 2020). Practitioner self-awareness guides appropriate disclosure and ensures the focus remains on the client's healing journey with nature (Pemberton & Loeb, 2020).

Physical and Psychological Healing

Proximity to nature should be considered when developing therapeutic spaces for women who have experienced domestic violence. Many shelters and resource centres where women seek mental health help are located in urban areas (Maki, 2019) with little access to private outdoor spaces. Women who have experienced interpersonal violence are often keenly aware of their surroundings, a hypervigilance that their brains honed for survival in a volatile relationship (Lowe et al., 2017), and urban environments could be overwhelming for their elevated nervous systems.

Therefore, practitioners should give special attention to the therapeutic space and ensure that it attends to the client's felt sense of safety and calm. The use of natural elements or outdoor environments are an effective way to attend to this population's unique needs in therapy as nature exposure is known to alleviate stress (Grahn et al., 2017) and lessen physical and psychological symptoms related to anxiety and depression disorders (Soga et al., 2017).

Reciprocal Healing for People and Nature

Approaches to therapy differ according to conceptualization of the client–counsellor relationship. Some view the therapist as an instructor, teacher, or director, whereas others view the therapist as a neutral, blank slate for the clients' thoughts and feelings to be reflected upon. Each therapeutic role may be helpful for different presenting concerns, but the present research review implies that when working with survivors of interpersonal violence, a warm, genuine, mutual, and equal client–counsellor relationship is appropriate (Cory & McAndless-Davis, 2020). The therapeutic interaction should purposefully contradict the clients' experience of unequal, abusive, and deprecating relationships and model healthy relationships. Offering nature a role as cotherapist helps to create a therapeutic atmosphere of reciprocity and mutuality.

Ecopsychology offers the perspective that human flourishing occurs alongside the flourishing of the natural world (Fisher, 2013). The field of counselling psychology becomes intertwined with environmental science, conservation, ecology, and traditional knowledge in light of the intimate connection between the natural world and the human psyche. As society becomes more urbanized and outdoor spaces are increasingly commodified, ecopsychology recognizes the ill effects on mental health and environmental health (Fisher, 2013). By introducing nature interaction into therapy, clients are invited to heal alongside nature as the therapist facilitates a respectful assembly.

There also exists an opportunity to model mutual, respectful, and reciprocal relationships in the interaction between client and therapist in nature-based counselling. Reciprocity can be fostered and revealed as a healthy way of being in a relationship that stands in sharp contrast to abuse and violence. Beginning with the informed consent process, a therapist can set the tone for how respect plays out in the session. By taking the time to thoroughly review rights and responsibilities, the counselling process, confidentiality, and expectations, clients are given the space to ask questions, voice concerns, or have their wishes for treatment heard. Consent is not only an initial process in a reciprocal relationship but an ongoing conversation that needs revisiting throughout treatment (Truscott & Crook, 2013). If nature is a cotherapist, it should also be invited into the informed consent process, with the therapist and client taking time to consider how the natural world can be respected during the session.

Reciprocity by definition is mutually beneficial, and therefore when integrating nature in therapy, the counsellor or psychologist should be cognizant of how the natural world is being treated in sessions. The natural world is not a tool to be used, a resource to be overharvested, or a disposable means to an end in nature-based counselling. The therapist should take care when

collecting natural materials for sessions, being conscious of what an ecosystem can afford to give and only taking so much. When bringing clients into wild spaces, the therapist should guide the client to give and receive gifts, passing on the knowledge of how plants and animals thrive and leading clients to take part in the growth and flourishing around them (Kimmerer, 2013). The client then is not a mere observer but a participant in the world around them. They are experiencing the ebb and flow of a relationship that cycles reliably.

Mental health professionals are aware of professional ethics, guiding them in their roles and informing how they show up in the counselling room. They are taught to look out for countertransference and transference and to monitor their emotions closely. In theory, this guardedness helps protect the client from shouldering a therapist's emotions and experience. In practice, it may impede a healing, therapeutic relationship if taken too far. When working with clients who have experienced interpersonal violence, a counsellor may feel a range of emotions such as deep sadness, anger, gratefulness, and hope. To avoid the expression of these in session could rob the client of experiencing the power of empathy, genuine connection, and positive regard (Renger, 2021). Maturity and vulnerability are required to know how to relate reciprocally with a client, and nature can provide a safe, less formal context for this to occur.

Valuing of Intuition and Traditional Ways of Knowing

Therapeutic conversations of power and control are important when working with women who have experienced interpersonal violence, as internal power and its relation to control is central to abuse dynamics (Wagers et al., 2019). Their internal power has been dismantled by their abusive partner's manipulative control, causing them to question their perceptions and intuition. Discussions of this power and control dynamic can help clients gain an understanding of what occurred in abusive relationships. This also provides a rich opportunity for the therapist

to shed light on the power dynamics in the therapeutic relationship. This conversation can happen early on in therapy when a therapist gives an overview of the process and roles of client and therapist. A therapist's intention and approach for therapy can be transparent and their goal of elevating the client's voice and experience can be made explicit.

The person-centred and postmodern movements in counselling psychology have paved the way for a more compassionate and caring interaction between therapist and client (Corey, 2017). As a profession, counsellors now acknowledge that the client holds expert insight into their own experience, and theories of counselling have been based on this idea. Treating the client as the expert in their own lives can be difficult in practice, and counsellors may sometimes still exert power over clients by assuming the expert role in sessions. This stance does not stem from a place of malice or grandeur. It can even sprout from a desire to help or save a client from the devastation they find themselves in. Yet, by assuming the expert role, a therapist can unwittingly suggest to a client that they cannot rely on their inner wisdom or intuition to guide them towards health, safety, and growth.

There is a reason that many women's resource centres and shelters operate using a feminist approach to counselling (Pemberton & Loeb, 2020). At the core of feminist therapy is client empowerment and honouring clients' lived, gendered experience (Brown, 2018). From this perspective, a survivor of abuse holds intimate knowledge of their situation and deep wisdom to support them moving forward. Feminist therapy also frames domestic violence as a gendered issue that is propped up by systemic patriarchal power. This view leads a feminist therapist to recognize the female survivor is up against greater systemic issues that are working against her. Empowering a woman who had experienced domestic violence, reminding her of the inner voice of wisdom, and helping her regain a strong sense of self are core foci of feminist therapy. These

principles of therapy can pair well with nature-based therapy and make it a good fit for a lot of shelters and organizations that work alongside women who have experienced interpersonal violence.

Other postmodern counselling approaches that elevate clients' expert position in their own lives are solution-focused therapy and narrative therapy (Allen, 2012; Metcalf, 2017). Considering the impact of abuse on women's observing self and intuition (Wagers et al., 2019), counselling in the wake of abuse should avoid pathologizing and focus instead on client strengths. Framing women's intuition as beneficial to their survival during abuse and thriving once they have left will likely contribute to their mental and physical healing. By regarding women's experience and intuition as valid sources of knowledge and insight, mental health professionals can help unravel the emotional and psychological harm that has been done.

Evidence-based modalities such as cognitive behavioural therapy aim to challenge a client's dysfunctional assumptions, negative thoughts, and core beliefs (Beck & Haigh, 2014). From a trauma-informed perspective, cognitive behavioural therapy techniques can help to dismantle cognitive dissonance and confusion in a survivor of abuse (Jackson et al., 2018). Counsellors must be careful not to frame the abuse as caused by flaws in survivor thinking and behaviour. In reality, an abusive partner has systematically worked to manipulate, confuse, and alienate a survivor from herself. In a therapeutic relationship that is structured similar to a teacher guiding a student, a counsellor may unwittingly reenact enacting the dynamics of an abusive relationship. A woman who has experienced domestic violence does not need another person with power informing her that her inner thoughts need revising and are ultimately the reason for her suffering. Instead, counsellors can model a more equal, reciprocal relationship in therapy with women who have survived interpersonal violence.

Nature-based practices that are approached from a reciprocal and nondualistic perspective create a nurturing setting that promotes an equal and mutual power dynamic (Sanders, 2019). Nature makes a brilliant cotherapist (Summers & Vivian, 2018), gently teaches women that they were thinking and feeling with wisdom all along. It carefully unearths the intuition that has been buried by abuse and offers space and nurturance for her internal power to grow. While interacting with nature alongside a therapist who is attentive to power dynamics, a client is invited to be an active participant in the counselling process. Their thoughts, feelings, and intuition are welcomed with wonder and curiosity instead of rational scrutiny. This somewhat playful approach to counselling in the wake of abuse can offer reprieve from the judgement and skepticism that survivors are often met with in courtrooms, churches, and their social sphere.

Kimmerer (2013) explained an Indigenous approach to nature as medicine involves asking to use natural elements, engaging in reciprocal interaction with nature, and contributing to its regeneration. From this perspective, professionals in the field of counselling psychology should partner with nature respectfully when integrating it into therapy. Plants, rocks, and other elements should not be foraged for therapeutic activities in destructive ways. Therapists should leave natural spaces better than they were found after a therapeutic activity takes place in them. The Indigenous people of the land the counsellor and client are on should be consulted and respected when collaborating with nature therapeutically.

Nonduality Between Humans and Nature

The theme of nonduality urges nature-based practitioners to see the healing that happens in the relationship between people, and between humans and nature. In an individualistic consumer culture this has become a foreign concept to many people who have learned that products are available for ownership and personal gain and nature is no exception (Sanders,

2019). In the field of psychology there is a temptation to view nature as a tool to be used in therapy. This perspective creates a false dichotomy and hierarchy between humans and nature and places humans above the natural world to act upon it or use it. If a therapist hopes to include nature in their practice, they should consider shifting the language they use to support the client's experience of connectedness rather than separation.

By fostering a client's feeling of interconnectedness, the client can begin to see that there is space for the complexity of their experience and their confusion. The ever-changing yet cyclical quality of the natural world teaches that all facets of life belong. This therapeutic notion can comfort survivors who struggle to make sense of their experience in a rational way. Through a reciprocal relationship with nature, women who experience domestic violence are offered an active role in the broader ecology (DelSesto, 2019). An invitation to active participation in wholeness with nature contrasts against the powerlessness a survivor may feel facing legal and social systems.

Nature Interactions as Living Metaphors in Therapy

Metaphors are used in counselling psychology to bring about positive client change, and the interactional quality of nature-based practices may provide a more profound, transformational experience. Using metaphors in talk therapy is nothing new in counselling psychology and modalities such as narrative and solution-focused therapy use metaphors to help the client externalize a problem (Metcalf, 2017). Metaphors can help paint a vivid picture of a feeling that cannot be communicated in words and provide insights into complicated situations. Expressive art therapy creates an opportunity for the client to develop metaphoric representations that reflect their intricate experience (Atkins & Snyder, 2018). Nature-based therapy can help survivors access metaphor in a similar tangible and impactful way.

DelSesto (2019) suggested that people can shape their sense of self through nature interactions and observation of parts of themselves or their experience of observing nature. Though talk therapy may speak about hope as a tiny seed that brings forth life in dark places, nature-based therapy provides the client with an opportunity to actually plant the seed and experience its birth and eventual flower- and fruit-bearing. By observing and taking part in this transformation, a client is invited to embody the metaphor and live it out in their own life. Another powerful example of a living metaphor in nature-based therapy is the cyclical care and nourishment that a garden and a gardener provide one another—an image of a respectful relationship. Imagine the power of growing food and flowers throughout a therapeutic program and experiencing the pleasure of a shared meal during the final session. As people eat together, the plants they cared for over the past months offer nourishment for spirits, bodies, and minds—a blissful and raw reminder of how it feels to be communally supported.

Nature-based therapy can take a metaphor and transcend talk therapy's noetic understanding of abstract concepts. In an increasingly complicated and digital world, the invitation to plunge hands in the soil and experience something tangible has the potential to be incredibly therapeutic. In the aftermath of abuse, bewilderment and disconnection threaten to overcome survivors. Giving them a solid task to ground themselves in can be a gift of nature-based methods.

Recommendations for Practice

Involving nature in the therapeutic process does not require large swaths of land or access to expansive gardens. The following section provides suggestions for integrating nature-based practices into the counselling process and expands upon the practical application of the research

themes. An overview of professional and environmental ethics in nature-based therapy is also included.

Healing of the Self and Nonduality Between Humans and Nature

Just as nature interactions can help clients reform their sense of self, nature can be a balm for therapists who hope to do long-term work with women who have experienced domestic violence. Working with a high-risk population can leave therapists susceptible to burnout and vicarious trauma (McNeillie & Rose, 2021). Helping professionals who witness the challenging, at times horrific, experiences of their clients can sustain injuries to their sense of self through the deconstruction of their world view, which leaves them grappling to find a meaningful role in their newfound reality. Self-care is an ethical mandate for therapists that helps prevent burnout and ensure clients receive a high level of care (Maranzan et al., 2018). Integrating nature interactions into their self-care routine can help professionals strengthen their sense of self so they are better prepared to work with high-risk populations.

It is possible that many therapists already value nature interactions such as long walks in nature, outdoor recreational activities, or tending to house plants as part of their self-care practice. However, all these activities can be done without a mindful awareness of the relationship through which one is connecting to nature. I recommend that therapists not only choose nature-based methods of self-care but also do so with an awareness of their connectedness to the natural world around them. Rather than viewing a walk in the woods as solely benefiting you as an individual, look for ways that your nature interactions connect you to the plants, animals, and atmosphere. This can help to combat symptoms of burnout that leave counsellors questioning if what they do truly matters in the world. Experiencing

interconnectedness with nature helps remind humans that we play a vital role in an intricate system that has the potential to benefit all involved.

Women who have experienced domestic violence also face a disorientation of their world view and sense of self (Czerny et al., 2018) and can benefit from nature-based activities that encourage experiences of connectedness. A therapist can encourage their client to slow down and be present in their experience in nature. Guiding questions or phrases that promote connectedness can be used to help a client notice details in their internal experience and in the natural world around them—for example, “Let your eyes take in the world around you. What are your eyes drawn to? What do you notice about this part of nature? Does this part of nature stir any emotion, sensation, or thoughts in you?”

There are many ways to encourage holistic engagement with nature in therapy. DelSesto (2019) outlined a spectrum of people and plant interactions that ranges from peaceful abiding to physical exertion. This leaves space for a client to bring their authentic self into the counselling process and allow nature to meet them where they are at. Some clients may find peaceful abiding through sensory engagement to be overwhelming. These individuals may find that their internal state is better reflected in a higher-energy activity such as digging through soil or moving through plant environments (DelSesto, 2019). Allowing space for the client to ask themselves what they need that day and follow their intuition is also part of healing and learning to trust themselves again. Once a client is comfortable with one form of nature interaction, a therapist could encourage different ways of being with nature that a client may not naturally gravitate towards. These novel experiences could expand the client’s sense of self as they embody new ways of being in the world. These gentle nudges should never coerce a survivor too far out of

their comfort zone, and enthusiastic consent should be obtained from the client before a therapist engages them in new activities (Pemberton & Loeb, 2020).

Physical and Psychological Healing

Kamitsis and Simmonds (2017) explained that nature-based practices can occur in clinical settings in several ways. Indoor plants can be brought into otherwise sterile offices to help create a more inviting environment. Garden boxes can be installed in small outdoor spaces and tended to by clients and counsellors. A therapist may use a small and private backyard to facilitate outdoor counselling groups or individual sessions. Natural elements such as rocks, foliage, flowers, shells, and moss can bring nature indoors to provide an accessible nature experience. Clients can also be encouraged to experiment with nature interactions outside of the therapy hour. A counsellor can recommend a daily walk in a green space, a mindful observation of the changing seasons, or a plot at a local community garden.

Regular exposure to nature is known to have significant benefits for mental and physical health (Soga et al., 2017), and nature-based lifestyle habits can help women who have experienced domestic violence recuperate from the all-encompassing impacts of abuse. Therapists can capitalize on this benefit through mindful planning and integration of nature into their practices, regardless of setting and modality.

Reciprocal Healing for People and Nature

In group counselling, reciprocity and respect can be the standard for how people will relate during the therapy time (Cory & McAndless-Davis, 2020; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). An early discussion of boundaries and the collaborative creation of a group culture is a positive way to set the tone of a group program. Everyone's voice should be heard in the development of ground rules. These guidelines can be revisited frequently during subsequent meetings to ensure

that clients can experience social supports that stand in sharp contrast to their relationship with an abusive partner. All participants are invited to share openly, and listening is encouraged so that the whole group can learn from one another and experience mutual growth. A therapist can also model mutually beneficial ways of relating in one-on-one counselling while maintaining appropriate ethics and professional boundaries.

If a nature-based therapist aims to model a reciprocal relationship with nature through horticultural practices, it is essential that they are knowledgeable about regenerative plant and soil health. For example, suppose a therapist is wise to soil biology and the ingredients necessary for a thriving garden ecosystem. In that case, they are less likely to employ herbicides and pesticides in therapeutic spaces. Especially when weeding and caring for a garden are part of the therapy, there should be no need to cut corners with gardening tasks that could harm the plants, animals, earth, and water. Instead, gardening activities should beautifully showcase the reciprocally beneficial relationship between land, plants, water, air, and people.

Valuing Intuition and Traditional Ways of Knowing

Viewing the land as a healer and nature as medicine for the body and spirit, whether validated with research or not, is not a concept that Western practices of psychology can take credit for. Indigenous Peoples worldwide have long acknowledged that humans' interconnectedness to the natural world, including the plants within it, is imperative for healing and thriving (Kimmerer, 2013; Redvers, 2020). Nature-based therapists should always carry respect for Indigenous practices and beliefs into the work they do with nature. Appropriation of sacred Indigenous practices is not respectful, especially in light of colonialism past and present. Researchers and practitioners should be careful to not appropriate Indigenous land-based healing practices that have been used for generations and effectively banned and eradicated by colonial

governments. For this reason researchers should be careful to include the existence of Indigenous land-based practices in their discussion of more widely accepted nature-based counselling methods, thus eliminating the claiming of nature-based practice as emerging Western medicine and unjustly benefitting from its use. It is imperative to acknowledge that healing with nature has rich tradition deeply rooted in spirituality and cultures of groups that have continued to be oppressed by the dominant culture in Canada.

Therefore, I recommend that a counsellor interested in nature-based therapy become familiar with the Indigenous Peoples near where they live to educate themselves on their traditional ways of knowing, knowledge, and use of the land. Indigenous Peoples ask the earth for consent to receive nature's gifts. Asking the land for plants, rocks, trees, or other natural elements before harvesting can translate to mindful foraging instead of just taking whatever is found. Counsellors should slow down and observe the ecology and find out if it can sustain them and their therapy practice. Be careful not to plant invasive species in a garden and research what plants can grow that will benefit native animals and vegetation.

Whether or not counsellors have access to outdoor spaces or nature-based methods, it is essential to emphasize a woman's intuition when counselling in the wake of abuse. The therapist should elevate the client's voice and personal experiences. To help someone trust their intuition, it is important for counsellors to model their own trust in their inner voice and instincts. Counsellors working with women experiencing domestic violence may find themselves asking, "Why doesn't she just leave?" This signals that a therapist may be second-guessing their client's wisdom and experience. Instead of offering the client advice in these moments, it is best to continue counselling from a place of curiosity. In my experience, the answer to this question often becomes apparent as the woman's story unfolds in session. Whether a woman is acting out

of survival, has children to protect, has been so alienated from social supports that she has nowhere else to turn, or numerous other factors that can be at play, she almost always has a good reason for staying with an abusive partner.

Intuition is what keeps survivors safe throughout abusive situations. Although the abuse is chaotic and confusing, a woman will become attuned to her partner's moods and behaviours as a means of survival. This survival response may look like giving in, acting passively, or appeasing, and survivors will often be the first ones to criticize their response to the abuse. Todd (2014) explained how powerful it can be for survivors to recognize their response to abuse as acts of resistance, no matter how passive they may seem. On an intuitive level, a woman knows her abusive partner's behaviour, despite how chaotic and volatile it may feel in the moment. Remaining silent, dissociating, or catering to the abusive partner's whims may be the difference between a violent explosion or a threatening storm that passes without harm. Some women may purposefully push for an explosion to escape the unbearable tension of walking on eggshells around their partner's precarious behaviour. If a counsellor can highlight the client's act of resistance and honour their inner wisdom, this can be a powerful step in reclaiming a sense of self injured by interpersonal violence.

Ethical Considerations

Counsellors, therapists, and psychologists abide by standards of practice and codes of ethics for mental health professionals (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017; College of Alberta Psychologists, 2019). Confidentiality is of the utmost importance for clients to feel safe sharing the intimate details of their lives. In a public outdoor setting, a therapist may not be able to guarantee the confidentiality of therapeutic conversations, which needs to be clearly stated to the client. Even in the privacy of a backyard or relatively remote wilderness, there is still a

chance that other people could hear what is being shared. Clients or counsellors may run into people they know while in public parks, and it is wise to create a plan with the client ahead of time to manage a situation should it arise.

There are also physical safety risks to interacting with nature that need to be mediated in nature-based therapy. If a client needs to use garden tools, they can be shown how to use them properly, and the risk of injury should be made clear to them ahead of time. The proper footwear and clothing should also be recommended to mitigate the risk of injury.

If a counsellor has access to an outdoor space, there are ethical issues to be aware of before blazing a trail or foraging for materials. A therapist or counsellor should always abide by their professional ethics and codes of conduct, no matter the therapy setting. When that setting is the outdoors, mental health professionals should also be aware of outdoor ethics. Leave No Trace, for instance, is a research-based outdoor ethic that was created in 1999 to reduce the negative impact humans can have on wilderness and recreation areas (Marion, 2014). The seven guiding principles are as follows: Plan and prepare, travel on durable surfaces, dispose of waste, leave what you find, minimize campfire impacts, respect wildlife, and be considerate of other visitors (Marion, 2014). These principles may not all apply to the scope of every nature-based therapy practice, but they are essential to note if a therapist plans to use public lands, wilderness, or parks.

Fundamental Next Steps for Research

The development of a nature-based therapeutic program, based off the five themes and specific to women who have experienced abuse, could be a powerful resource for the field of counselling psychology. For a program to be developed there is more research needed on the five themes and women's lived experience of them in therapy. Survivors' intuition and experience are

not only valid ways of knowing inside the therapy room but also essential topics for future research on the topic of domestic violence (Allen, 2012). Qualitative research methods provide an avenue to uphold the voices of survivors and give individuals the opportunity to share a collective experience of interpersonal violence, contributing to more holistic care in the field of counselling psychology. To date there has not been qualitative research on women who have experienced domestic violence and their experience of healing through nature-based therapy. It is imperative that survivors' voices are elevated, and it would be interesting to see how closely their collective experience aligns with the themes found in the current literature.

The theme of healing of the self through nature-based therapy warrants further research as it applies to women who have experienced domestic violence. Mills' (1985) work on the harm done to a woman's sense of observing self and self-identity is poignant and deserving of ongoing development. More research on this topic could help shed light on the impacts of abuse that are not as obvious but equally damaging as physical injuries and provide empirical evidence of the value of nature-based therapy. How the self can be healed through nature connectedness could also be studied in more depth as it relates to this population. Current studies on nature connectedness have not explored its benefits specifically with women who have experienced domestic violence.

There also needs to be more space in counselling psychology research for Indigenous voices and knowledge, particularly regarding land-based therapy practices (Redvers, 2020). Future research into land-based therapy for interpersonal violence survivors from an Indigenous perspective could be conducted to add necessary context and culture to the discussion of nature-based therapy. The land as a healer is not a concept created by modern psychotherapy, and the field as a whole has a lot to credit to the traditional practices of Indigenous Peoples. Traditional

practices and knowledge can be used to develop and guide respectful and regenerative nature-based practices in future therapy. Hopefully, this will support clinicians' respect for the healing power of nature and inform sustainable methods that can heal the earth, individuals, communities, and cultures.

The field of ecopsychology is exploring the concept of reciprocal healing and flourishing of people and planet (DelSesto, 2019) but it still has space to expand into specific populations, such as women who have experienced domestic violence. It would be interesting to find how this relationship of reciprocity and mutual benefit is uniquely experienced by women who have experienced interpersonal violence. The theme of nonduality between humans and nature could naturally flow into future studies on reciprocal healing. Nonduality may be an unapproachable concept for a lot of Western practitioners currently, and future research on the topic may encourage therapists to reconsider the field's individualized view of therapy.

Lastly, the integration of feminist therapy and nature-based therapy warrants future research because in my review of the = literature it was difficult to find articles that explore a combination of these approaches. These two approaches blend beautifully to meet women who have experienced domestic violence in a therapeutic space of respect, mutuality, and trust. Further research into combining these modalities will encourage practitioners to implement elements of both feminist and nature-based practices into their work.

Reflexive Self-Statement

The process of researching, extracting themes, outlining implications, and offering recommendations for practice felt deeply personal for me. I felt a temptation to take a more linear research path in order for this work to be taken seriously. Throughout my academic journey, I have felt a growing dissatisfaction with the parts of myself that were not being invited

into the learning process. For example, early on I was challenged to present as more confident and self-assured in classroom settings as opposed to the gentle way that I had been contributing. It became apparent to me that my abstract, creative, and gentler self may not be appreciated in all academic spaces and I pushed myself to be more concrete and assertive while suppressing the softer facets of myself. The more I read and researched violence against women and the intuitive healing power of nature, the more I realized that beginning to acknowledge and heal these parts of myself would be necessary to genuinely stand behind the themes I was discovering and, more importantly, serve clients. Intuition, nonduality, and reciprocal healing are not concepts that crop up often in the field of mainstream counselling psychology. But by framing a woman's intuition and the healing power of a reciprocal relationship to nature as mystical, intangible qualities, I have learned that they are easily discredited as unscientific. Although these things may possess a level of perceived magic, they are also raw, gritty, very real to the human experience, and worthy of research.

When I began writing this paper, I sought out empirical, peer-reviewed evidence to bolster my claims. I hesitated to follow my own intuition down an unknown, unstructured, wild path. I began to wonder whose evidence was going to guide the conclusions drawn in my writing. Early on in my research, it became apparent that nature-based research has borrowed heavily from Indigenous practices without giving proper credit. As I combed through the studies, they led me towards ecopsychology, which pointed me in the direction of Indigenous authors who taught me about land-based therapy and the earth as a healer. Organically, I began to gather up these common threads, which led me back into myself, faced with the reality that my own internalized colonialism and sexism were holding me back from accepting people's lived experiences and considering its value in treating clients.

My mentor and friend, Elsie Goerzen, set the table and invited me to join the powerful work of helping women heal from interpersonal violence. Ms. Goerzen prepared a light snack for women before sessions, lit candles in the middle of our meeting spaces, and always surrounded us with potted plants that she toted back and forth from her home greenhouse. In her nurturing, she holds space for hundreds of women to grieve, feel anger, feel safety, gain clarity, share laughter, and come to know that they are not alone and they are not unworthy. The evidence of her effective care is that countless women have grown back into themselves in the aftermath of abuse.

In the first semester of my master's degree, my counselling skills professor playfully asked if we have "sufficiently sucked the soul out of counselling at the end of each class." They meant to ask: By focusing on the academia of psychology, do we risk losing the art of genuine connection and client experience as the core of what we do as counsellors? There were many times that I was genuinely afraid we had succeeded in extracting the heart out of this sacred work because I felt my passion for the field begin to wane after months of course work and academic paper writing. Only when I had the privilege of connecting with people in my practicum did I realize the transformational power of therapy is sharing in the everyday suffering, joy, and pain of the human experience. To me, this genuined connection to clients' experiences is the soul of counselling, and if we can hold onto that in the field of counselling psychology then we can continue to offer healing experiences to our clients.

As I sit with survivors of unthinkable trauma, wedged between four white walls in a windowless room downtown, I can't help but think of how inviting nature into the therapeutic relationship could add to a restorative experience of therapy. As I continue into my career as a counsellor for women who have experienced domestic violence, I will take these inklings with

me and begin to incorporate them in my practice. It would be my honour to eventually develop a nature-based program that stems from the five themes presented here and the experience of my beloved clients. I hope to move forward in awareness of the shoulders that I stand on, respecting those who have come before me and acknowledging those whose voices are left out of pages in our academic literature.

Conclusion

Great opportunity exists for the field of counselling psychology to partner with nature in order to benefit a diversity of clients, specifically women who have experienced domestic violence. There is space for programs to be developed and studied and also room to include Indigenous voices that carry a rich history and tradition of healing with nature. My hope is that this work can stir practitioners to consider the possibilities for growth and restoration of our clients in the aftermath of abuse. It is clear that nature-based therapeutic methods can be easily woven into existing counselling approaches. Although all the integrative options could not be covered here, I encourage you to explore how your current counselling approach could incorporate nature interactions. There are many creative opportunities to invite nature into a therapy session, most of which are relatively accessible. Despite funding constraints or location, nature is all around us, even in the smallest of ways. I encourage you to be observant of the ways that nature nourishes you physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Doing so may inspire you to bring the outdoors into the important work you do with clients.

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