



# Forest Therapy tools for Youth Work

A Practical  
Guide  
2024



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# Why Forest Therapy?

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Exposure to natural settings is well proven to improve physical and mental health, retention of learning, civic engagement and environmental responsibility.

These are all highly relevant in our world for our own wellbeing and that of the young people we work with who will actively shape our future.

Research shows us these benefits of time spent in green environments are increased dramatically through mindful practices. Hence we would like to present some example of how to introduce some simple sensory exercises attractive to Youth to enhance the benefits they receive as you work with them in natural settings.

# What is Forest Therapy?

*Moving through a natural environment, unhurried and employing all the senses in mindful attention.*

# Cultural History



Forest Therapy is often associated with Shinrin-yoku (Forest Bathing)



This term was coined in 1982 in Japan.



The practice encourages people to immerse themselves in nature, particularly forests, as a form of preventive healthcare.



It was developed as part of Japan's public health strategy, recognising the stress-reducing and overall health benefits of spending time in forested areas.



The Japanese roots of forest therapy are deeply connected to the country's historical and cultural reverence for nature. Shintoism and Buddhism, the two dominant religions in Japan, both emphasise harmony with nature, and the idea of forests as sacred spaces is integral to these traditions.

# Approaching Youth Work

In applying Forest Therapy tools to youth work we recommend taking a wider view of the term to include any practice within green spaces. Some of the more traditional mindfulness approaches we associate with meditation can feel daunting to a young person with a busy mind and many distractions.

Yes, the benefits of forest therapy in wild forests with limited human sights and sounds are the most powerful. Luckily there is a large amount of research showing us that similar practices in a busy urban park, with a pot plant in a room or a view of the sky through a window also are of great benefit. (Han et al., 2022; Jo et al., 2019)

The science also supports the idea that we benefit just by being in green spaces. Young people who may not be considering or focusing on self improvement can benefit regardless.

For some it may be useful to forget terminology and focus on the outcomes.

We can think of these approaches more generally as 'Natural Therapy' or simply reconnecting with the natural world and recognising ourselves as a part of that world.

# What are these benefits?

The research in this area has been growing rapidly since the 80's with every year more observations of practitioners and peer reviewed studies expanding the list of positive outcomes. Here are some key recognised benefits to youth:

## Cognitive and Learning:



Improved retention of learning



Increased curiosity



Stronger focus and attention span:  
Particularly benefiting youth with ADHD.



Boosted creativity: Innovative thinking and lateral problem-solving.



Contextual learning opportunities:  
Nature settings make concepts like ecosystems, sustainability, and teamwork more tangible and relatable.

### Social and Leadership Development:

- Enhanced teamwork and collaboration
- Leadership skill-building
- Civic engagement: Increased interest in volunteering, community action and are more likely to vote
- Interpersonal skills: greater empathy, inclusivity, and understanding
- Increased environmental stewardship

### Health Benefits:

- Better sleep quality
- Reduced inflammation
- Stronger immune system
- Improved cardiovascular health

### Emotional and Mental Health Benefits:

- Reduced stress and anxiety
- Improved emotional resilience and coping mechanisms
- Mindfulness and self-awareness
- Improved self-esteem.
- Reduced climate anxiety
- Stronger sense of purpose
- Cultural and heritage connection: Green spaces foster respect for traditions and local ecological history.

### Behavioral Benefits:

- Better task focus / reduced impulsivity
- Reduced aggression and conflicts
- Enhanced sense of responsibility



Reconnecting with the natural world is unique and personal



*"For me Forest Therapy is a natural way to connect to your wild side and experience freedom in your life"*

*-Sofia*

*"Forest Therapy is the herbs I collect from the forest to prepare preventive medicines for diseases"*

*-Ferhat*



*"For me Forest Therapy is a way to find a better path to yourself, your health and how to not be in a war against yourself"*

*-Maša*

# Considerations for Facilitators

## **Create a Safe, Comfortable, and Familiar Space**

- Don't forget the usual: safety, accessibility and weather
- Eating or drinking in a space improves comfort and familiarity
- Highlighting landmarks and storytelling linked to the location is effective

## **Sensory Focus**

- Exercises focusing on one sense at a time are very powerful tools
  - Non verbal or silent tasks are ideal

## **Lean into your Creativity**

- Journaling, drawing, land art, sculpture, drama and music are all useful tools provided you focus on the process, not the outcome
- Use natural materials from the space as physical tools or symbolic props to count intentions, learning or observations.

## **▪ Physical, Visible Action**

- Tree planting, gardening, foraging litter collection or building
  - Creates a personal connection with natural spaces and promotes a sense of community and responsibility
- Particularly powerful for those struggling with climate anxiety

## **Slow down**

- Try to include slow movement or stillness. The younger your group the more creative you get to be!
  - closed eyes, roleplay, storytelling, thought-provoking questions, identifying shapes in clouds, counting things you can smell or hear, breathing exercises...
- Ensure time for reflection and discussion

## **Rituals**

- Opening and closing the activity with a ritual is an important lesson from Forest Therapy. This specifically enhances the behavioural and emotional benefits and is very effective for 'letting go' of negative emotions. Used extensively in bereavement treatment.

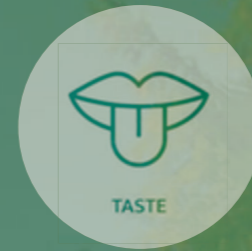
Always include **Individual Experience** within group work

## **Close with Gratitude**

- End your activity with a moment of gratitude to any natural elements around you and to each other

Remember being in a natural space is already of great benefit to you all. Completing tasks or full participation is of less concern especially for those less comfortable or easily distracted.

# Example Workshops



**Who?** 3 years+

**When?** All seasons

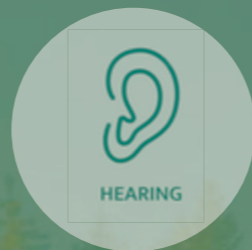
**Materials?** Food foraged from nature or from backpack

**Where?** In a green space or during a break on a hike

## **Exercise:**

You will have 2 of the same “taste elements” for every participant. You will share one piece with each participant. Ask them to eat it. After this ask them to remember the taste and any other feelings.

After this you will share the other piece, but before eating it, ask them to observe, smell and touch the piece.



**Were the taste and feeling the same?  
Was anything different?**



**Useful tip: Eating and drinking in green spaces has been shown to improve the health benefits of Forest Therapy. Always have your breaks with Youth in Green Spaces!**





**Preparation:** Make up one jar for each participant. Jars should be covered in paper so the contents are hidden. Put something into each jar with a different scent. (Ideally natural smells!)

**For example:** clean straw, locally available plants, compost or soil, fresh lambswool, boiled cabbage. Wood smoke can be achieved by holding a damp piece of cloth over smoke then closing in the jar. If natural products are difficult to obtain you can use some essential oils. Write the name of the contents on the inside of the lid and close the jars. Be careful to avoid allergens.

- 1 Everyone takes one jar and sits in the circle.
- 2 Close your eyes and open your jar. Put the jar close to your nose and concentrate on the smell 5min
- 3 While participants concentrate on smell, facilitator can pose questions every minute or so.

**Do any feelings come?  
Is this smell connected with a certain place? -Where are you?  
Do any memories arise?**

Eyes remain closed and no speaking throughout.



Afterwards participants share in pairs and in the group about the experience.

The same questions that were posed by the facilitator can be used.

If time permits a follow up exercise can be useful for participants to reflect on how their awareness of smell may have changed. Sit (eyes closed) or walk in a natural space and focus on what you smell.

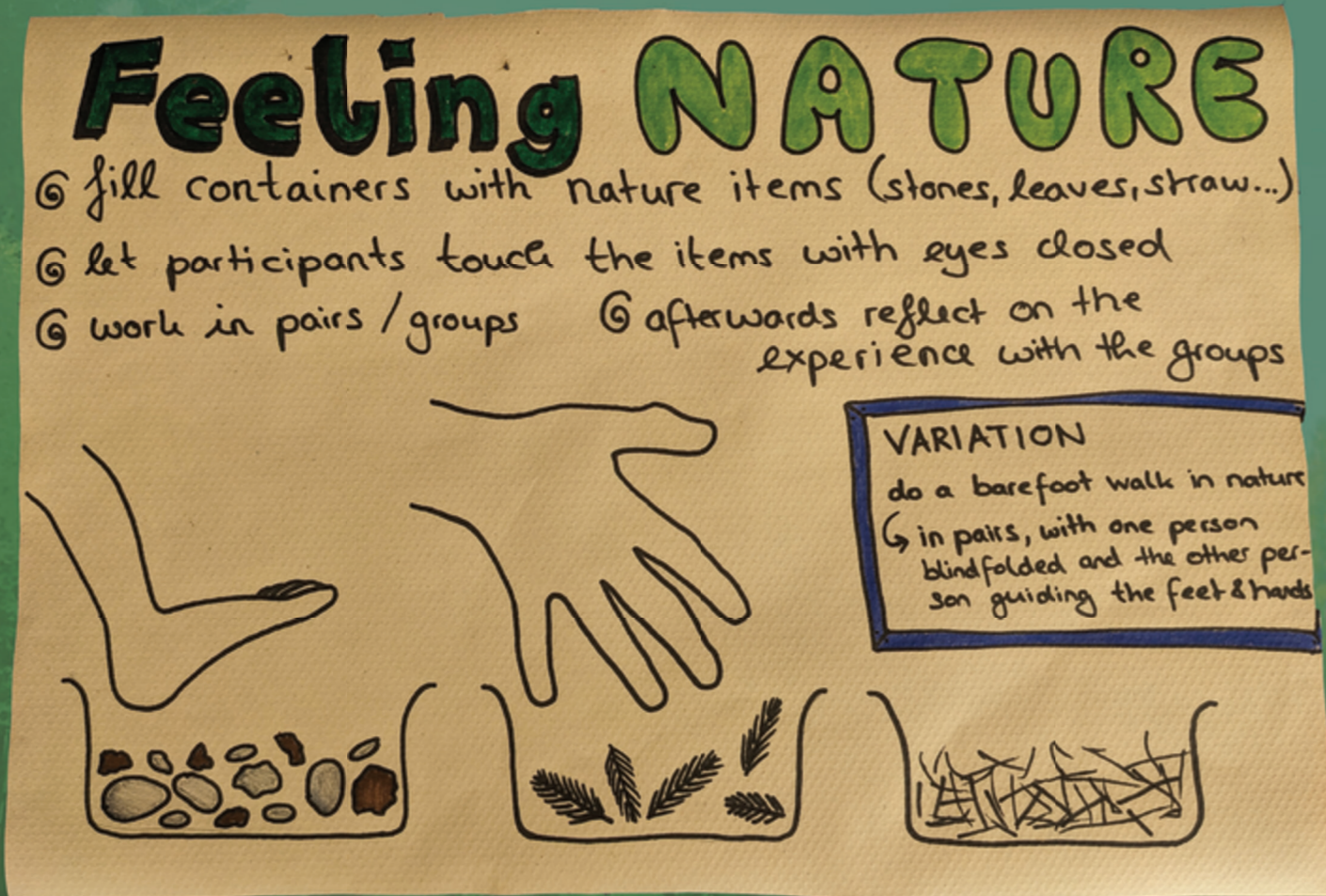
Younger groups can be set the task to 'collect' 5 scents they can **recognise** or **describe** by counting off on their fingers.

**\*\*Note for Facillitators:**

Focusing on smell can bring up emotive or difficult memories. Facilitator should be observant and ready to support participants through the experience.



**Smell Jars**



**Flags in the forest** is a forest therapy tool to encourage us to use our sight more attentively and to be more present.

**Where:** Ideally a forest or natural area with a walking trail, but can also be conducted in parks, sports grounds or athletic tracks.

**Materials:** Textile or paper coloured flags (for example red, green, brown and white)  
If doing a longer walk, a second facilitator should be "whip" following behind the group to ensure nobody is left behind.

**Group Briefing:**

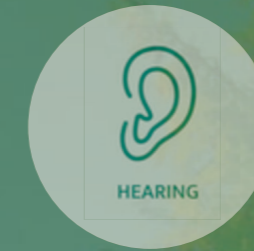
- 1 This is a silent exercise
- 2 You begin the walk only when the person ahead of you is out of site.
- 3 You will come across someone who will give you a coloured flag.  
From the moment you see the flag, look for and pay attention to this colour in your surroundings.
- 4 Wait in the same place and when the next person arrives silently pass them the flag and continue to walk focusing on the same colour until you receive another flag.
- 5 You will notice other colours than the flag colour. You will gently remove your attention from them and focus on anything you can see around you that is the colour of the flag.
- 6 Stay on the trail and look for arrows if you come to an intersection.

The facilitator walks into the forest (or green space) with the flags hidden in a basket or bag.

**What did your hands tell you that your eyes might have missed?**  
**Any surprises?**  
**Anything comforting? Was there anything you did not identify?**  
**How did it feel to not label, only explore?**

**Adaption:**

Whilst touching the items, ask the participants to describe the item (without naming it) to their partner or group in as much detail as possible. Then ask them to describe what they are feeling themselves as they touch the item.



The facilitator chooses places where the flag changes take place and marks the trail with chalk or branches if needed. Ideally choose places where you are not seen from far.

**Did anything surprise you? Were any colours more or less interesting?**

**Adaptions:**

For younger participants a similar exercise can be conducted in a circle with one colour presented to the group at a time. Group are then invited to walk around a supervised area in silence focusing on that colour before being called back to be given the next colour.

**Facilitator tip:** Include green in your flags, focusing on this colour in natural settings has been shown to reduce stress hormones!

**Silent walk** is a simple tool for mindful and relaxing walk that helps to concentrate on the sense of hearing and connect to the environment. This session can be done anywhere outdoors.

**Materials:** none

**Time:** around 1 hour

**Participant:** individual or group size up to 10-12 people

Start with a circle where you explain the aims and structure of the exercise (5-10 min) and give a time frame and meeting point after the walk.

Invite the participants to go out for a walk in the area (park etc). During the walk everyone shall remain silent and concentrate on the sounds around them. Ask them to name and remember as many different sounds as they can notice. Remind them to pay attention to the sounds nearby and farther away. Stopping to stand still at times and (where safe) closing your eyes can help with hearing farther or less obvious noises.

Head out for the walk for about 30 min. After returning, ask participants to share their experience in pairs or in a circle depending on the group's comfort.

**Most memorable sound? Any surprises?**

**How did the sounds affect your mood? Did you feel more connected to your surroundings? Why or why not?**

**\*\*Note for Facilitators:** Silent walk sessions are most effective in natural spaces, with minimal human generated sound, however even in the loudest urban environment it is an valuable sensory tool to train mindfulness. In such situations you can use the reflection question, **Which sounds were natural in origin?** or you can vary to task to collect only sounds that come from nature.

## BONUS!

### PLANT BINGO

- Divide participants in small teams, give them bingo sheets.
- Their task will be the finding plants in surrounding area and shout BINGO.

→ You can prepare the game according to plants you have in your area.



#### OPTIONS:

- You can decide the difficulty according to group (age, knowledge level about plants)
- If you want you can include some questions to bingo.

#### SUGGESTIONS:

- Give resources for youth to find out how the plant looks like.
- Explain the plant benefits shortly, give some examples that participants can do in their lives.

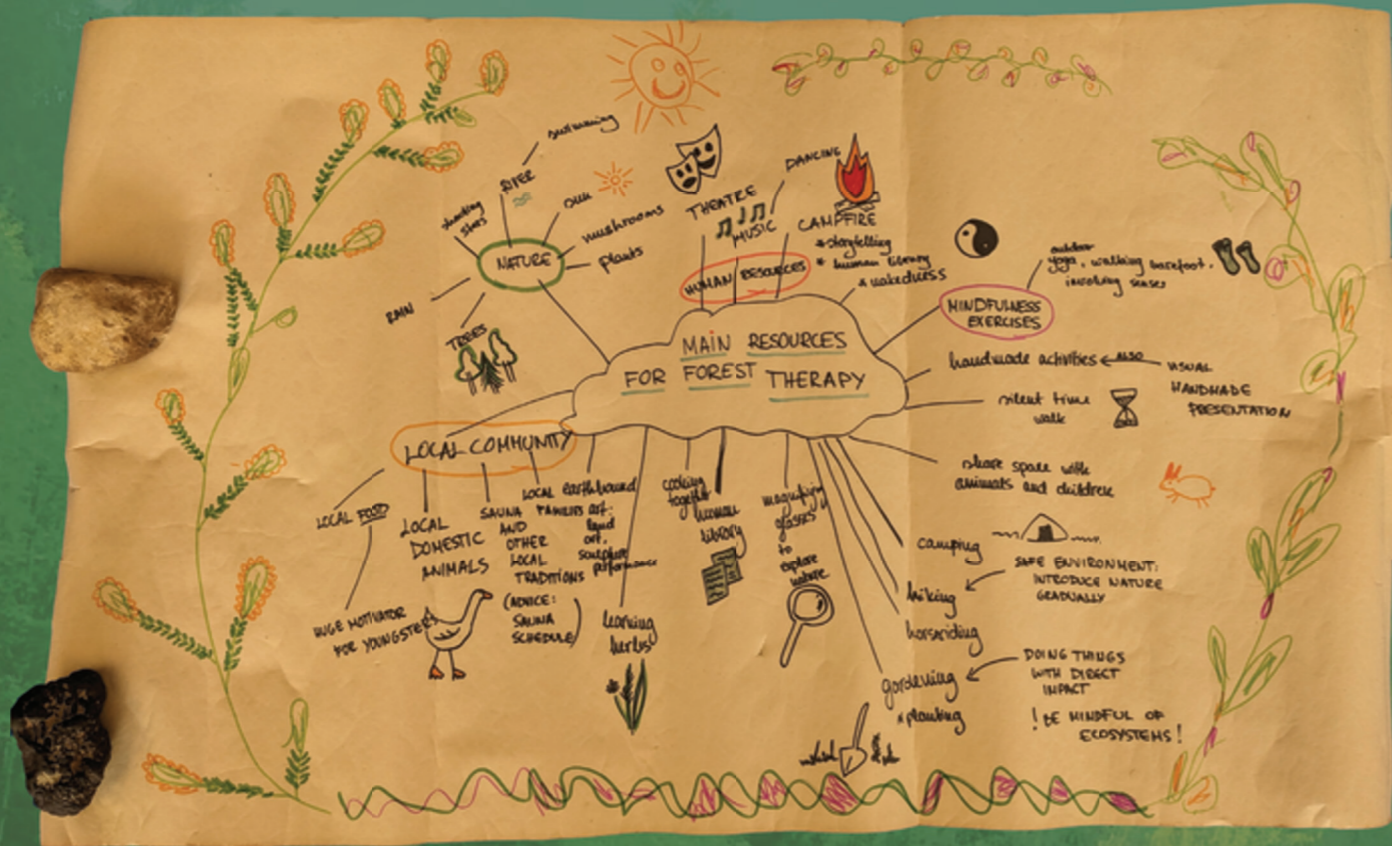
#### REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- How we can use these plants in our daily lives?
- How was the group dynamic? What do you find interesting?

*The natural setting promotes a suspension of the human-centred and self-centred preoccupation. ...we can achieve a more powerful practice approaching our experience with humility. Hence the way or practice of Forest Therapy extends beyond the natural settings into the rest of our life*

*- Prof. David Edward Cooper*

# Resources



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# Good Reading

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# About this Toolbox

This document was created as the culmination of a 7 day workshop in Southern Estonia. The participants were youth workers from Estonia, Turkey, Bulgaria and Luxembourg.

The course was focused on Introducing Forest Therapy and exploring how best to include it's benefits in our daily Youthwork in both Rural and Urban settings.

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If you have any feedback on this document, are active in this topic or would like to be we would love to hear from you.

Please get in touch!

[mtyeikkellegimaa@gmail.com](mailto:mtyeikkellegimaa@gmail.com)



Elif Öztürk  
Eva Edovald  
Ferhat Şimşek  
Hande Demir  
Jéssika Rodrigues de Oliveira Hoffmann  
Justin De Bondi  
Karin Hindre  
Kätlin Valving  
Killu Vunk  
Marko Nuut  
Mariya Lilova  
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