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COVERING GROUND AND GROUND COVER

Considering Nature as Healer

Covering Ground: How Walking Restores Us

We therapists are often asked, "Is it boring listening to people's problems all day?" The answer is no. People are remarkably unique in how they heal, and working with people is an honor that remains truly engaging. Down deep, most therapists feel the job is a spiritual calling. If there's anything boring about therapy it's the sitting.

Sitting is an occupational hazard. Indoor sedentary jobs and lifestyles contribute hugely to our national health crisis. Without fresh air and exercise our bodies and minds fail to self-regulate. This makes us all the more vulnerable to diabetes, heart disease, anxiety, depression, Alzheimer's, attention deficit and a host of other maladies. That's why it sometimes makes sense for therapist and client to put on sneakers and head out the door together to have part of their session on foot. Of course common sense must prevail: the route should be safe and client confidentiality must not be compromised, but under the right conditions, a walk is just what the doctor ordered.

Some depressed clients desperately need the endorphin boost of walking but cannot muster the gumption to walk on their own. Several have accepted my invitation to walk a few blocks during session. Often it's the jump-start needed to encourage them to walk regularly on their own.

When a client who, due to anxiety or ADD, gets fidgety with face-to-face contact, or simply cannot tolerate sitting, I might invite them to bring their walking shoes to the next session. Usually fifteen or twenty minutes of walking releases enough dopamine to calm anxiety and increase bodily comfort. It can be a turning point. Just knowing that walking is an option puts some clients at ease and increases their ability to benefit from therapy.

Covering ground through the act of walking is conducive to covering ground in the psychological sense of examining a problem, or reviewing one's story. We are, after all, creatures built for walking like our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Using our distance vision to scan clouds and horizons calms the mind. New ideas come with greater ease when

powered by our rhythmic stride. When we're stumped by a problem or just plain discouraged, walking lifts the blues, broadens perspective and restores creativity. Walks are both relaxing and empowering. We don't have to rack our brains and force the issue. Instead, a solution or a "step" in the right direction arises naturally as if from the landscape, or from the air.

I think of walking as "paleo-therapy." It satisfies our essential animal nature. For me it restores equilibrium and helps me appreciate the privilege of "listening to people's problems all day."

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Ground Cover: Plant Therapeutics

Early in my career I learned about Carl Jung's protege, Marie Louise vonFranz, and how she gardened between clients as a way to stay grounded, attuned and refreshed. I now have the good fortune to have a garden just outside my office door and it benefits both me and the clients. They walk an earthen path to get from their parking space to the office door. I notice them walking slowly, looking about, sniffing the air, orienting themselves to the weather, the wind and the seasonal development of plants and trees. They check out what's blooming, listen to birds and take it all in before entering the office. As a green transition from stressful classrooms, offices and freeways the garden gives them pause and pleasure. Once through the door they often report on the scents and sights that caught their interest. What's unspoken but often palpable is how they're reminded of being part of the natural world, its cycles, its abundance and beauty. This awareness is the first step of eco-therapy.

One species in the garden has become a true partner in therapy. It's a prolific, lush ground cover, a hardy strawberry, popularly known as the "lipstick" variety for its vivid pink blooms. It loves our northwest soil and yields sweet berries from spring through fall. Clients express awe at its robust ability to spread. Because it's highly conducive to transplanting, I'll often tell a client or a couple, "If you'd like to bring a container next week, we can dig up a few plants for you to take home." Many do and wind up planting them in their gardens or in pots on windowsills. This simple act evokes a visceral sense that right at our feet the world is full of good things to be valued and shared.

Whether they're a couple working short-term on communication, or an individual working long-term to heal trauma, the strawberry plants provide metaphors for their healing. "We're working on our love at root level," said one spouse. "My strawberries survived that freeze," said an individual, "they're survivors, just like me." "Ground cover," said another client, "that's *foundation*, right? I need it in my yard like I need it in my life." Another client, recovering from depression showed me a photo of the potted strawberry plant thriving on her fire escape, sending out shoots to the world. "That's me," she said, "finally reaching out after all this time."

We can't always have a "paleo-session" on foot or an "eco-session" in the garden, but it's still possible to integrate mind and body while seated in a therapy office. Methods that do so, such as somatic focusing and breath-centered mindfulness, track the interconnected processes of mind, body, emotion and spirit. Attending holistically, an attuned therapist is both witness and guide, helping people to strengthen their healthy connection to self, others and the natural world. Increased self acceptance, loving kindness, improved clarity and creativity, healthier choices, more balanced emotions and a restored sense of trust may result.

Psychology is still a young science continuously growing with new discoveries. As neuroscience, evolutionary psychology and other branches of study shed new light, we therapists have the pleasure of broadening our knowledge and deepening our skill. This is yet another reason we don't get bored with our work!

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