

Eco- Therapy

“Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life.”

-Rachel Carson (writer and marine biologist)

We live in a hectic, fast-paced world with little time to pause and feel the exquisite nature that exists around us. Our air is lined with pollution and our oceans and deserts are decorated with trash. While our environment is becoming more polluted, our mental health is deteriorating and depression is increasing. Man is leaving more and more marks of destruction while nature is slowly disintegrating away. Businesses are growing, options are widening and diversity is available; to keep up in such a corporate world, one has to work and strive very hard to keep a job, get through academics and make a difference on this planet. Therefore, due to the extreme mental load and stressful conditions, depression is on the rise worldwide. Many studies have been carried out to cure depression and understand its main cause but a new emerging ideology has risen and that is eco- psychology.

Depression is a psychological disorder that may occur due to several different factors. The degree of depression depends on various reasons such as social, genetic, gender or age. Throughout the years, more and more anti- depressants have been created and the business of psychiatry has thrived. The public has become very aware of the problem; teens visiting school psychiatrists and adults visiting therapists are a growing norm. According to the World Health Organization, an average of 5 to 10% of any population suffers from depression. The interesting fact is that studies have shown that the years when depression hits the most is between age 20 and 45 which are the years when numerous people are the most active (WHO). During that very productive phase of our life is when the therapeutic effect of nature would have the greatest effect on our minds and souls.

The environment offers a healthy solution to depression during the productive phase of our lives. Imagine you are standing in the middle of a city with no plants in sight. Cars are whizzing past you and tall, concrete buildings are all around you while you stand there breathing in pollution and looking at the swift

pedestrians hurrying to and fro. Imagine the same scenario but the concrete buildings have balconies decorated with beautiful green hanging plants and with flowers blooming. The sidewalks are filled with potted planted trees with numerous birds that have nested in them and the chirping of the birds drowns out the sound of the cars. Nature relaxes the mind and reminds us that we are the stewards of nature and not the destroyers. There is a connection between nature and human mental health and this is a divine gift to recognize.

Eco- psychology recognizes this divine gift and supports the relationship between nature and humans. It is proven that nature does help cure the mind and has an outstanding therapeutic effect. Bryan Walsh, a writer for Time magazine, reported that emerging psychologists believe that the cure for anxiety, depression, and stress are all due to isolation from nature. (Walsh, 2009) The truth of the matter is that we have slowly lost our connection with nature and other items seem to have dominated our lives such as computers, cars, cell- phones and other artificial commodities. On different levels, we are all a part of this new artificial world and by doing so, our mental health is deteriorating and our stress levels are increasing. Eco- therapy focuses on the reconnection of the individual with nature. How does one feel when they are outdoors? What is their relationship with nature? This is the essence of eco- therapy.

Eco- therapy is the use of nature by psychologists to cure mental health. This can be done by having the patients come in contact with nature or having natural items (plants or animals) in the psychiatrist's office where sessions are held. Also, sessions can be held outdoors (Davis, 2008). Another example of eco- therapy would be a psychiatrist recommending that his patients enjoy daily walks in the park to reduce stress.

But psychologists that practice and understand eco- therapy aren't the ones who hold the cure for depression. If we spend more time outdoors, nature will provide a positive effect on its own. Researchers from the University of Michigan and Uppsala University have carried out studies that have proven that nature has restorative effects on mental health and thus helps cure mental fatigue (Davis, 2008). Also, Frances Kuo, an international scientist, has proven that children who interact with green areas improve their attention span and thus helps reduce ADHD symptoms. Finally, numerous studies have concluded that being in natural outdoor recreations have positively reduced stress levels in humans. This study was carried out by showing volunteers a stressful video to increase their stress levels. Next, some of the participants were showed a video containing

nature settings and some were showed a video without nature settings. The participants who watched the videos with the nature content recovered from their stress faster (Davis. 2008).

If nature is so stress relieving then why isn't everyone running outdoors and enjoying nature? Why don't we spend more time outdoors in Cairo, instead of at restaurants and movie theatres? I've spoken to several people in Cairo and some of them love spending time at the desert, beach or parks but some do not have the time to get away from the city. However, I believe that this problem might be slowly being solved. Egypt has started to understand the importance of nature and more gardens and parks are being created such as Azhar Park and Hadeka El Dawleya. Therefore, even the city dwellers in Egypt can still go outside and enjoy the therapeutic effects of nature. By being around nature, minds can slowly change to understand that there exists a divine connection between mother nature and humans. We have a duty to help nature and in return we can heal ourselves.

The fact of the matter is that it is not that easy, there are many other factors that have an effect on how we think and act. We are living in a world controlled by different means: businesses, politics and economics; and our minds are manipulated to follow a certain corporate path and not an environmental one. We live in a corporate world and the very little nature that is left is being destroyed to create more and more items that we can then purchase. Millions of products are being produced at the precious cost of the earth and its environment. Climate is changing, species are becoming extinct, mammals are losing their habitats and humans are suffering from health disorders. Some corporations may be too stubborn to change and governments may not have nature on its list but how about us, the individual? How can we reconnect with nature and strengthen our bond with the earth?

An idea that I believe can make a change is purchasing more plants which will support local nurseries; this will definitely boost the health of the environment and of humans. Our world revolves around purchasing; shopping malls, advertisements and department stores which try to attract you to buy. But instead of supporting corporations, we should try to reduce consumption of their products and instead purchase plants for our friends and family. If a couple of individuals start this plant-gift giving idea in Cairo; it can slowly become a very

positive trend. We live in a country that is very affected by globalization and trend setting. Therefore, very small individual changes can ripple through our culture and make a solid effect.

Recently, my friends and I planted trees in an upcoming garden in the fifth settlement. We did this to contribute to the “Billion Tree Campaign” created by the United Nations Environment Program. However, our experience planting the trees was bittersweet; we enjoyed helping our mother earth but we got surprised expressions from the neighbors and workers in the street. They found it extremely odd that a group of girls would be digging holes, planting trees and watering the plants. The reactions saddened me. If it is odd that we are interacting with nature and doing such a simple task then how will we be able to convince other Egyptians to do the same? However, this may have been an issue of social class. The people may have reacted that way because we were carrying out gardening labor which is usually done by workers of a lower class. So how could we convince others that gardening and nature is the responsibility of everyone?

I believe that the first encounter with convincing people is showing them how they can benefit from a change. One can't simply tell people to make the environment their priority when they are busy making a livelihood for themselves and their family. First of all, increasing awareness of the benefits of plants is crucial because not only do plants provide therapeutic effects but they help clean the air of our homes and the air of our much polluted city. The youth of Egypt are a very passionate demographic. Therefore, school programs can have a great effect on our culture. The Cairo American College created a “Green Team” to teach their students to become more environmentally aware and responsible. Recently, The American University in Cairo had an earth week event which was a very interactive event to raise awareness of the environmental crisis the world is facing. These are both superb ways to start reconnecting with nature and spreading awareness of our responsibility. Finally, psychiatrists should consider exposing patients to plants and natural places before prescribing medicinal treatment.

The earth can cure us, keep us relaxed and provide us with the very elements that we need to survive. In return, it needs our care, love and our protection. I have hope that in every home I visit, there will be a plethora of plants and that our sidewalks will be lined with trees and flowers. There is hope that our souls will become reunited with what we were always meant to be with: the earth.

Works Cited

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