

INSIGHT GUIDE # 40

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

How can I use ecopsychology in my coaching practice?

Have you gone for a walk in the countryside and come back feeling rejuvenated? Do you sometimes look at the sunset or watch the clouds move across the sky and feel the wonder of nature? There is something about nature that seems to connect with us as humans – maybe

it's the scale of the mountains or the beauty of the forest. When nature is combined with an outdoor walk, run or swim, it seems to have a transformative effect. In this guide we will explore the potential and power of coaching in the great outdoors.



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What is ecopsychology?

Ecopsychology blends concepts and methodologies from ecology (the study of relationships between organisms and their physical surroundings) and psychology (the study of the mind). It focuses on the nature–human connection and offers an alternate lens to examine our psyche, behaviour, values and deeper self. The relational, enquiry-based learning and discovery approach mirrors fundamental concepts that underpin coaching practice. The three key strands of ecopsychology are:

1. The emerging synthesis of ecology and psychology.
2. The skilful application of ecological insights to the practice of psychotherapy.
3. The discovery of our emotional bond with the planet.

(Roszak, 1994: 8)

The current underpinning dominant cultural and societal approach focuses on the importance of the individual within primarily hierarchical and pyramidal power structures. This is an egocentric construct and ecopsychology offers an alternate perspective where humans are located in a wider networked ecosystem, which creates a more connected, holistic, sustainable and ecocentric methodology. This builds on the notion of synergetic interplay between personal and planetary well-being and adds an ethical and systemic dimension, which moves the work of the coaching profession beyond service to an individual or organisation and into the wider living ecosystem.

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Emergence of ecopsychology

Ecopsychology is an interdisciplinary subject that draws from environmental ethics, transpersonal ecology, deep ecology, biophilia and psycho-ecology. Notable influencers include the cultural historian Theodore Roszak, who coined the term 'ecopsychology' in his book *The Voice of the Earth*, in which he addresses industrial culture's longstanding historical gulf between psychological and ecological constructs.

Howard Gardner (1983), known for his multiple intelligences model, added an eighth intelligence to his model: 'naturalistic intelligence'. This, alongside the original seven (linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, kinaesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal) presented an alternate awareness of nature. More recently, the Austrian biologist Clemens added to somatics the concept of 'ecopsychosomatics' (Clemens, 2018). This offers a framework to focus on movement and embodied presence, such as mindful walking, within nature.

Benefits of ecopsychology

The benefits of integrating ecopsychology into coaching cover a range of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual factors. The American author, Richard Louv succinctly describes a dose of Vitamin N (N for nature) as a 'deceptively simple treatment for improving physical and mental health, for stimulating learning, creativity and a sense of feeling fully alive' (Louv, 2016: xv). This sentiment has been supported with evidence from neuroscience, psychology, physiology, biology and evolutionary studies.

The integration of ecopsychology positively supports coaching through:

- Deeper ability to contemplate and reflect.
- Immersion in different space; removed from day-to-day environment.
- Greater awareness of individual behaviour, emotions, values and beliefs.
- Stronger connections to self, others and the environment.
- Expanded sense of identity beyond the ego and development of the ecological self.
- Increased cognitive control. Directed attention is replenished as involuntary attention is captured. This is known as attention restoration therapy (ART).

Techniques to bring ecopsychology into coaching

There is a variety of techniques to integrate ecopsychology into existing coaching practice to complement existing methodologies, theories and styles. The key is to organically interweave each technique within a dynamic environment. The extent to which ecopsychology is openly acknowledged can range from nature unconsciously forming the backdrop to actively inviting nature to co-create the coaching process.

Deeper questions: These provoke how clients think, feel or believe differently about information within a frame of reference as opposed to simply eliciting more information. Deeper questions challenge assumptions and norms to generate alternatives and possibilities; then they create change. The GROW model and associated coaching questions can be metaphorically linked to the continuous growth exhibited in nature.

Systemic approach: The natural ecosystem offers a framework to view the world based on a client's connection and/or disconnection within the wider social system. Networks of relationships and perceptions of gestalts can be explored to encourage self-examination and self-confrontation of personal responsibility to the wider system. The hierarchical pyramidal system can also be used to contrast thoughts, feelings, values and beliefs.

Seasonal cycles: Observations from the annual seasonal cycles (winter, spring, summer and autumn) can be linked to other cyclical themes that emerge during coaching, e.g. life, career, self-development or a specific project. Timelines (or circles) can be created to identify interrelated elements, connections, opportunities and possibilities (this links to nature play, which is discussed below).

Evolution: Evolutionary theory can be drawn into conversations around change. The nature versus nurture debate could be introduced as a metaphor to explore fixed versus growth mindset.

Ecological self: Drawn from the school of deep ecology, the process of self-actualisation transpires when an individual transcends the 'egoic' to ecological self. This theory focuses on ethical and moral responsibilities to ourselves, others and the environment. Deeper questions can be framed to explore connections and disconnections with nature (and within ourselves) against the wider natural environment.

Nature play: This creative approach uses natural resources (stones, leaves, moss, bark, flowers etc) to symbolise and externalise a situation, e.g. timelines and relationships (particularly around 'stuck-ness'). This experiential element allows different perceptions and emotions to emerge and shift.

Visual and linguistic metaphors: Visual metaphors observed in the natural environment can be used to externalise and explore ideas, e.g. path junctions, or seasonal cycles (see above). Linguistic metaphors that reference nature can be unpacked, e.g. 'black sheep in the family', 'she's the shining star in the business'.

Mindfulness: There are different approaches to being fully immersed in the present moment to acknowledge and accept feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations, e.g. body scan, loving kindness, observer etc. See below for further details.

Sit spot: Identify a quiet and restorative location and make the commitment to visit regularly, e.g. for 20 mins, 3 times a week over 4 months. Use a journal to record observations related to changes in the environment and personal thoughts/feelings that emerge from mindfulness practice.

Nature retreats or pilgrimages: These are generally longer than an individual coaching session and a variety of coaching approaches can be integrated. Nature retreats usually focus on a holistic lifestyle approach, whereas pilgrimages are a prolonged journey with a possible moral or spiritual component; often to a specific destination of significance.

Box 1: Still or walking mindfulness

- **Appreciate** your body, surroundings and ability to move.
- **Reflect** on the ways we're interwoven to our surroundings.
- **Ground** yourself to the earth. Physically connect with each toe, base of foot and heel. Walk in the moment.
- **Activate** your senses: listen, breathe, smell and notice.
- **Mantra:** recite a phrase, e.g. 'be here now', or simply 'breathe'.

(Adapted from Hanh, 2015)



Practical considerations

The following areas should be considered in advance:

Experiment: Trial the concept in advance with your peers or willing clients. Select an accessible local park or open space to test, then adjust and learn from the experience.

Dynamic environment: Stepping outdoors involves an element of the unknown and risk. The multisensory environment can initially seem both distracting and overwhelming for both the coach and client. Explicitly emphasise this element of uncertainty and highlight the importance of psychological safety within the coaching contract; then review regularly. Embrace an organic and fluid mindset into your practice to coach in the moment.

Location, location, location: Think about the venue (near nature versus wilderness) and route in relation to terrain, distance, accessibility, session timings, fitness levels, confidentiality and medical issues.

Client comfort: Not everyone enjoys spending time outside. Co-create the entire outdoor element with your client and reference in the coaching contract.

Wet weather plan: Some clients are content to don waterproof jackets, boots and huddle under an umbrella, although some might prefer a more comfortable, dry option.

Health and safety at work: Make sure first aid, public liability and professional insurance are covered. Consider your personal safety, especially when meeting a new client for the first time.

Client medical disclosure: Clarify any medical and mental health conditions relevant to being outdoors that might not usually arise during the coaching partnership.

Henley Centre for Coaching

The Henley Centre for Coaching is a global leader in coaching research and coach training. We are the only triple-accredited coaching provider in the world offering both postgraduate university qualifications in coaching and accreditation from the Association for Coaching (AC), the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC).

The Centre provides formal accredited coach training through our *Professional Certificate in Executive Coaching* and *MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change*, and accredited supervision training through our *Professional Certificate in Supervision*. These programmes are delivered in the UK at our Greenlands campus, and at venues across the world.

The Centre provides continuous professional development for coaching professionals through masterclasses, webinars, conferences, and via online access to journals, ebooks and coaching research. These are all delivered through our online learning platform, meaning coaches can connect from anywhere in the world to engage in professional development.

The Henley coaching team consists of leading practitioners and academics who have shaped the coaching profession since the late 1990s. They have written many of the most popular coaching books and they continue to publish in leading management journals and to contribute at conferences worldwide. Their writing, thinking and research informs our teaching and ensures our programmes are at the cutting edge of coaching practice.

The Centre offers annual membership to all professional coaches, providing a virtual-learning environment where the members shape research and practice in coaching. Check out our website for details on how we can help you and your business come to life.



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