

# looking towards the future of wilderness therapy



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In this final article of my series exploring wilderness therapy, I will be introducing my own research and discussing the contribution it makes to the understanding and development of residential wilderness therapy programmes. As I have discussed in previous articles, there are currently many forms of wilderness or adventure therapy programmes, a trend which has grown dramatically over the last 20 years. These programmes are primarily aimed at young people and are said to have positive impacts on things ranging from personal awareness (1) and confidence (2), to recovery from addiction and substance abuse (3). Research in this area points to the effectiveness of such treatment programmes (4, 5), yet much of this research fails to examine the effectiveness of the constituent parts of wilderness therapy programmes - specifically the importance of the wilderness environment in which such programmes take place. Furthermore, although wilderness therapy is an intensely personal journey for someone to undertake, a large proportion of wilderness therapy research is quantitative. This neglects the participant's subjective experience and instead places focus on measuring behaviour and psychology. Existing research describes overall outcomes rather than examining the participant's experience of individual programme components, such as individual activities, connection to nature, and the group environment. Therefore, the first motivation and aim of my research was to contribute a qualitative examination of wilderness therapy participants' experience - specifically focused on individual programme components - to the growing body of wilderness therapy research.

## The nature-human dichotomy

A common issue I see in the delivery of wilderness therapy programmes is the understanding of nature and the misconception that humans are not a part of it. This creates a human-nature dichotomy where humans and nature are viewed as separate entities. As a result, many wilderness therapy programmes either bracket nature as a component or neglect it altogether. Therefore, another aim of my research was to explore how a new understanding of the human position within nature can be integrated into wilderness therapy and how this would affect participants' experiences of the wilderness therapy process. To do this, I looked to the philosophy of Daoism, which originated in China around the 4th century BCE. Daoism teaches that humans are one and the same as nature and has developed several practices which draw upon the relationship between humans and the rest of nature. These practices include meditation and cultivation, which aim to increase the flow of Qi (the energy or vibration within our body which gives us life) and dissolve the barriers between oneself and nature.

## The research

With this in mind, my research explored the integration of Daoist cultivation and meditation practices into wilderness therapy, and the perceived effect this has upon participants' experiences of the programme and their identification with nature. Special attention was paid to understanding the participants' experience of the meditation and cultivation practices, both within the programme and upon returning to their home environment. The programme consisted of a 3-day residential trip in the Yorkshire Dales and was attended by 6 adults with self-reported low mood and anxiety. It was led by a qualified life coach and a qualified counsellor and outdoor leader. The weekend consisted of several activities such as the creation of representations of the self using natural materials, mandala creation, short mindful walks, labyrinth walking, meditation, private and group reflection. The meditations during the programme were positioned to occur either before or following participation in an activity. Participants were given cameras and diaries to document their experiences of the

programme and were interviewed one week after the trip and again six months later. The photographs and diary entries were used as prompts in the interviews.

Following the specially designed programme, participants reported that the meditations and cultivation practices supported them in feeling more relaxed and grounded. Being able to approach activities during the weekend in a more grounded state allowed them to explore themselves in greater depth. During these activities they began to experience a change in perspective – specifically linked to how they relate to themselves and the rest of nature, developing an understanding of where they fit within nature. The meditation practices also provided the participants with a tool which they could take with them when they returned to their home lives.

The participants' experiences of the meditations and cultivation practices were influenced by several other key ingredients of the programme. Although not directly linked to the integration of Daoist meditation and cultivation practices, each of these factors impact how the participants engaged with these practices and, therefore, should not be overlooked by practitioners looking to adopt this intervention. The first factor to be considered is a participant's readiness to change. If the participants are not ready to change, they will find it difficult to fully engage with the programme and may have a negative experience of integrating with the group or the environment. In cases where entry into a programme is based on self-referral, this is not likely to be a problem. However, when entry into a programme is not optional, full engagement is less likely and it is more likely that they will need a longer adjustment period.

Another factor which was highlighted was whether participants engaged with the activities alone or as part of a group. Some participants benefited from interacting as part of a group, whereas other participants found group interaction difficult and received greater benefit from the activities when they engaged with them alone, after being given directions on how to perform the activity. With this in mind, the activities within a wilderness therapy programme should be flexible enough to cater for the needs of the group and programme leaders need to be able to assess the participants to understand what would be of greatest benefit to them. For example, although someone may find group interaction difficult, a small amount of group interaction may be beneficial and support them in feeling more comfortable in a group environment. Therefore, a balance needs to be found between time spent as a group and time spent alone. This leads onto the third factor which is ensuring the participants are given the time and space for reflection, both alone and as part of the group. This is because the participants use this time to process the activities they have participated in and develop their identification with nature. The final factor is the positioning of a meditation practice before a more practical activity as the meditation helps the participants feel more relaxed. When the participants approached an activity in a relaxed state, they received a greater benefit as they were able to give their full attention to it.

A full understanding of the impact that the integration of Daoist cultivation methods had on the participants' lives was not achieved until the six-month follow-up interviews. During these interviews, it became evident that despite initially having a positive impact upon the participants' lives, it was not something which they were able to maintain. The main reason for this appeared to be not having the time for, or prioritising, self-care. Thus, participants struggled to maintain the cultivation practices which they had learnt and often returned to the situation they were in prior to their participation in the programme. This does not mean that the programme was not

valuable to the participants, as they identified it as being significant to their development. However, because they were not able to make time to continue to reflect upon their experience and how it relates to their lives, the longevity of the programmes impact was lessened.

### Final thoughts

The results of my research can be used to strengthen our understanding of how and why wilderness therapy works, or in some cases why it may not work. Specifically, the Daoist perspectives present a new level of understanding which approaches the processes within wilderness therapy from a stance in which humans are an integrated part of nature. Therefore, instead of understanding wilderness therapy from a position situated outside of nature, where it is seen as an external component, it is understood from a position which is situated as part of nature. Greater focus is given to how the participants identify with nature and how strengthening this identification contributes to the positive outcomes of wilderness therapy. However, I also identified a key problem which limits the success of wilderness therapy and that is the participants' time for self-care upon return to their home environments. The implication this has for the participants is a gradual return to old behaviours, therefore an undoing of the benefits they have gained from attending the programme. This brings into question whether wilderness therapy can be effective as a more conventional therapy, or whether it's best served to provide temporary respite from the stresses and strains of everyday life.

I argue that wilderness therapy has the potential to provide long-term results, so long as we identify a means through which to support participants in maintaining the positive changes that they have experienced. The answer to this may lie in the provision of an aftercare support group where participants regularly return to the wilderness environment and continue the work they started during the programme. However, further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of this.

What sets an experience of wilderness therapy apart from simply spending time in nature is the structured approach it takes. Although there is currently no defined structure for wilderness therapy, it does contain specific activities which have been designed to target specific therapeutic outcomes such as promoting social interaction, increasing confidence and self-esteem, and understanding thoughts and emotions. Furthermore, these are delivered by qualified counsellors or therapists who are on hand to guide the participants' experiences of the environment in a way which enhances the benefits of it. Therefore, although simply taking a walk outdoors can have positive effects on factors such as mood and stress levels, I argue that for people experiencing low mood and depression, the positive effects can be enhanced through the participation in a structured programme ▲

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