

A Refreshing Perspective on Walk and Talk Therapy

by

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Abstract

Walk and talk therapy, is considered a novel approach to traditional counselling where therapeutic sessions are conducted while walking outdoors. This meta-analysis aims to evaluate the effectiveness and challenges of walk and talk therapy as an alternative form of counselling. The purpose is to highlight the potential of incorporating physical activity, exposure to nature to enhance the efficacy of counselling interventions in order to foster holistic well-being. Conducting therapy outdoors can provide an alternative method for individuals suffering from mood disorders as well as encouraging a strong connection with nature. Many countries have recognized the therapeutic benefits that nature can provide and have created programs and spaces for those to seek treatment. While walk and talk therapy is not a new concept, there has been an increase in outdoor counselling especially since COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are some concerns with walk and talk therapy including the risk of confidentiality and liability and therefore, many counsellors are reluctant to incorporate the method into their practice. The discussion of the research leads to a deeper understanding of the potential applications and considerations associated with walk and talk therapy, offering valuable insights for mental health professionals, researchers, and practitioners in the field of counselling.

Keywords: walk and talk therapy, nature therapy, outdoor therapy, mood disorders

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Chapter 1: Introduction

If fresh air, sunshine, and greenery are free tools one can access for mental health purposes, what about a counselling session in nature for these extra benefits, also known as walk and talk therapy? We may be familiar with the expression “If you are going to talk the talk, you need to walk the walk” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2022). In other words, a person needs to put their words into action. In regard to walk and talk therapy, a counselor can “talk the walk” with the person. This notion is supported by extensive research linking natural settings to psychological and physical well-being (Cooley et al., 2022; Coventry et al., 2021; Harper et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2018). The following reviews the benefits, limitations, and possible future directions walk and talk therapy has to offer for clients who want to experience counselling outdoors.

Overview of Walk and Talk Therapy

Mental health is a fundamental aspect of our overall well-being, shaping our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours in several different ways (World Health Organization, 2022). In 2019, 970 million people were living with a mental disorder, and 280 million were affected by depression (World Health Organization, 2022). While counselling and psychopharmacology can be helpful, there is a need to turn to free and accessible alternatives (Watkins-Martin et al., 2022). Walk and talk therapy is very much like it sounds, the client and the counsellor walk alongside each other and talk about the issues. Similar to a conventional therapy session held in an office setting, but with the additional advantages of engaging in physical activity and being surrounded by nature. (Revell & McLeod, 2016). Walk and talk therapy has gained a lot of popularity and momentum in recent years, especially after COVID-19 during which people were

more confined indoors (Cooley et al., 2022; Greenleaf et al., 2023). Mental health practitioners are turning to the outdoors for a new way to conduct therapy sessions as it provides a more holistic and effective approach to mental well-being.

Engaging in physical activity to positively affect depression, anxiety, self-esteem, insomnia, and mental health conditions has been well documented (Greenleaf et al., 2023). Research suggests that engaging in physical movement within natural environments can have more favourable effects on cognitive processes than being in an indoor environment (Revell & McLeod, 2016). Walk and talk therapy allows the client to move their body and supports cognition (van der Berg & Beute, 2021). Therefore, bringing the counselling process outdoors can be a beneficial step for the therapeutic relationship. As a result, the medical field has turned to the natural environment for a way to integrate nature into more therapeutic practices. For example, having a counselling session while gardening for an elderly client who may have mobility issues or mindfulness meditative walking through a forest to help lower stress levels are some of the alternative methods to provide counselling outdoors (Field, 2022). Nature can be an empowering tool for people to reconnect with themselves and their environment.

Walk and talk therapy is not a new way of delivering counselling, the premise has been around for centuries. Ancient philosophers felt walking stimulated great ideas, Indigenous communities have always integrated nature and healing practices within their lifestyle, and some of the first psychoanalysts took their clients out for a walk (Ayuso, 2023; Greenleaf et al., 2023). Other recorded pioneers were Cyrus the Great in the sixth century B.C. who built enclosed gardens to foster relaxation from the city, Hippocrates emphasized the importance of a scenic environment to improve a humans' health (Owens & Bunce, 2022). Walk and talk

therapy has evolved over the centuries. Song et al. (2016; Owens & Bunce, 2022) emphasized how the growth of urbanization has created a strong disconnect between humans and their natural environment, thus contributing to a more stressful state of our society. Children are becoming more detached from nature and parents are keeping them indoors to mitigate any dangers, whether they are real or imagined (Owens & Bunce, 2022). In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to be immersed in nature as a result of growing urbanization (Song et al., 2013). As a result, emphasis has been placed on urban green spaces for those who can not access a forest. For example, planting trees near buildings, small pocket parks, or grass on roofs are ways green space can be incorporated to help improve the air quality and provide a calming effect. The research is growing, and interest to develop nature-based interventions for more common mental health problems is increasing. However, the emphasis on research now lays on understanding the mechanisms of nature-based interventions and how they work for certain individuals and mental health disorders.

However, many studies state more funding and research is needed (Cooley et al., 2020; Coventry et al., 2021; Greenleaf et al., 2023; Kelly et al., 2017; La Puma, 2019; Naor & Mayselless, 2021; Olafsdottir et al., 2020; Patel et al., 2011; van den Berg & Beute, 2021; Wicks et al., 2022). A good use of resources and funding would be to identify best practices and quantify their impact on certain conditions and populations. For instance, those suffering from depression would benefit from going for a walk immersed in nature compared to walking on a treadmill indoors (Olafsdottir et al., 2020). A very interesting study in Denmark which lends to spending time outdoors anytime of the year was done by researchers in Denmark. The study was done for the purpose of seeing if those working outdoors suffered from mood disorders or

seasonal depression like many do during the winter months (Hahn et al., 2011). It was determined that those who worked outside for more than two hours a day had more positive moods than those who spent time indoors. Another option which is gaining popularity is earthing. Research is showing that connecting to the earth with your hands or feet can help lower cortisol levels and minimize depressive symptoms (Chevalier et al., 2018; Koniver, 2022). Mental health practitioners can look for alternative practices to make walk and talk therapy as well as outdoor therapies an option available to a broader range of people, including those in underserved communities. In today's society there is an increased awareness and more conversations about mental health which can also contribute to improvements in therapies.

The results of being outdoors for a therapy session seem to show all positive results; so, what would the hesitation be for counsellors? According to Revell and McLeod (2016) there are a broad range of reasons why a therapist would be drawn to walk and talk therapy and why they would not. One study (McKinney, 2011) spoke with 11 counsellors and their rationale for engaging in walk and talk therapy included comfort levels, the kind of client they had, and their own personal beliefs. However, there are many unknowns when a counselling session moves outside. The main concern counsellors have is maintaining confidentiality. Unfortunately, it can not be guaranteed as a result of being outdoors. Other concerns are safety and liability (K. Barry, personal communication, January 1, 2024). When a counselling session is within four walls, there is a level of control of the environment; however, when the counselling session is taken outside there is the unpredictability of such things as the weather, the terrain, or getting physically hurt. These issues can be enough of a deterrent for some clinicians who would prefer to maintain a more traditional form of counselling session.

Despite the emerging research on walk and talk therapy, the Canadian Counselling Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) does not have any formal training for this kind of therapy. Many counsellors offer their own guidelines and coaching on how to engage in an outdoor therapy session as they see the need and benefits of offering the service to their clients. Provision of a revised confidentiality contract when counselling sessions begin outside, how to discuss and agree on an outdoor meeting place, and what to do if they run into someone they know while in a session are some examples of what can be considered included in standards of practice for walk and talk therapy. Support of new ideas and alternative therapies can contribute to the evolution of the mental health field and enhance the quality and diversity of available services and would be something the CCPA should notice. If there was a more streamlined way through the governing bodies to implement an easily accessible process for counsellors to use, perhaps more clients would be able to participate in outdoor therapy.

Purpose of Walk and Talk Therapy

The purpose of discussing the many aspects of walk and talk therapy is to illuminate the benefits it has to offer for certain mental health disorders and to offer alternative methods to traditional counselling. As we navigate our fast-moving and tech savvy world, the simple act of combining movement with dialogue stands out as an excellent option for a therapeutic approach. The following will highlight the potential for integrating physical activity, nature exposure to increase the effectiveness of counselling interventions and promote holistic well-being.

The topic was chosen out of personal interest in spending time outdoors, and how these new outdoor environments have made me feel. I have been fortunate to experience many

adventures outdoors and have appreciated how it has made an impression on me. For instance, when I was a teenager a couple of friends and I decided to do a hike located in our community. Although the hike was very challenging for all of us, I recall we all shared stories about ourselves we had not shared before, such as what scared us about the wilderness, insecurities about graduating high school, and frustrations with our parents. Moving our bodies, engaging in dialogue, and being immersed in a forest seemed to create a space where we felt comfortable to share. This made me excited to learn more about walk and talk therapy, and the kind of impact it was making in the mental health field. Integrating new ways to deliver therapy to a wide variety of populations can help breathe new life into the client -counsellor relationship. By bringing more attention to the ongoing exploration and innovation of therapy modalities within the field of mental health, and considering alternative approaches like walk and talk therapy, counsellors can tailor interventions to meet the diverse needs of their clients.

Contributions to the Field

Therapy had a reputation for being an elite service, only for those who came from wealth (Holzman, 2012). Over time it has evolved into a more accessible service and has been able to support a wide range of challenges. In the early stages, psychology was influenced by scientific methodologies. Research was tailored to understanding the brain and how it impacted thoughts and behaviours (Cherry, 2022). Many new modalities have evolved as a result of psychology changing from a science-based discipline to observing behaviours through conditioning and interactions with the environment (Cherry, 2022). Some psychological therapies that have emerged over the past 100 years are cognitive behavioural therapy, gestalt therapy, and solution-focused therapy as well as several others (Counselling Tutor, 2019).

Throughout its history, counselling has evolved in response to societal changes, cultural shifts, and advances in psychological theory and research (Cherry, 2022). In recent years, the mental health field has learned and drawn from the biological and social influences on psychology, which has led to the majority of counsellors to not identify with one school of thought (Cherry, 2022). Instead, mental health professionals are able to look at many theoretical perspectives to formulate new ideas on how to support their clients. Although there have been many advances in psychology, mental health professionals are still learning new ways to understand the human psyche. Therefore, it feels natural for humans to turn to nature and the outdoors for a different approach to heal.

Many countries have recognized the many health benefits nature can provide for an individual's well being. For instance, Canada and New Zealand are two countries in which doctors can recommend a park prescription for mood disorders such as depression and anxiety (PaRx: A Prescription for Nature; Patel et al., 2011). Medical doctors were able to offer this prescription in conjunction with other traditional therapies and medications for those seeking a better quality of life. Other countries which have recognized the benefits of being outdoors are the Nordic countries which incorporate outdoor school as part of the curriculum (Remmen & Iversen, 2023), Brazil utilizes their rich natural environment to provide nature walks (Cunha et al., 2020), and Japan responded to the advances in technology and coined the term "forest bathing" in order for people to connect better with themselves and nature (Kim & Shin, 2021). As a result of this global recognition, hopefully outdoor therapies including walk and talk therapy, can be given more attention on how important it is for humans to connect with nature on a regular basis.

Traditionally, therapy has been done on a couch, and then moved to two chairs facing each other (Rickard et al., 2021). In these seating arrangements, eye contact was considered an integral part of the therapeutic relationship. However, according to Rickard et al.'s (2021) study establishing eye contact was not always helpful and felt intimidating at times. One finding of the study indicated a higher therapeutic alliance was created when the therapist and client were sitting side by side. This lends to the positive results walk and talk studies have had in regard to how clients feel after a session because client and therapist are walking alongside each other (Cooley et al., 2020; Coventry et al., 2021; Greenleaf et al., 2023; Kelly et al., 2017; La Puma, 2019; Naor & Mayseless, 2021; Olafsdottir et al., 2020; Patel et al., 2011; van den Berg & Beute, 2021; Wicks et al., 2022). Walking side by side allows for a more relaxed and informal atmosphere, which can facilitate open and honest communication without the pressure of constant eye contact. Power dynamics are not as physically pronounced as when the therapist is sitting directly across from their client, perhaps making the client uncomfortable to express themselves. Chapter two will explore how walk and talk therapy offers a unique approach for the client to feel supported and empowered regardless of whether they are maintaining eye contact or not.

In 2022, Owens and Bunce (2022) published a study that examined the specifics of what aspects of nature-based interventions could assist those who were suffering from depression. Depression is one of the most common health disorders globally and some individuals can develop recurrent episodes, which usually begins in their youth (Owens & Bunce, 2022). Children are spending more time indoors despite research showing how being in contact with nature can offer benefits for anxiety and depression (Owens & Bunce, 2022). Certain

mechanisms that were assessed in the study for those who have been diagnosed with clinical depression: stress, rumination, mindfulness, sleep, and exercise and being outside seemed to have a positive effect on these mechanisms. Treatments for clinical depression is typically heterogenous, traditional therapy and pharmacological treatments (Owens & Bunce, 2022). As a result of the findings from the analysis, it is recommended more robust and controlled experimental designs need to be put in place for more personalized treatment plans.

However, not everyone is on board with taking a therapy session outside. Walk and talk therapy is suitable for only certain mental health disorders, especially stress, anxiety, depression, anger, and grief. Therefore, those who are suffering from major mental health conditions such as schizophrenia and or a dissociate disorder, would not be a good fit for walk and talk therapy. Walk and talk therapy is still a challenge for therapists who prefer a more traditional setting and do not want to add any risk to their counselling sessions (Revell & McLeod, 2016). As mentioned previously, the top concerns about conducting a therapy session outside are confidentiality, safety, and liability (K. Barry, personal communication, October 21, 2023). Therefore, some extra steps need to be taken, such as creating a new confidentiality agreement, mutually determining a meeting spot, being prepared if either person runs into someone, they know during the counselling session as well as other potential scenarios. Walk and talk therapy should be introduced in the therapeutic process if good rapport and trust has already been established between client and counsellor. Nonetheless, it's essential to respect individual therapeutic approaches and preferences for both client and counsellor and ensuring clients receive the most effective and suitable form of care for their needs and circumstance.

Positional Statement

Walk and talk therapy represents a dynamic and effective approach to mental health treatment that harnesses the healing power of nature and physical activity. I have been fortunate to grow up in areas where the outdoors has been easily accessible and safe to be in. Additionally, my family also was drawn to doing activities outdoors such as nature walks, skiing, and camping. These are experiences I have fond memories of and feel fortunate to have had them throughout my youth and have continued to participate into my adulthood. As I have created my own family, I have realized how important it is to regularly spend time outside and instill a joy of learning about nature. Walking and talking outdoors offers a unique opportunity to engage in self-reflection and dialogue in a natural environment, away from a traditional therapy office. The rhythmic motion of walking can promote relaxation and mindfulness, making it easier to access and process emotions.

Nevertheless, I am aware not everyone is drawn to being outside. There are elements which can be irritating or unsafe for some, such as rain, loud sounds, having the appropriate dressing attire, and animals. Additional barriers could be having access to only unsafe outdoor spaces, physical disabilities, or they do not have the knowledge of understanding the outdoor elements. Some of these factors could play into why therapists are not encouraging outdoor counselling sessions as there are so many uncontrollable elements. Therefore, it is a deterrent. A controlled and quiet environment in the therapist's office can be a comfortable and preferred location for optimal focus and concentration.

Ever since COVID-19 there seems to be a surge for alternative ways to take care of oneself. Many therapists had adapted their practices to include outdoor therapy sessions as a

response to safety concerns and social distancing measures (Owens & Bunce, 2022). In my personal experience, I noticed how many people were out walking around my community during COVID-19. Even the local forest trails were active with many people. I began looking forward to meeting up with others and going for a walk, something I never made much time before. I even noticed my conversations with others felt more significant. Walking and talking outside felt beneficial because it fostered a natural and relaxed environment conducive to open conversation and emotional exploration.

I chose walk and talk therapy for a few reasons. First, it is well known how beneficial exercise is to our physical and mental health. Those who engage in regular walking activity lower their risk of heart disease and improve bone health (Government of Canada, 2024). Secondly, I liked how more relaxed the session can feel when going for a walk with your counsellor. The session has the ability to feel like the client is talking to a trusted confidant. Thirdly, incorporating nature into a counselling practice feels like a big leap forward in more progressive options for those suffering from mental health disorders. By utilizing the outdoors, something we all have access to, can lead our medical system to more dynamic and cost-effective treatments.

Outline of Chapters

The following will review the evolution of outdoor therapy, and how specifically walk and talk therapy has picked up momentum in the past few years. The concept and practice of it has been around for centuries, however the population is turning to alternative methods for medical treatments and are seeking more time in nature. The research thus far has demonstrated the therapeutic advantages of spending time outdoors. Chapter two of this paper

will discuss the different kinds of outdoor therapies which have grown from walk and talk therapy, the history, the psychological and physiological benefits, as well as the limitations and ethics surrounding counselling outdoors. And chapter three will discuss the findings and limitations of the current research on walk and talk therapy, applications on how it can be incorporated into the workforce, the medical field, and education systems. Lastly, the paper will include discussions on future directions, a curriculum to be incorporated into the workforce and mental health field to be applied to young adults and adults. As well as reflections from myself and for practicing therapists.

Definition of Terms

Blue Space- the act of spending time near blue spaces which are natural environments that include a body of water (Adkins & Latham, 2022)

Earthing- or grounding, involves making direct contact with the earth's surface by walking barefoot on the natural ground, soil, or sand (Ibe, 2023).

Forest Bathing- "Shirin Yoku" the act of taking in the forest atmosphere with all of one's senses (Song et al., 2016).

Green Exercise- physical exercise undertaken in natural environments (Coventry et al., 2021).

Green Space- is open areas reserved for parks including vegetation, water features and other kinds of natural environment (Wikipedia, 2024).

Nature Therapy- a therapeutic approach that involves nature to promote mental, emotional and physical well-being (Field, 2022).

Walk and Talk Therapy- a form of counselling that incorporates walking outdoors while talking about issues and problem-solving with a therapist (Revell & McLeod, 2016)

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Nature is one of the most important psychological ingredients of human existence (Naor & Maysless, 2021). Combining the benefits of physical activity and outdoor environments with the principles of psychotherapy, walk and talk therapy represents a departure from traditional office-based counselling. This literature review seeks to explore the emerging body of research on the efficacy, mechanisms, and applications of walk and talk therapy. By synthesizing findings from research studies, this review aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the potential impact of this innovative therapeutic modality on the psychological well-being of individuals and how other outdoor therapies were inspired. The following will discuss how walk and talk emerged, the physiology of what happens to the body when it is walking outdoors, limitations and ethical considerations, and what the future looks like for counsellors who incorporate it into their practice.

Description of Walk and Talk Therapy

Walk and talk therapy is a counselling session conducted outdoors. The counsellor and client walk alongside each other while the client discusses their personal struggles. The therapy session can take place in an urban setting or a more nature-based environment, such as a park or a forest (Revell & McLeod, 2016). Clients can simultaneously enjoy the advantages of engaging in physical activity, being immersed in nature, and undergoing therapy. Outdoor therapies are intentional, they are determined by location, use active bodily engagement, and recognize the relationship between humans and nature (Harper et al., 2021). There are options other than walking for a counselling session, for instance, expedition and wilderness therapy,

horticulture therapy, and exposure to different natural environments (Harper et al., 2021). Many of these outdoor therapies will be discussed in further detail. However, as it has been discovered, more funding and research is needed on exactly how the outdoors can make a positive impact on mental health disorders. So far, the literature does show a positive outcome when a client engages in some kind of outdoor therapy and is gaining a lot of traction within the counselling community (Greenleaf, et al., 2023; Harper et al., 2021).

Traditionally counselling has been a face-to-face practice with a counsellor on one end of the room and the client on the other side. However, Van den Berg and Beute (2021) describe how the mental healthcare system has been exploring new interventions besides pharmaceutical or cognitive behavioural treatment, given the prevalence of stress related mental illnesses. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many counsellors pivoted their practice and started conducting sessions outside. The outdoors became a rediscovered playground (Greenleaf et al., 2023). The external environment was showing a positive impact on one's mental health. Van den Berg and Beute (2021) state that our physical environment, specifically natural environments, can aid in the prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation of mental health issues. Being in nature can help mitigate the detrimental effects of stress related illnesses (Hartig et al., 2014). Many counsellors who are pioneering the outdoor therapy movement recognize it adds a more humanistic approach that can get lost in a clinical setting (Cooley et al., 2020). Additionally, some clients can find an office setting quite intimidating or confining so using the outdoors as a backdrop or walking in a therapy session can feel quite supportive. Conducting a counselling session outside will help eliminate any feelings of

intimidation speaking with a counsellor. It would perhaps make the step towards initiating counselling a little easier for those that are reluctant.

Walk and talk therapy is also known as nature therapy, green therapy, ecotherapy, or outdoor therapy (Field, 2022). There are many alternatives to access therapy outdoors and some are better suited for certain populations than others. For instance, adventure or wilderness therapy is a treatment modality that uses expeditions into the wilderness or other unfamiliar surroundings, typically rural areas, as a means of addressing behavioral issues, specifically those of teenagers and young adults (Good Therapy, 2016). The programs were created in response to the high number of young adults enrolled in residential treatment programs (Bettman et al., 2016). The adventure program offers group counselling as well as individual counselling and updates are relayed back to the family, which is similar to what happens in a residential program.

In horticultural therapy a client engages in gardening activities with a trained therapist to achieve a goal such as coping skills, how to socialize, and build motor skills (Harper et al., 2021). Many studies, for instance in Nicholas et al.'s (2019) research findings, it demonstrated its effectiveness for adults and elderly adults addressing cognitive decline as well as physical disorders. Although it was suggested that more research is needed on horticultural therapy, the results did indicate the therapy played an effective role in promoting well-being, a better quality of life, and minimized symptoms of depression in older adults (Xu et al., 2023).

Forest bathing is another outdoor therapy which has been shown to have positive effects on clients' mental health (Song et al., 2016). Forest bathing originated in Japan where it is known as "shirin yoku" (Song et al., 2016). It is the act of taking in the forest atmosphere with

all of one's senses. This could be done individually or with a counsellor. It has become quite popular and is a recommended method for anyone suffering from a mood or stress related disorder. Song et al. (2016) studied male and female subjects in eight forest locations and urban areas in Japan, taking measurements of pulse rate and blood pressure over a time span between 2012 and 2013. The results indicated a significant positive impact on the central, autonomic, endocrine, and immune systems of the participants. Spending time at or near any kind of natural setting was found to support a healthy mental state. However, two limitations of this research are that the participants were examined over a short time frame and that most participants were young and able bodied. It would be helpful to understand how forest bathing can affect those with more severe mental health disorders and how an older person reacts to consistently participating in forest bathing. Regardless, the research consistently showed that immersion in a forest environment can have a positive effect on mental and physical well-being.

More recently there has been a large emphasis on blue therapy, the act of spending time near blue spaces which are natural environments that include a body of water (Adkins & Latham, 2022). Britton et al. (2020) carried out the first systematic review on the effects of blue spaces on human mental health and the results indicated a significant impact on a person's psycho-social well being. The research studies were based in Europe, U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Israel, and the subjects' moods were rated after they participated in the following activities: surfing, dragon boat racing, sailing, fly-fishing, kayaking, canoeing, swimming, and scuba diving. For the most part, the findings did indicate there was an increase in self esteem, self-efficacy, and resilience. It was interesting to note that a consistent finding was partaking in the activities, such as surfing, sailing, kayaking, in blue spaces contributed

more to rehabilitation and health promotion than the actual qualities of a blue space such as the sound of running water or a connection to nature. There is limited academic research on blue therapy, but Britton et al. (2020) state that the results so far are very positive and provide a viable option for an individual to reduce symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder and depression.

A European project, called Blue Health, grew from the concept of blue spaces in 2016 (Blue Health). It was developed in response to the growing urbanization in Europe and an increased understanding of how blue spaces can affect a person's health and well-being. A team of experts came together to bring attention and act on integrating insights from environmental science, public health, psychology, urban planning, and other disciplines. Researchers collaborated to understand how aquatic environments influence health and develop strategies for leveraging these spaces to promote well-being (Blue Health). Funding ended for the project in 2020, and the website does state it hopes its efforts will be used as a reference for future city planning for blue spaces. Regardless of the type of outdoor therapy utilized, studies have shown how incredibly beneficial it is to spend time in nature to improve our mental health (Coventry et al., 2021).

Mental health disorders are associated with a lower quality of life, increase in medical care, high economic and social costs, and increased mortality (Coventry et al., 2021). Over the past several years, long term health conditions are on the rise and are typically coupled with depression. Traditional-based counselling interventions will not be able to support everyone who is struggling; therefore, the medical system has turned to nature-based therapies as a more cost effective and holistic approach to counselling. Coventry et al. (2021) conducted a study to

investigate which outdoor based therapies were the most effective for an improved mental and physical outcome. They viewed nature therapies such as horticulture activities, environmental conservation, exercising in blue and green spaces, forest bathing, wilderness therapy, and arts and crafts in nature. The results of the meta-analysis did confirm nature-based therapies were effective as a counselling method for pre-existing conditions and also as a preventive measure (Coventry et al., 2021). Almost all of the participants were suffering or diagnosed with depression and the most effective intervention was being in a green nature-based environment doing exercise. Specifically, positive results were seen in those who were immersed in a nature-based environment had reduced depressive mood, anxiety symptoms, and negative affect. A very significant finding emphasized by Coventry et al. (2021) was how helpful gardening was to reduce depressive moods for those suffering from long term illnesses as well as lowering symptoms of anxiety. It was also helpful for those who find it challenging to make connections with others. From the analysis it can be concluded the participants who were immersed in nature consistently for nine-12 weeks and did some form of exercise between 20-90 minutes per session in a green environment was the most effective modality (Coventry et al., 2021). Once again, research has shown how effective and supportive a nature-based therapy can be (Cooley et al., 2020; Greenleaf et al., 2023; Olafsdottir et al., 2020; Patel et al., 2011; van den Berg & Beute, 2021; Wicks et al., 2022).

History and Global Practices of Walk and Talk Therapy

Walk and Talk therapy has evolved as a result of the substantial increase in individuals who have been diagnosed with stress related disorders as well as mood disorders such as depression and major depressive disorder (Cooley et al., 2022). In 1983 the World Health

Organization (WHO) introduced the term “sick building syndrome” which is the poor physical and psychological health that can result from being in a low-quality indoor environment (Cooley et al., 2022). Evolutionary psychology suggests that the human mind and body have been developed by millions of years of living in small communities shaped by nature (Cooley et al., 2020). Therefore, it is hypothesized humans are drawn to safe and natural settings. However, as a result of industrialization, the human population is becoming more and more disconnected from the earth and each other, leading to a population suffering from psychological distress (Cooley et al., 2020). An informative study conducted by Ulrich (1984) over a ten-year period found patients who had views of nature from their hospital bed recovered quicker from surgery than those who did not. The concept of the restorative properties of nature leads to outdoor therapy which has become globally recognized. Many countries have taken advantage of the therapeutic benefits nature has to offer.

While walk and talk therapy does not have a single origin or a prescribed history, it has evolved organically from a combination of historical influences and therapeutic traditions of the relationship between nature and well-being. Walk and talk therapy is rooted in ancient philosophical traditions (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014; Thomas, 2020). In ancient Greece the philosopher Aristotle gave lectures in while walking through the covered walkways of a temple called the Lyceum. He had a large following of students known as the Peripatetics. Socrates, another ancient Greek philosopher walked while teaching his students (Britannica, 2017). Other European philosophers in the 17th century such as Jean-Jaques Rousseau and Nietzsche were known to go for long hikes or walks as they felt it helped generate great thoughts (Ayuso, 2023). Sigmund Freud was known to walk the streets of Vienna on therapy sessions and noticed his

clients told him the truth when both of their noses were facing the same direction (Greenleaf et al., 2023).

Later in the 1940s there are recordings of the first wilderness and adventure organization in the U.K. called “Outward Bound”. The founder Kurt Hahn thought it was important for youth to gain the skills and confidence to experience wilderness skills in a supportive group environment (Beck & Wong, 2022; Outward Bound, 2024). Walking and talking outside seems to have the timeless benefits of movement, nature, and therapeutic dialogue which resonates with physical activity, natural environment, and emotional healing.

Indigenous cultures have always used nature, movement, and learning within their daily practices, in order strengthen the creative thinking process and foster connection with their community and land (Ayuso, 2023). This approach recognizes the importance of engaging the body as well as the mind in the learning process, promoting physical health and coordination alongside cognitive development. The activities used in the wilderness therapy groups are inspired by some Indigenous cultural practices, such as talking circles and talking sticks, canoe trips, and vision quests. And as mentioned above, in 1980 Japan coined the term shinrin-yoku which translates to forest bathing (Forest Therapy – Training & Research). Individuals are to walk through a forest, taking in all the senses, while taking in deep breaths (Song et al., 2016). The benefits of walking through a forest were recognized and practiced as a free alternative or in conjunction with medications. It was found that forest bathing helped minimize symptoms of depression, physical pain, and high stress levels (Forest Therapy- Training & Research). Forest bathing eventually changed to forest therapy. The Japanese culture caught on, and currently offers therapeutic programs or even tours for those who want to experience what forest

therapy feels like (Harper et al., 2021). It has inspired others globally to encourage forest bathing as a simple, accessible, and cost-effective method to improve the quality of life and health of today's society.

South Korea followed Japan's lead and has adopted forest bathing as a type of healing for mental and physical health (Park et al., 2021). In 2017, a non-profit organization was created in Australia called the International Nature and Forest Therapy Alliance (INFTA) in response to the positive results from evidence-based research on how beneficial it is for humans to spend time in nature (INFTA, 2023). INFTA has created international programs and training for those who want to learn and teach about the benefits of forest therapy, as well as to promote the practices with other government agencies and stakeholders for research and integration within a person's lifestyle (Forest Therapy- Training & Research).

The momentum of having a therapeutic relationship with nature for health benefits is present in other parts of the world. As mentioned above, the Japanese practice forest bathing and believe in it so much that doctors can provide a prescription for *shinrin-yoku* in Japan (Forest Therapy- Training & Research). Nordic cultures have adapted to understand the need for humans to be outdoors to respectfully interact with nature, known as "*friluftsliv*" which translates to as "outdoor life" (Remmen & Iversen, 2023). The Nordic countries, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Norway, all incorporate outdoor education within their school systems, it is not separate. Remmen and Iversen (2023) conducted an analysis of several aspects of the outdoor school programs, such as cognitive function, type of outdoor education, and teacher perspectives. The results did note that Nordic teachers did not encounter any obstacles when teaching outdoor education, and felt their communication and relationship was stronger

with students when they were learning outdoors (Remmen & Iversen, 2023). If the teachers are on board with teaching outdoors and are experiencing a stronger relationship to their students, this will lead to a more enjoyable and positive experience for all.

In Brazil, ecological walks or “caminhadas ecológicas” are organized by groups to promote physical activity and connect individuals with the natural environment (Cunha et al. 2020). Brazil has many long-distance trails, which have been well travelled by their Indigenous populations. They have become very popular worldwide, and tourism has increased as a result of people wanting to be immersed in a long-distance nature walk and experience its therapeutic benefits. The Danes have developed a healing garden known as “Nacardia” (Sidenius et al., 2017). A small participant group of Danish university students who were experiencing stress related symptoms enrolled in a 10- week program to see how the healing garden would affect them. The results indicated all participants felt safe, protected, and gained more self awareness about themselves. Interestingly, the participants were followed up with one year later and many of them had reported spending time in green spaces to practice mindfulness and feel calmer. It is very telling how much of an impact the garden made on the mental health of the participants.

Doctors in New Zealand were the first to prescribe a “Green Prescription” (Patel et al., 2011). This was done to replace a medical prescription for anyone suffering from a mental health disorder or had problems resulting from being overweight. The prescription program helps set up a program for patients who need to be proactive with their health. Patel et al. (2011) determined that the innovative methods used in the Green Prescription are beneficial for those suffering from even a low-grade mood disorder or those who struggle with any kind of exercise. Canada, the U.S., and the U.K. have followed suit. The U.S. began wilderness therapy

programs for those who were not responding well to traditional therapeutic methods, which were typically inside a room (van den Berg & Beute, 2021). In November 2020, Health Care Canada issued the Park Prescription Program, PaRx, in conjunction with Parks Canada and created by health care professionals who wanted their patients to connect to nature. Four provinces, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario are currently able to issue a park prescription: (PaRx: A Prescription for Nature; Lu, 2022). PaRx states spending at least 2 hours a week in nature will greatly affect stress levels, mood, increased energy, and longevity (PaRx: A Prescription for Nature). By integrating nature into healthcare practices, park prescriptions aim to promote a holistic and preventive approach to health and well-being.

The global history and recognition of the integration of nature-based therapies into healthcare practices signify a profound acknowledgment of the symbiotic relationship between nature and human well-being. The fusion of movement, nature, and therapy have evolved as a dynamic and innovative approach to mental health treatment. The emergence of park prescriptions, social prescribing initiatives, and various nature-based interventions underscores a paradigm shift towards more holistic healthcare. As walk and talk therapy continues to gain recognition and integration into mental health practices, its history is a compelling foundation for understanding the profound impact that movement and nature can have on fostering holistic wellness.

Psychological and Physical Effects

Being in nature, walking and breathing in the fresh air and taking in the surroundings can feel really good, so what is it doing to the human body to help with our mental health?

According to INFTA (Forest Therapy- Training & Research) a forest walk can reduce blood

pressure, reduce cortisol levels (stress hormones), increase energy levels, increase levels of happiness, and help support better concentration. Therefore, if a client and a therapist are in a walk and talk therapy session, the client will support a stronger connection with their therapist and evoke feelings of positivity and general overall well-being (van der Berg & Beute, 2021). The question may be whether walking alone in a natural setting yields the same results as walking in a natural setting with a therapist. Van der Berg and Beute (2021) screened 40 participants who were considered stressed and burnt out to commit to a 12–18-week coaching program. The participants were divided into two groups, the walk and talk coaching group and a control group. The walk and talk group walked through the countryside of the Netherlands for one hour and half during the 12–18-week period and received coaching and prompts on how beneficial it was to walk in nature, identifying what brings the participant joy in their life, and to discover their talents and how to put them into action. The control group walked through a natural setting but did not receive any talk therapy. It was found the participants who did receive talk therapy showed decreased levels of stress and concentration problems and increases in job satisfaction and self-esteem. The conclusion is that walking *and* talking through nature increase mental health levels and provide a refreshing take on counselling.

Getting adequate amount of light into our eyes while outside enjoying nature is another contributor to a more positive mental state. LeGates et al. (2014) conducted a study to understand how getting the right amount of light into the retina of our eyes can affect human behaviours and quality of life. In the study they used humans and rodents as test subjects and drew upon previous research which demonstrated when light enters the eyes it indirectly affects brain activity and our circadian rhythms. If we are exposed to irregular environments of

light, our sleep patterns will be irregular which will lead to mood and learning deficits. The review of research does indicate that the right exposure to light does play a significant role in mood disorders and our circadian clocks affecting our cognitive functions and our temperament (LeGates, et al., 2014). More recently, Maruani and Geoffroy (2019) conducted a study using bright light therapy as a treatment option for those suffering from seasonal depression, bipolar, and major depressive disorder. The results support LeGates et al.'s (2014) work advising being exposed to the proper kind of light helps with circadian rhythms, enhancing alertness, and increases serotonin levels. Exposure to natural light is another added benefit to engaging in walk and talk therapy. Combining sunlight exposure with walking and talking therapy provides a holistic approach to mental health that addresses both physical and psychological well-being.

The benefits of exercise for human physical health as well as mental health are well documented. Regular walking can help with cardiovascular health, lower blood pressure, and can increase immunity (Kelly et al., 2017). Kelly et al. (2018) wanted to understand which mental health issue was the most influenced by walking. After an extensive review of over thousands of research studies, the researchers concluded those diagnosed with depression and anxiety were the ones who benefitted the most from just walking alone. Depression was the top mental health struggle that walking helped with. Additionally, it was determined that walking, whether indoors or outdoors, proved to be advantageous for alleviating symptoms of depression. Although the results of the review by Kelly et al. (2018) did indicate walking helped those who suffered from anxiety, it was difficult to state how anxiety was defined, but there was evidence of lower levels of anxiety in participants. Other components of mental health were measured, such as self esteem and resilience with very little evidence to support if walking did

help. One very noteworthy finding in the analysis, was the group who did benefit the most out of all the research analyzed were the ones who walked outdoors. This leads to some further interpretations such as the kind of space the person was walking in and the magnitude of their mental health struggles.

Physical exercise has been proven to be beneficial for longevity and supportive of positive mental health (Hartig et al., 2014; Koziel et al., 2022). Cardiovascular illnesses increase when individuals become sedentary. Koziel et al. (2022) decided to analyze patients who were part of an outpatient hospital trauma group waitlisted for psychotherapy and challenge sedentary behaviour. All the participants were female, all had been diagnosed with PTSD, depression, stress, and anxiety and all had reported low physical activity. All participants were agreeable to integrating walking in their psychotherapy program and the findings determined there were a lot of positives walking with a therapist outside. For instance, there was an increased agreeability between therapist and patient, a feeling that walking lifted the patient's mood, an increased motivation to do physical activity in between therapy sessions, and a sense of agency using walking as a coping strategy (Koziel et al., 2022). It was interesting to note that patients were motivated to engage in some kind of physical activity in between sessions as a result of enjoying the experience with their therapist. Further research is needed to see more precisely how walking helped decrease the symptoms of certain mental health diagnoses as well as continuously integrating walk and talk therapy for outpatient clients.

As mentioned above, Song et al. (2016) described how physiological measurements were used for those who participated in at least 15 minutes of forest bathing and the results indicated the individuals had lower cortisol levels, lower pulse rate, and lower blood pressure.

The 15-minute session induced a state of physiological relaxation. Their research was inspired by a study done in 1990 by Craig et al. (2016) to investigate the physiological effect of forest bathing and cortisol levels, a stress marker, using a test sample of the subjects' salivary glands. It was a small sample of participants, but enough to demonstrate spending time in the forest can reduce levels of stress. Kim and Shin (2021) wanted to investigate further to see the difference between a self-guided forest walk compared to a guided forest walk and what were the therapeutic differences. It was reported those who participated in a self-guided forest walks had more opportunity for self-reflection, and those who were in the guided walks had more positive emotional changes and stronger social bonds as a result of interacting with others. These two research studies describe how forest bathing can support someone's physical health as well as mental well-being.

Walking is a healthy habit, spending time in nature has been shown to be positive, but which one is more helpful for our mental health? Olafsdottir et al. (2020) conducted a study to determine which modality would be the most beneficial for mood disorders and physiological responses to stress. The setting for the research was in Reykjavik, Iceland, and the participants were divided into three groups. One group did three 40-minute nature walks on a wooded-forest path, the second group went to a gym and walked on a treadmill for 40 minutes, and the third group sat in a laboratory watching a video on nature. The researchers tested cortisol levels and psychological effects. The group which benefitted the most when under higher amounts of stress was one that walked in nature while the group which benefitted the least was the one watching the video of nature scenes (Olafsdottir et al., 2020). All three of the interventions for stress reduction had the potential to significantly decrease cortisol levels, but it seems walking

in nature had the strongest effects on those suffering from high levels of stress. It can be interpreted that regardless of the environment, it is best to go for a walk for health and mood benefits.

Earthing or grounding is the practice of connecting with the earth's surface by walking barefoot on the natural ground, soil, or sand (Chevalier et al., 2018; Ibe, 2023). Earthing is still in its early stages of research but, some studies suggest potential benefits for mood disorders, by helping to lower cortisol and stress levels. As Koniver (2022) explains the universe has a direct current which flows through everything on our planet, including plants, animals, human beings, and the surface of our entire globe. The direct current from the earth flows continuously across the earth's surface. Human bodies, which are highly conductive, join this global electrical circuit whenever we make direct contact with the earth, hence the word earthing.

There are a few connections between walk and talk therapy and earthing. For instance, clients can do their therapy session barefoot, immersed in a natural sensory experience, and combined with the physical movement it can provide an enhanced transformative therapeutic experience. As a result, healing takes place and can aid in reduced inflammation within the body, improved sleep, decrease levels of stress both physiological as well as psychological, improved blood circulation, and increase symptoms for a positive mood (Chevalier et al., 2018; Ibe, 2023;). In 2015, a study was done on the effects of earthing on mood disorders (Chevalier, 2015). The study was quite unique as it used earthing products. These products included mats made of rubber with carbon fibers to make it electrically conductive, an electrically conductive pillow, and a transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) patch to place on the body (Chevalier, 2015). Some of the participants used the earthing equipment and others used

placebo products for one hour and then a scale was used to determine if the mood increased on those who had the proper earthing equipment. It was determined participants' mood increased to a more positive and pleasant state than those who were given the non-earthing equipment (Chevalier, 2015). A follow up study was done in 2018 by Chevalier et al. (2018) where massage therapists were earthing while they were working with clients and it was compared to those who did not, and the results indicated lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Even though there are limitations to both Chevalier's research studies (2015 & 2018) the results do suggest more research and testing is needed on how earthing can be incorporated into a therapeutic approach to support those who are suffering from mood disorders, especially how the natural electrical currents impact humans. Walking barefoot can feel invigorating and does align with the principles of walk and talk therapy, as clients can benefit from a deeper connection to nature. Integrating these practices may offer additional avenues for individuals to explore and benefit from the healing potential of the natural environment.

Many of the research studies described have discussed how some of the outdoor components play a role in creating a more positive outdoor therapy session. However, Hartig et al. (2014) conducted a review which suggested it is not one component of the outdoors which affects a client's experience of outdoor therapy, but multiple pathways. Components that have been significantly researched are air quality, physical activity, social cohesion, and the amount of stress reduction. For instance, the type of vegetation the clients are exposed to, specifically, if the plant emits a higher content of pollen there will be a greater demand for species which emit a higher levels of oxygen content (Hartig et al., 2014). The outdoor space where individuals

conduct their outdoor therapy is important too, how safe they feel in the setting and how they can move. Some outdoor spaces may be better suited for sitting and admiring the greenery, while others lend themselves to running or walking. From the review, all results indicate being in contact with nature is beneficial; however, measurement of how it biologically affects an individual is quite subjective. Humans will react to outdoor stimuli differently, and how, when, and where will need further research.

Walk and talk therapy is typically best suited for those with mood and stress related mental health disorders (Cooley et al., 2022; Coventry et al., 2021; Greenleaf et al., 2023; Olafsdottir et al., 2020). So far, the evidence implies a shift in mindset occurs. Watkins-Martin et al. (2022) wanted to see if going for a walk in a nature-forest type setting was more beneficial than someone going for a walk in a more urban setting. The researchers had a small sample size from an outpatient psychiatric ward, with more female participants than males, and who were diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD). The participants went for a one hour walk with minimal talking, and the results did lean towards the nature walk being more beneficial than the urban setting. Berman et al. (2012) conducted a similar study using MDD participants, but the interest was to determine if nature had an influence over memory and affect. The results did show the participants who did go for a nature walk versus an urban walk showed greater working memory capacity and positive affect. Watkins-Martin et al. (2022) and Berman et al. (2012), both confirm that walks in nature for those suffering from MDD is an optional intervention. However, more research is needed to understand the duration of the effects of interacting with nature and if treatment of other major mental health disorders can benefit from walking in nature.

The physiological benefits of walk and talk therapy underscore its potential to enhance both mental and physical well-being. By integrating the therapeutic process with the cadence of walking, the approach not only promotes cardiovascular health but also stimulates the release of endorphins, reducing stress and anxiety. There is a necessity for significant and sustainable investment in community and nature-based interventions, as they are poised to fulfill an important role in addressing the demand for mental health support.

Limitations and Ethics

As already discussed, conducting therapy outdoors offers multiple benefits. However, it is important to acknowledge and understand the constraints and challenges associated with walk and talk therapy. These limitations encompass factors ranging from practical considerations to individual differences. For instance, is the client able bodied and able to walk with the counselor to establish a strong rapport? As discussed with counsellor Kevin Barry (K. Barry, personal communication, October 21, 2023), an experienced Vancouver-based therapist who has practiced walk and talk therapy for a long time, three of the major limitations for walk and talk therapy are safety, confidentiality, and liability. Agreement is needed on a meeting location for both client and counsellor to feel safe. It is important for the client and counsellor to feel safe where they walk, and for the counsellor to feel comfortable navigating their route. In the lower mainland of British Columbia, locations that may be preferred by a client to begin a walk and talk therapy session are downtown Vancouver seawall, Stanley Park seawall, downtown Vancouver, Lonsdale Quay North Vancouver, New Westminster Seawall, Burnaby Lake, Rocky Point in Port Moody, Queen Elizabeth Park in Surrey as well as numerous others. However, coordinating nature therapy sessions may require additional planning and logistical

considerations, such as finding suitable outdoor locations, transportation, and ensuring a safe and comfortable environment.

In case the client is triggered or gets injured, there is safety knowing other people are around that could possibly help. A therapy practice close to a natural area or park with convenient walk routes would be preferable. However, a rural or small-town setting, where both the client and the therapist may be familiar to many in the community, could compromise the client's confidentiality and emotional well-being. Natural environments may pose safety concerns, such as uneven terrain, wildlife encounters, or exposure to potential hazards. This can be a significant limitation for certain individuals, especially those with mobility issues or health concerns.

Confidentiality is paramount. Privacy can be a concern in outdoor settings, potentially limiting the depth of discussions. While out in a counselling session, there is the strong possibility of others being able to listen to the topic of conversation between the client and counsellor. Of course, this depends on how populated the location is. In a conversation with Kevin Barry (K. Barry, personal communication, January 1, 2024), I learned that a very significant consideration is what to do or say if the counsellor and client encounter someone either or both know. A discussion will need to be made before commencing therapy outside to develop a script or response if some kind of introduction needs to be made. Kevin Barry advised the counsellor can be introduced as "this is my friend" or "this is Kevin" to avoid any possible awkward moments explaining the client is having a therapy session (K. Barry, personal communication, October 21, 2023). Another option is establishing a code word when the conversation needs to stop, should they encounter a situation where the client runs into

someone they know. Alternatively, if the counsellor runs into someone, they know they will need to advise their client ahead of time how they will introduce themselves and the client (Cooley et al., 2021). In order to maintain a positive therapeutic relationship, it is important for the counsellor to provide clear communication to make the client feel supported.

Additionally, the ethics are a little different for those counselors who are conducting treatment in nature and need to be addressed as part of the relationship (Berger, 2008). Before a counsellor considers taking therapy sessions outdoors, it is imperative for the client and counsellor to have a strong foundation. It would be ineffective and possibly detrimental to the therapeutic experience to even attempt discussing the possibility of walk and talk therapy to a client with whom the therapist did not feel a strong bond. If the client is not able to talk freely, combative, or guarded it would be best to work on positive communication in an indoor counselling session. Therefore, if the counsellor and client both agree to introduce having counselling sessions outdoors, a new consent form will need to be agreed upon. Just as in a traditional counselling setting, it is important to maintain appropriate professional boundaries during walk and talk therapy. This includes avoiding dual relationships, refraining from engaging in physical contact beyond what is necessary for safety, and ensuring that the therapeutic relationship remains the focus (Berger, 2008). Another ethical consideration for the counsellor involves rating the client's autonomy to decide when to discontinue walk and talk therapy, be it in the middle of a session or at any stage of their treatment, should they perceive it as ineffective. This practice honors their autonomy and preserves their dignity (Cooley et al., 2021).

A few limitations to consider outside of the ethical boundaries are weather and time (K. Barry, personal communication, January 1, 2024). In the colder and winter months, the likelihood of hosting a walk and talk therapy session diminishes as many are not willing to spend a lot of time outdoors. Adverse weather conditions, such as extreme heat, cold, or rain, can impede outdoor sessions, limiting the consistent availability of this therapeutic approach. Also, counsellors are concerned about keeping time because there is high probability the session time will be longer than an indoor session. Some counsellors are still very attached to the traditional delivery of therapy and are not as willing to experiment with an outdoor setting. Revell and McLeod (2016) conducted a study to determine the views of counselling practitioners who offer walk and talk therapy in the U.K. Participants were recruited online using search words such as “nature therapy, outdoor therapy, eco- therapy” as there is no set terminology for walk and talk therapy. The practitioners involved in the study had incorporated walk and talk therapy for the past one to two years within their practice and used a variety of modalities such as mindfulness-based CBT, gestalt, and humanistic. The results indicated that of the 32 counsellors studied, all of them agree that offering a walk and talk option in the therapeutic process is very useful for clients (Revell & McLeod, 2016). Clients claimed to be invigorated by the walk and counsellors felt they had a higher focus on what their clients were saying. Some of the limitations the counsellors expressed were not being creative within their counselling session as they could only walk, facing the unknown outdoor environment whether that was crowds, or weather, and maintaining boundaries.

Other considerations were whether the client had proper footwear or outerwear, the timing of the session, and keeping a professional distance from the client as the counsellor and

client are walking alongside each other and not seated in a room across from each other. Despite these limitations determined in the study, the biggest take away from the counsellors was that walk and talk therapy was an effective way to “unstick” anything in the therapeutic process and enable psychological processing (Revell & McLeod, 2016). In this context, recognizing the boundaries of nature therapy allows for a more comprehensive understanding of its potential impact and aids in refining its application within the relationship between counsellor and client.

However, if we were to flip to the perspective of the client, how do they feel about partaking in a walk and talk therapy session? Clark (2019) examined what clients thought of therapy outdoors and the results indicated walk and talk therapy was found to be equally or more therapeutic compared to their experiences with traditional therapy, especially for those who find traditional therapy unappealing or intimidating. Additionally, some of the participants felt a mind-body connection as they were walking and seemed to recall counselling content most likely as a result of the physical activity, talking with their therapist, and the natural setting (Clark, 2019). More recently, Greenleaf et al. (2023) conducted a study which focused on the clients’ experience and perspective on walk and talk therapy. A comprehensive examination was conducted regarding the outdoor environment, physical exertion, and the transition from traditional face-to-face interaction to walking alongside each other. The participants were mostly university students attending private practice counselling clinic and were recruited on a volunteer basis through phone interviews. Two interesting themes that came up when analyzing the data were the rhythm of walking and talking as well as the disharmony of walking and talking. The benefits determined were the outdoor counselling session helped stimulate

thinking and thought processes, helped with conversational flow, a nice change from the traditional indoor setting of a therapy session, and more attuned with a mind-body connection. However, the concern of the participants was a lack of confidentiality as a result of the location having a higher density of people. Some participants found some of the outdoor stimuli distracting while talking to the counsellor. As a result, the participants were overstimulated and were too distracted to focus on what was said and to process their thoughts in the therapy session. Regardless, the results of the Greenleaf et al. (2023) study do lend support to the use of walk and talk therapy as a means to enhance the therapeutic process. Participating in walk and talk therapy provides a positive influence on the therapeutic relationship by creating a different dynamic.

There does not seem to be any formal training through the Canadian Counselling Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) for walk and talk therapy. There are several registered clinical counsellors and psychotherapists who offer their own training for walk and talk therapy across the country, which lends to the growth in popularity of the type of therapy. However, there are no specific guidelines offered through a national organization on what a walk and talk therapy should include, where to conduct the therapy session, and all the possible ethical considerations. As the walk and talk therapy seems to evolve and grow, so will the standards and practices for all clinical counsellors.

Establishing and adhering to a set of ethical considerations for walk and talk therapy is paramount to ensuring the integrity and effectiveness of this innovative therapeutic approach. By prioritizing client autonomy, confidentiality, informed consent, and professional boundaries, practitioners can create a safe and therapeutic environment that aligns with ethical principles.

Walk and talk therapy may be highly beneficial for some individuals while presenting challenges for others. A thorough assessment of individual needs, preferences, and suitability is essential in determining the appropriateness of walk and talk therapy for a particular client. Moreover, recognizing and addressing potential challenges associated with the outdoor setting, such as privacy concerns and the dynamic nature of public spaces, further reinforces the need for a thoughtful ethical framework. As walk and talk therapy continues to gain popularity, it is crucial to foster trust within the therapeutic relationship to help promote positive outcomes in this evolving field of mental health practice.

From the historical records to the initial investigations into the therapeutic benefits of movement and nature to the studies exploring its diverse applications, the body of research reveals the significant role that walking and talking can play in promoting a healthy mind and body (Cooley et al., 2020; Greenleaf et al., 2023; Olafsdottir et al., 2020; Patel et al., 2011; van den Berg & Beute, 2021; Wicks et al., 2022). In a time marked by rapid digital interconnectedness, integrating movement with dialogue emerges as a powerful therapeutic strategy. The combination of physical activity and therapeutic conversations addresses the complexities of mental health challenges and the need for human connection as well as a connection to nature. As this body of research continues to expand, it paves the way for the integration of walk and talk therapy into mainstream mental health practices, offering a refreshing, cost-effective, and accessible avenue for individuals to engage in a journey toward holistic well-being.

Chapter 3: Discussion and Applied Practices

Discussion of Findings and Limitations of Current Literature

The simple act of being outside and walking alongside a counsellor has provided positive results (Cooley et al., 2022; Coventry et al., 2021; Harper et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2018). A variety of nature-based therapies are offered to those who have become stagnant in a traditional based counselling set up or are seeking alternative methods to support their therapeutic journey. In a very technologically driven world, it feels even more important to spend time in nature to generate strong connections to the earth, others, and ourselves. Walk and talk therapy promotes a connection to nature, moves the body for physical exercise, and encourages cognitive improvement (Cooley et al., 2021; Hanson & Jones, 2015; Harper et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2018; Koziel et al., 2022). These elements can be beneficial to anyone whether or not they suffer from a mental health disorder.

While walk and talk therapy holds promise as an innovative approach to mental health treatment, it is essential to acknowledge and address the gaps in knowledge in the current literature. So far, the research discussed in this paper has shown to have positive effect on clients and their therapeutic journey (Berger, 2010; Cooley et al., 2020; Coventry et al., 2021; Craig et al., 2016; Greenleaf et al., 2023; Harper et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2017; La Puma, 2019; Naor & Mayselless, 2021; Olafsdottir et al., 2020; Patel et al., 2011; Schwenk, 2019; Song et al., 2016; van den Berg & Beute, 2021; Watkins et al., 2022; Wicks et al., 2022). However, as previously mentioned, there are some very legitimate concerns about walk and talk therapy, such as confidentiality and safety (K. Barry, personal communication, January 1, 2024). The use

of the outdoors for therapy sessions significantly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as there was a need to find an alternative way to provide face-to-face counselling (Newman & Gabriel, 2023). And conducting counselling outdoors worked for many clients. However, many well-established counsellors may not feel this is a viable or desired option (Newman & Gabriel, 2023). The traditional method of delivering therapy in a controlled environment feels more comfortable.

Newman and Gabriel (2023) conducted a study to analyze participants lived experiences with walk and talk therapy and the findings were all generally positive. The greatest finding was the informality the clients felt. The ease of flow of the conversation came naturally, the participants were more comfortable with silence, and the set up of the session felt neutral. A few noticeable elements the participants did comment on was some distractions, such as insects flying and the noise of a car alarm, for the outdoor portion as well as not being familiar with the area caused some minor distractions (Newman & Gabriel, 2023). The element of nature was more of a backdrop to the research, and the focus was on the communication with the counsellor. It was interesting to note all the detailed observations participants commented on, and yet the small group did conclude they found the experience quite positive and would benefit from a hybrid setup of traditional counselling and walk and talk therapy (Newman & Gabriel, 2023).

As discussed in chapter two, confidentiality is paramount in a client and counsellor relationship. When this aspect is threatened it can create some anxieties. In order to minimize the threat of confidentiality when conducting a walk and talk therapy session, certain routes can be chosen or signals can be agreed upon between counsellor and client when either of them

run into someone they know (K. Barry, personal communication, January 1, 2024). However, the risk of jeopardizing the therapeutic relationship may not feel worth it for the counsellor. It is possible the counsellor had to work very hard to create a strong foundation or they are not comfortable going into an environment where there are some unknowns, and in order to keep the momentum going and trust from the client, it feels more stable to continue with in-office counselling sessions.

Eye contact can cause anxiety for many individuals (Rickard et al., 2021). For a client who suffers from an anxiety disorder, direct eye contact can arouse feelings of discomfort during a counselling session. Schneier et al. (2011) compared individuals who are diagnosed with a social anxiety disorder to those who are not, in order to measure the levels of fear and avoidance. A common characteristic is gaze aversion. The person may be overwhelmed with the environment and avoids eye contact to focus on their thoughts without feeling judged, or it could be a copy strategy to maintain a sense of control when talking with another person. The findings of the Schneier et al. (2011) study did suggest those who were diagnosed with social anxiety did self-report significantly higher levels of fear and avoidance of eye contact than those of healthy participants. For clients who suffer from any kind of anxiety disorder, these results support a therapy such as walk and talk where eye contact is not required. Another consideration is cultural differences of clients. Fear of offending someone by giving direct eye contact is a common social value in East Asian cultures. It can be considered confrontational and possibly disrespectful (Schneier et al., 2011; Uono & Hietanen, 2015). However, in Western cultures making eye contact and holding it for an extended period of time can be interpreted as confident and respectful. Overall, it is helpful for counsellors to be aware of the potential factors

that can foster meaningful connections with their clients while respecting individual differences in communication preferences.

What is an option for a client who is not able bodied but would benefit from the outdoor elements? For instance, if the client has mobility issues and are unable to participate in walk and talk therapy. How would a counsellor support or encourage a request from someone who would like to experience nature therapy? As it has been described in chapter two, many kinds of outdoor therapy have been inspired or grown from the premise of walk and talk therapy. It depends on the abilities and needs of the client, but there are still options for them to experience and incorporate what nature can provide.

A disability is not a health condition, it is a complex interaction between the individual, societal and environmental factors (Zhang et al., 2017). Additionally, any health-related promotions and prevention activities do not target those with disabilities as a result of various barriers. Thus, the health-care activities are less accessible causing health disparities (Zhang et al., 2017). Zhang et al. (2017) did an extensive review on the effects nature had on those who were considered to have a disability. There were three elements the researchers measured: mental benefits, social benefits, and physical benefits. Many individuals who do have mobility barriers struggle with the confidence to explore or experience a new environment. A few reasons are concerns about proper accessibility, the potential discrimination they may experience for participating in an outdoor therapeutic activity, as well as safety risks. The activities were either passive or active. The passive outdoor activities were looking out into nature from a window, or if the participants could access the outdoors the preferred activities were being barefoot and enjoyed the sensory stimuli the vegetation and small animals had to

offer. The active activities were gardening, adaptive walking, fishing, and canoeing. The general results from the systemic review did demonstrate an increase participants well-being by spending time in nature. The experiences were stress relief, improved cognition, and increased self-confidence (Zhang et al., 2017). Although there needs to be an extensive amount more research done to promote nature-based therapy, the main goal of these programs should strive to be inclusive and welcoming to individuals of all abilities.

The main focus of many of the studies discussed in this Capstone is to determine if being outside whilst talking to a therapist improves mental well-being, and so far, the results support the positive effects of walk and talk therapy. However, what therapeutic modality is best? There was no direct statement in the research studies if one therapeutic modality was more suitable. Given the favourable outcomes of walk and talk therapy for mood disorders, the most suitable therapeutic modalities are CBT, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), narrative therapy, gestalt therapy, as well as solution-focused therapy (SFT) (Cooley & Robertson, 2020). Cooley and Robertson (2020) do advise the importance of a counsellor being flexible in their chosen therapeutic modality or the ability to integrate multiple modalities when engaging in walk and talk therapy. The outdoors does bring different stimuli, and there may be instances where an aspect of a certain therapeutic modality is needed to support the client. Counsellors who regularly engage in walk and talk therapy, report to having an affinity and good connection to the outdoors and feel confident and comfortable utilizing different modalities (Cooley & Robertson, 2020). The dynamics of walk and talk therapy are unique, having a client centred approach and flexibility that can enhance its effectiveness and the well-being of the individual.

Applications of Walk and Talk Therapy

All of the reviews and studies done on walk and talk therapy as well as other nature-based therapy emphasize there is a large need for more funding for efficacy, mechanisms of action and causality (Cooley et al., 2020; Coventry et al., 2021; Greenleaf et al., 2023; Kelly et al., 2017; La Puma, 2019; Naor & Mayseless, 2021; Olafsdottir et al., 2020; Patel et al., 2011; van den Berg & Beute, 2021; Wicks et al., 2022). The studies evaluate small sample sizes, many of the participants are students, and the measurements of mental health disorders was not always consistent. Funding and strong interest from certain governing bodies could provide the boost walk and talk therapy needs to satisfy the questions on why this type of therapy is needed. For instance, funding in order to secure a large number of participants to provide clearer and perhaps more robust results. As a result, it will support program development, ensure walk and talk therapy's effectiveness, accessibility, and sustainability in addressing mental health disorders. Walking presents significant opportunities for fostering positive mental health and mitigating the risk of mental health issues. Presently, though, the exploration of walking as a distinct avenue for promotion of mental health remains limited. It is to be expected that with ongoing research endeavors a more complete understanding of the benefits of walking will be revealed.

There are a few possibilities where outdoor therapy can grow with certain populations as well as workplaces. Our current human population has become more sedentary, and in order to encourage certain groups to reap the benefits of being outdoors, customized programs need to be developed for adolescents, individuals with a chronic medical condition, and those with mobility issues, with the intention of promoting mental health resilience in vulnerable

populations. Additionally, creating and funding programs for individuals who are employed in an office setting in order to educate and promote a healthier workday. An option could be to allocate a couple of walk breaks throughout the workday to promote physical movement, lower stress levels, and encourage energy boosts. Or providing employee initiatives to participate in some kind of outdoor therapy session to encourage mental well-being. As a result, workplaces could see an increase in job satisfaction and productivity.

Another possible application is integrating technology to track the accessibility of walk and talk therapy. Advancements in tracking devices can be utilized for biofeedback in real-time to measure physiological indicators such as mood and stress. This possibility would help counsellors during outdoor counselling sessions, or individuals who are interested in measuring their own mental health (Hanson & Jones, 2015; Koziel et al., 2022). As we continue to explore and expand the applications of this approach, it is important for mental health professionals to embrace the opportunities it presents and incorporate it into their practice to better serve the diverse needs of their clients. Through ongoing research, collaboration, and advocacy, walk and talk therapy can continue to thrive as a valuable and effective tool in promoting mental health and enhancing quality of life for individuals.

Other areas where programs and initiatives can encourage walk and talk therapy is creating community programs for preventative measures. Individuals should be educated about the benefits walk and talk therapy can have with respect to mental health issues, such as decreasing the symptoms of depression, reducing stress and anxiety, and creating a stronger well-being to prevent any serious mental health diagnosis. Advising physical exercise, socializing, being exposed to different stimuli, and positive cognitive functions are some of the

benefits walk and talk therapy can provide. Hanson and Jones (2015) found several positive improvements that walking groups had on an individual's mental health, including reduced blood pressure, body fat, total cholesterol, and risk of depression. Therefore, outdoor walking groups can be an acceptable form of intervention, with few adverse effects. Creating and promoting walking groups with or without a counsellor can reach individuals who may face barriers to accessing traditional mental health services.

Outdoor therapy, and specifically walk and talk therapy, has garnered considerable empirical support to the many benefits and flexibility it can provide individuals on their therapeutic journey. Cooley and Robertson (2020) reviewed on what needs to be included and considered when creating guidelines or standards of practice for a governing body to consider. For instance, determining the location and what kind of intensity that is suitable for the client. Also, communicating location and considering risks, such as the type of trail and if there are restrooms en route. A very important component when creating guidelines is consent. A new letter of consent will need to be created advising of the ethical consideration of doing counselling outdoors, dual relationships, boundaries, and professional conduct (Cooley & Robertson, 2020). Informed consent is an important aspect to communicate and include in the new letter of consent as there are some unpredictable factors to consider such as confidentiality, weather, and injury. The review by Cooley and Robertson (2020) can be considered a lever for Canada's own governing body of counsellors to promote safe, ethical and effective practices while supporting the outdoor aspect into mental health care.

Once the guidelines are established a training program will be needed for counsellors. When communicating with Kevin Barry (K. Barry, personal communication, October 21, 2023)

part of the resistance to incorporate walk and talk therapy within the counselling sessions was the comfort level of counsellors. Some counsellors are not comfortable with the risks of being outdoors or even feeling comfortable navigating a client on a walk while trying to deliver effective therapy. Therefore, implementing a training module can provide some structure and reassurance for counsellors who are apprehensive or unsure how to actually conduct a walk and talk therapy session. Establishing a training or certification program to define educational prerequisites, experiential training components, supervision requirements, and continuing education criteria to ensure competency and proficiency in delivering walk and talk therapy.

Reflections on Walk and Talk Therapy

Walk and talk therapy offers a refreshing experience and approach to traditional counselling methods. Being outside in nature provides meaningful opportunities for learning and development (Naor & Mayseless, 2021). Clients can feel relaxed and more comfortable expressing themselves in a non-traditional environment as they walk along side their counsellor. The outdoors can serve as a supportive backdrop for individuals to reap the benefits of fresh air, movement, and environment to encourage a different therapeutic experience. It is encouraging to see the medical field is turning to the natural environment for easily accessible method to help treat mental health disorders.

After I reviewed all of the studies and articles advising there is a huge surge in mental health disorder diagnosis, I appreciated how the medical field is turning to the outdoors, something we have free access too. The increase in infrastructure as well as technology has changed the human lifestyle where we seem to be more stressed and depressed than ever. Instead of bringing individuals closer together, it has created distance, limited communication,

and changed our physical environment (Cooley et al., 2020, Harper et al., 2021; Newman & Gabriel, 2023; Olafsdottir et al., 2020). As it has been mentioned, urban planning has focused on incorporating more green spaces for people to have access to (Briton et al., 2020). Additionally, it is very encouraging to know Canada recognizes the variety of benefits the outdoors can provide and as a result a park prescription was created (PaRx, 2024). The website lists the benefits of immersing oneself in nature: living longer, increasing energy, reduced stress and anxiety, better mood, pain reduction, and improved heart health (PaRx, 2024). The improvements listed were a combination of physical and mental benefits which demonstrates how health care is focusing on more holistic healing methods. I was very pleased to see this movement, which promotes individuals to improve their physical and mental health as well as establish a connection with nature instead of turning to medications. It feels as a promising approach to improving public health and well-being while fostering a deeper connection with nature.

One reflection which stood out for me was how individuals can take initiative by supporting themselves with any mental health symptoms. Forest bathing, horticulture, and even grounding are all outdoor activities that have the capacity to be done without the presence of a therapist. With the proper psychoeducation and programs available to communities, individuals who may not have the means or access to a trained counsellor, can participate in therapeutic activities and reap the benefits. As a result, an individual can feel empowered because they took charge of their mental health.

Kelly et al. (2017) discusses how the historical significance of walking within societies and how research evolved to understand the benefits walking has on physical health. It was not

until I became a parent when I realized the importance walking can have on one's mental state. I came to understand why walking groups had high and consistent attendance and was a significant form of exercise. It hit three very important areas: mental, physical, and social. Something humans all require to thrive and prosper. Therefore, by providing outdoor therapy encompasses a holistic approach to support clients.

Overall, my understanding and knowledge on walk and talk therapy for this Capstone has deepened my conviction of the healing potential of nature and inspired me to continue exploring this field in my future practice as a counsellor. By incorporating the insight of the natural environment and integrating outdoor experiences into therapeutic interventions, I believe we can empower individuals to cultivate resilience, find meaning, and thrive during mental health challenges. The growing body of research on walk and talk therapy underscores its significant potential as a holistic and effective approach to improving mental health and well-being, offering promising avenues for future exploration and application in clinical practice.

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