



**why...**  
we hear you  
Cancer  
Counselling  
Registered Charity No. 110291

# WHY outdoors: an evaluation

Moa Sundström and Melissa Hillier

**why...**  
we hear you

**KING'S**  
*College*  
**LONDON**



# About us

We Hear You (WHY) provides emotional support through free, professional counselling services for anyone who has been affected by cancer or other life-threatening conditions. We support children, young people and adults across Bath and North East Somerset, Somerset and Wiltshire.

This data in this report was collected and analysed by Moa Sundström during a placement with WHY from the MSc Health Psychology course at King's College London, in collaboration with WHY's Chief Executive Officer Melissa Hillier.

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We'd like to thank everyone who took the time to participate in this project: with your help we can improve our services for people affected by cancer.

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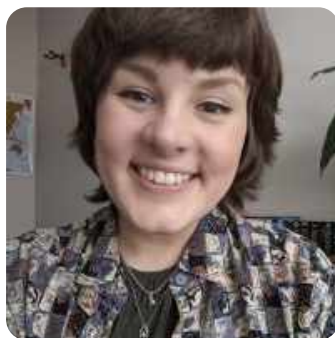
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# Foreword



**Melissa Hillier, WHY CEO**



**Moa Sundström**

## **Thank you for reading our WHYoutdoors report.**

At We Hear You we're always revising our services to combat barriers to access, both visible and invisible, and striving to ensure we're offering the support that people want and need, to help them cope with the emotional impact of cancer or a life threatening condition.

Our WHYoutdoors courses now run several times a year and the feedback is consistently absolutely glowing. The existence of WHYoutdoors is thanks in no small part to Rhonda Brandwick and Michéal Connors of Natural Academy in North Bristol, who collaborated with us on the WHYoutdoors pilot project, and subsequently trained four WHY counsellors to run the courses independently.

A big thank you also to Moa Sundström of King's College London for her fantastic work on this report, to our WHYoutdoors facilitators and the participants who gave up their time to take part in this research.

**Melissa Hillier**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**We Hear You**  
**February 2022**

### **About the author:**

Moa Sundström is a recent MSc Health Psychology graduate from King's College London and aspiring Health Psychologist with a huge interest in public health issues. She is particularly interested in the psychosocial aspects of life with and beyond cancer, how chronic illnesses can impact a person's social life and romantic relationships, and how to manage one's health holistically. Carrying out the WHYoutdoors evaluation sparked an interest in her to further research nature-based therapies, particularly whether this can be applied to other illness-populations and how to create a similar intervention for those cancer patients who are not as mobile. This is something she hopes to investigate in the form of a PhD in the future. In the past she has carried out research in people with Parkinson's who attended dance classes with their partners and also the quality of life in young adults living with Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis. She is currently working in Clinical trials and is enjoying seeing a different aspect of medical research.

# Key points

**WHYoutdoors is a novel workshop developed in collaboration with the Natural Academy, Avon Wildlife, and We Hear You (WHY). It is based upon the Five Pathways of nature connection, namely contact, beauty, emotions, compassion, and meaning. It was developed as a programme to help people living with or beyond cancer, as it is well-known that this population often suffers from psychological issues such as anxiety, depression and unanswered existential questions, often causing significant and lasting distress.**

**In this evaluation, five WHYoutdoors participants volunteered to take part in interviews, as did four counsellors who facilitated the course.**

The overall findings indicated that the participants thoroughly enjoyed their time with WHYoutdoors. The course gave them time for self-care, to reflect on what they had gone through, to become more connected to nature through various grounding techniques, become more mindful, and connect with others going through a similar experience. Everyone got something different out of the course and they all seemed to get what they needed, the course was flexible and varied enough to allow for individual differences. It is also really important that there is support available for those suffering with long-term effects, especially psychological support as family and friends do not always realise how long lasting someone's cancer diagnosis may be.

The counsellors who took part in the training and then acted as the facilitators all gained something from the training/course as well and they were able to incorporate this into their general counselling practice to some degree. They thought the course was very well designed and had something to offer for everyone, from being a life-changing experience for some, to increasing nature appreciation for others. Both the participants' and counsellors' impressions of the course were very similar, and nobody had any major suggestions for improving the course, as most of them thought it was perfect the way it was currently designed.

Lastly, the take home message is that, as humans, we are all part of nature, and nourishing this relationship is incredibly important, with the potential to improve psychological wellbeing: something which has been found in numerous studies across the world and reported by this report's participants.

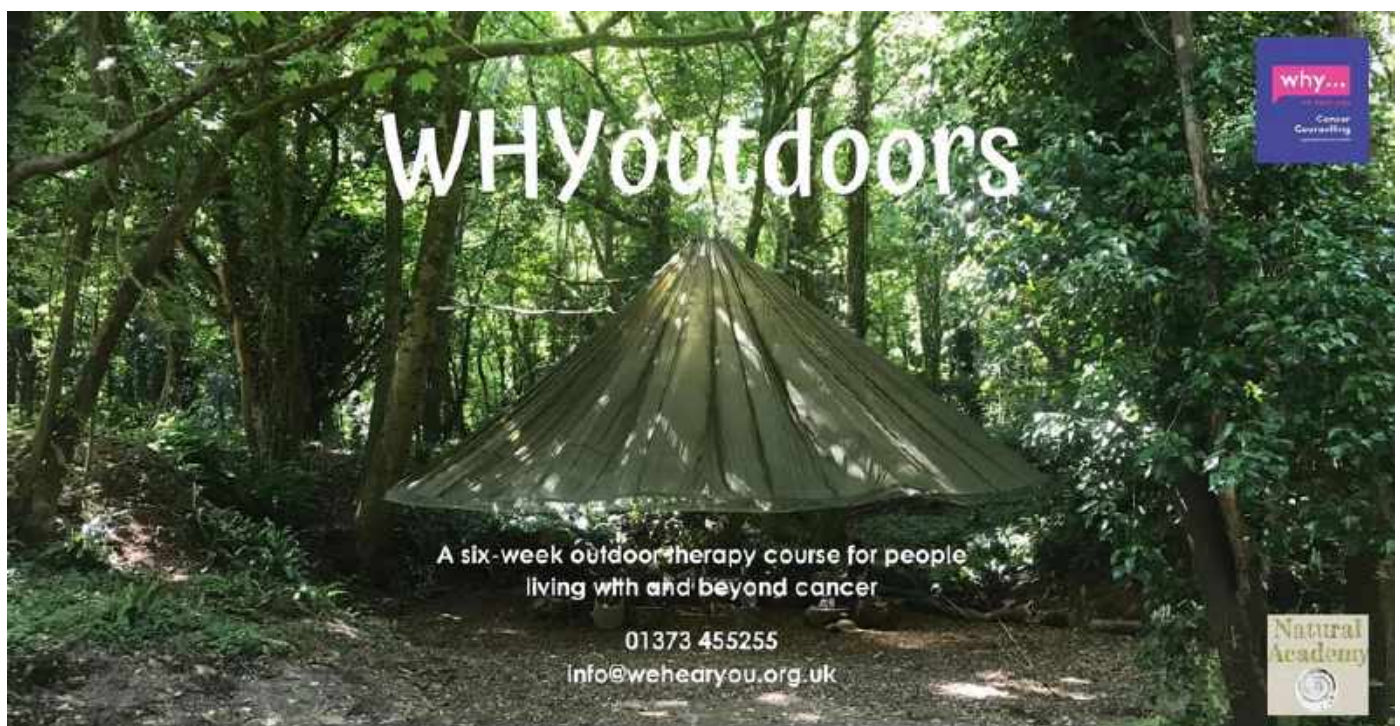
**with our group, there was one person in particular who went very deep and you know I think probably it was life changing for them.**



# Recommendations

## Suggestions for future WHYoutdoors courses

- Online follow up sessions
- Offering a second, more in-depth level of WHYoutdoors for those who are interested
- Having a one-off day where those affected by cancer can bring a loved one along (child, partner, friend, etc) and have a nice, positive experience with them.
- Organising various workshops in nature and incorporate nature, creativity, and social connection in these; for example wood carving or flower wreath making. This could potentially also make nature connection workshops more accessible as there would be minimal mobility requirements. Could also be a great way to awake an interest in those who are sceptical about doing a whole six-week course
- A controlled study needs to be carried out using both objective and subjective measurements (questionnaires and physiological measures e.g., salivary cortisol tests to measure stress levels indirectly)



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# Background

A cancer diagnosis can be incredibly unsettling and traumatic as it can often make the person rethink some of their life decisions and face their own mortality, possibly for the first time in their life. It is common for cancer patients to develop mental health issues, for example in women with breast cancer, almost 40% have elevated anxiety levels and 22% have depressive symptoms one and a half years after diagnosis, suggesting that the psychological and emotional effects of cancer can be long-lasting if not treated.<sup>1</sup> Women have also been found to be more likely to experience anxiety and depression than men, although both men and women who are younger than 50 years seem to experience mental health difficulties after receiving a cancer diagnosis.<sup>2</sup> Due to the enormous impact cancer can have on a person's wellbeing, there is a whole range of support services available to those affected such as mindfulness courses,<sup>3</sup> group therapy,<sup>4</sup> art therapy,<sup>5</sup> and increasingly therapeutic interventions based around nature,<sup>6</sup> as many find counselling and traditional support inadequate due to long waiting times, expensive (if accessing support privately), and not tailored to living with and beyond cancer.<sup>7</sup>

Historically, nature-based therapy and holistic healthcare have not had a place in the Western world of health and medicine as the focus has been based on a biomedical perspective. This is however changing as holistic person-centred healthcare is slowly becoming more popular. One commonly used form of alternative therapy is garden therapy, which has been found to improve psychological wellbeing in various groups of people, for example elderly with or without dementia who live alone or in a residential home,<sup>8</sup> people with stress disorders or burnout,<sup>9</sup> and those with psychiatric illness such as schizophrenia.<sup>10</sup> Garden therapy is thought to have positive effects on wellbeing as a result of interacting with nature and is linked to the Biophilia hypothesis, an innate human need to be connected with nature due to the physical, intellectual, and emotional levels of connectedness nature has to offer.<sup>11</sup>

The social aspects of outdoor based courses and therapy programmes have been found to be an important part of the overall experience, as creating therapeutic bonds with people in a similar situation as oneself can be both powerful and healing.<sup>12</sup>

Another result of spending time in nature is increased happiness which is closely linked with nature connectedness,<sup>13</sup> although it is difficult to pinpoint the causal relationship between nature connectedness and happiness. It has also been shown that in outdoor therapy the participants discovered that being outdoors was what they valued the most, followed by ability to reflect, and surprisingly that the relationship with the therapist was not important in facilitating positive experiences.<sup>12</sup>

The authors suggest that this is due to the positive group experiences and opportunity to connect with others, meaning that the participants did not need to create a close relationship with the therapist as typically happens in a one-to-one therapeutic setting.

Due to the vast impact a cancer diagnosis can have on a person and their life, many of these alternative therapies have been developed or adjusted for cancer populations. Walking and physical therapy overall in cancer patients has been found to improve both physiological and psychological health and wellbeing.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, group psychotherapy alongside an at-home exercise programme can improve cancer survivors' physiological and psychological wellbeing, particularly quality of life.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, combining exercise with therapy can be particularly helpful for those who may not feel comfortable with attending traditional psychotherapy due to perceived or experienced stigma and can therefore be a great way to encourage men to attend, who may feel apprehensive about one-to-one therapy.

## Summary

WHYoutdoors is a holistic course aimed at those living with and beyond cancer at any stage of their cancer journey. The course was developed based on Wellbeing with Nature by the Natural Academy and Avon Wildlife and is based on the five pathways of nature connectedness: contact, beauty, emotions, compassion, and meaning, all of which have been found to increase a person's feelings of nature connectedness.<sup>16</sup> The course aims to increase nature connectedness and help the participants come to terms with their cancer diagnosis or cancer-related issues such as anxiety, worry of relapse, or existential questions, all of which are common.<sup>17</sup> Although there is a current lack of coherent research in combining these five pathways for cancer survivors, there is a body of research in the effects of these pathways on their own.



# The Five Pathways

## 1 - Contact

Contact is based upon grounding techniques, sense connection, and mindful walking, all of which are currently on the rise in the Western world even though Shinrin-Yoku (or forest bathing) - which incorporates all of these - has been used for decades in Japan and other Asian countries.<sup>18</sup> Forest bathing is a form of mindfulness practice whereby one uses all senses to heal through nature and has been found to increase killer cells (which kill cancerous cells), improve hypertension, reduce anxiety and depression, as well as increase feelings of gratitude and connectedness.<sup>18, 19</sup>

A recent systematic review pointed out that there is no one way of measuring the effects of forest bathing and that this field needs standardised measurements in order to understand and interpret the potential benefits in a robust manner.<sup>19</sup> However, the authors did find that overall forest bathing seems to reduce anxiety and to some degree stress, depression, and anger, showing that the evidence within this field looks promising.



## 2 - Beauty

Biophilia can be defined as the love and appreciation for nature, leading to greater appreciation of a person's natural surroundings.<sup>20</sup> Through actively spending time in nature and appreciating all its beauty individuals can increase their nature connectedness as well as wellbeing, although it is important to note that one needs to be emotionally invested in order to experience the wellbeing benefits.<sup>21</sup> There is also cross-cultural evidence that engaging with and appreciating natural beauty is related to wellbeing in healthy people, which is facilitated through an increased nature connectedness.<sup>22</sup> There has also recently been a suggestion for combining nature therapy with ecological restoration, whereby participants take part in restoring the natural environment through a 'hands-on' approach which can increase nature appreciation and connectedness and therefore also wellbeing.<sup>23</sup>

# The Five Pathways

## 3 - Emotions

Talking about emotions can be challenging for many reasons, for example cultural and social expectations can make a person feel as if they need to 'man up' or 'get on' with things – attitudes which can be very damaging. There is also stigma around opening up about one's emotions and attending therapy. The act of simply sharing emotions regarding cancer with other cancer survivors has been found to be therapeutic for women who have had breast cancer,<sup>14</sup> although this will of course differ from person to person. Johnsen<sup>24</sup> showed that healthy adults found it easier to improve their negative emotional states when they were in natural environments and that the participants consciously sought out to visit natural environments in order to restore their psychological wellbeing following a difficult situation. This has also been found by others,<sup>25</sup> who concluded that people spend time in nature to aid them in shifting their thinking patterns from negative to positive and to help them maintain a positive state of mind.

**Current research indicates that meaning-centred group therapy for cancer survivors has been found to improve psychological wellbeing and personal meaning in both those receiving palliative care and cancer survivors no longer needing care.**

## 4 - Compassion

Having self-compassion makes a person more likely to carry out self-affirmations, which are linked with prosocial behaviours whereby a person focuses on someone else by helping or comforting them for example.<sup>26</sup> Self-compassion has further been found to play an interesting role in cancer survivors as thinking kindly of oneself has been associated with fewer symptoms of depression and stress, as well as better quality of life compared to patients with cancer who have low levels of self-compassion.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, research has also shown that self-compassion may mediate the relationship between nature exposure and body appreciation and body functionality in healthy people.<sup>28</sup> This is particularly interesting as it is well-known that cancer survivors sometimes struggle with body image after treatment and that both nature and self-compassion may help them change this.

# The Five Pathways

## 5 - Meaning

Meaning-centred psychotherapy was developed specifically for people with cancer to address spiritual, psychological, social, and physical issues/needs following a cancer diagnosis.<sup>29</sup> This type of therapy was first developed in 2010 and has been found to increase hope and meaning finding as well as help the patients with answers to spiritual questions, particularly palliative cancer patients.<sup>30</sup> However, since then patients and healthcare professionals alike have identified a need for meaning-centred therapy for those living beyond cancer as well. As a result of better targeted treatments more people are surviving and becoming long-term cancer survivors,<sup>31</sup> albeit the anxieties and meaning-centred questions seldom go away after a person has had a brush with their mortality. The psychological effects can be long lasting and often people suffer from anxiety and worry and have a number of unanswered questions regarding existential and spiritual matters.<sup>17</sup> Current research indicates that meaning-centred group therapy for cancer survivors has been found to improve psychological wellbeing and personal meaning in both those receiving palliative care and cancer survivors no longer needing care.<sup>4</sup>

The current evaluation was carried out in order to gain an understanding of what the participants take from WHYoutdoors, how the course has affected them, and what aspects are good or bad. The counsellors who facilitate the course were also interviewed to understand how the training and course has impacted them, to learn what they think of the course and in what ways they believe it impacts the participants, and whether these match the participants' thoughts.





# Participants

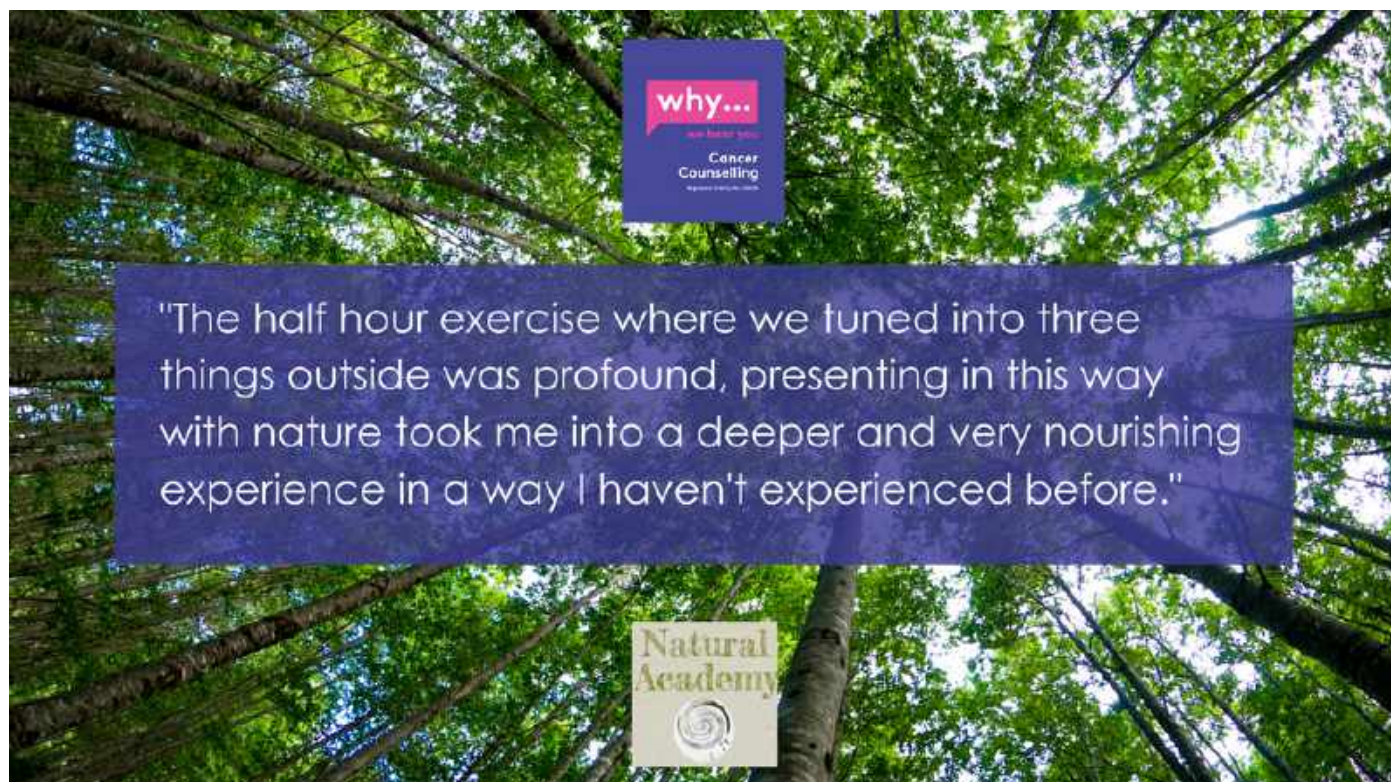
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Five WHYoutdoors participants, all women (mean age 57.2 years) took part in semi-structured interviews. Four were living with and beyond breast cancer, one ovarian cancer

4

Four WHYoutdoors facilitators also took part in semi-structured interviews. All were counsellors for WHY prior to the WHYoutdoors training

A virtual WHYoutdoors also made it more accessible, and as one participant pointed out, this may be a way of reaching a wider range of people as going through cancer can be a lonely experience but having access to WHYoutdoors changed this completely.



# Findings

## Themes and subthemes



### **Main theme - Nature connection and being outdoors**

The course improved participants' nature connection and made them look and spend time in nature in a different, more meaningful way

#### **Subtheme - After the course: mindfulness and grounding**

Some used the techniques frequently after the course had finished and found it helped them cope with both cancer and COVID

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### **Main theme - The WHYoutdoors format**

The setting where WHYoutdoors took place was very important and aided the participants' positive experiences and healing

#### **Subtheme - "I wouldn't change anything"**

The participants liked the course the way it was and only had minor suggestions for improvement

#### **Subtheme - COVID and Zoom WHYoutdoors**

Nature connection could potentially be taught over Zoom and was found to be very beneficial

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### **Main theme - Powerful and profound experience**

WHYoutdoors can be a life changing experience and have a positive impact on most aspects of a person's life

#### **Subtheme - Expectations beforehand**

Nobody knew what to expect prior to the course and did not want to ask too many questions as they wanted to do it with an open mind

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### **Main theme - psychological impact and wellbeing**

The psychological long-term effects of cancer were mentioned numerous times, and the importance of psychological, emotional, and spiritual healing.

#### **Subtheme - Socialising with others in the same situation**

Being able to speak to others who have gone through the same thing was beneficial and the participants were able to make close bonds with the others.

# Nature connection and being outdoors

Attending WHYoutdoors led to an increased nature connection for many as it shifted their relationship with the natural world:



*What was important to me [was] the sort of more connection to nature, taking more time, seeing the beauty in nature, and, you know, a more peaceful feeling.*

*Matilda*

All participants enjoyed spending time outdoors prior to the course but rarely took the time to appreciate nature. One participant spoke of how seeing bare trees during the course helped her appreciate where she was in her cancer journey, as she felt upset having lost her hair and was able to draw parallels between her hair growing back and trees growing leaves in the spring, which she found transformative.



*I believe in nature and this connection with oneness and all that kind of stuff, it just felt right to explore where I was at in my life, in that way the connection with the land and where you fit, it just made so much sense to be exploring where I was at on the land you know with connections to nature, it's amazing.*

*Gemma*





## Nature connection and being outdoors (cont.)

Another important aspect for those who attended the course in person was where it took place. Patricia commented:

***“it’s a little, just this lovely woodland and lovely, it’s beautiful. It was very important that it was in this outdoor space and not in a room somewhere cos it wasn’t talking about, you know, it was happening”.***

The participants also liked being away from any distractions and how the facilitators fostered the participants’ nature connection in numerous ways, by setting creative tasks for example. Matilda said she was able to “engage with nature in a different way than I used to, which obviously was facilitated by the staff” which allowed her to slow down and appreciate nature more. Furthermore, finding meaningful items in nature helped the participants with their reflections and realisations and gave the course a nice structure:

***“I did like that they gave us tasks and then sent us off to either collect things or to observe things and I did enjoy that kind of having a kind of structured uh purpose to exploring” (Camilla).***



## After the course: mindfulness and grounding

Throughout the course the participants learned various grounding and mindfulness techniques which they enjoyed to varying degrees. Most found the techniques useful and had implemented them in their lives since then, except one participant: 'I think I was too busy in my head to engage with some of these techniques. They were nice, when we did them together, but I can't say in honesty that I took them away and did them on my own, I didn't' (Matilda). This nicely illustrates how versatile the course is, and allows everyone to take from it whatever they need at that point in their life. Most had however incorporated grounding techniques into their everyday life, for example Violet:



**I still, I even go out in my garden now, I've got a camping chair set up in my shed that I sit in sometimes and if it's a bit windy or rainy I'm sat in the shed under cover, just listening to it all and watching it all.**

showing how one can feel connected to nature in the comforts of one's home or garden.

Another aspect that was frequently mentioned was the simplicity of it all and how easy some found it to integrate WHYoutdoors. One participant mentioned having taken notes during the sessions which helped deepen their understanding afterwards. Overall, the participants all felt the course helped them in numerous ways, from being a life-changing event for some to helping others cope with COVID and lockdown as well as accept their post-cancer bodies. Patricia gave an example of what she gained from the course:

***"Just being kind to yourself I think, not being hard on ourselves, which is definitely something that was really fostered in the outdoors group"***

Some participants had also made more tangible changes after the course such as taking pictures of nature and bringing fresh flowers into their homes.



## The WHYoutdoors format

Four participants attended the course in person and one person through Zoom due to COVID restrictions at that time point. One major positive aspect of the course was the duration, as it allowed them to dig deeper than would have been possible during a standard one-hour counselling session. Most also did not want traditional therapy or only talk about cancer, about which Gemma said:

***"I didn't know what to expect, I kind of wasn't sure whether we were gonna sit there and talk about our cancer and all that, which wasn't really what I wanted to do"***

However, most found it beneficial to talk about their cancer journey during the lunch break, and having this longer break was therefore a positive and important aspect of the course.

The facilitators were praised by all participants for their wealth of knowledge, understanding, and way of holding the group.



***the overview and the management of the people that were guiding it, the facilitators, and I did quite like the fact that they were holding us, I did like that I could kind of go there and put myself in their hands if you like, and trust the situation, I didn't have to just be me, making all my own decisions all the time***

**Camilla**

The participants felt it was a safe space and were able to be vulnerable and seeing others' vulnerability too aided their own healing and reflections. Patricia echoed this and said:

***"I liked listening to everybody else talking about their experiences and being vulnerable, and it's a privilege you know, to be in a group of people, who are being held, that was one of the things that was so good about the facilitators"***



## “I wouldn’t change anything”

The participants were all incredibly pleased with their WHYoutdoors experience and did not have any major suggestions for changing the course. Some participants thought it might be beneficial to do a similar experience with their partners, children, or a friend:

***“If there was an opportunity for partners to join in, particularly ones that you know, they’ve gone through the journey as well and there isn’t as much help available for them”***



Other than that, longer WHYoutdoors days and a follow-up day after the course had finished were also suggested, as a way of helping them incorporate WHYoutdoors more in their day-to-day life. One participant would also have liked a second more in-depth course and learn more nature connection, but other than this there were no ways in which the participants could think to improve the course.

# Covid-19 and Zoom WHYoutdoors

One participant did the course online due to COVID, although most of the others had attended a follow-up session on Zoom. Violet said:

***“it would have been nice if the course could have ended with a real meeting in person, but the entire course was online”***

and added that this might have given her more closure. However, she thoroughly enjoyed it nevertheless and was able to foster her nature connection in her garden. Gemma also enjoyed doing an extra session over Zoom and said this was something she would like to do again if given the opportunity:

***“it worked really well, I think there’s opportunities to, it’s not the same of course, but I think that idea and that way of connecting is still something that can be taught virtually”.***

A virtual WHYoutdoors also made it more accessible, and as one participant pointed out, this may be a way of reaching a wider range of people as going through cancer can be a lonely experience but having access to WHYoutdoors changed this completely.

## Powerful and profound experience

The participants all had a profound and positive experience at the WHYoutdoors course, regardless of where they were in their cancer journey. WHYoutdoors put them in a happier place and helped them cope with lockdown, something which was frequently mentioned. WHYoutdoors further changed many aspects of the participants' lives and their thinking patterns, on which Violet commented: “sometimes it’s difficult to specify in what way it helped, and I have to go back and think about it and really think about it”, as the impact was so profound. Some participants also mentioned being able to explore their emotions and actions as a positive aspect of the course, something which they had never have done previously:

***“It was so fascinating how taking the simplicity of what they did and what they talked us through enabled me to explore above and beyond so much, I can’t tell you what, ... each session you just dug a bit deeper, you went in a slightly different place I, I explored so much ... it was so powerful, so powerful”***

**Gemma**

## Powerful and profound experience (cont.)

They also mentioned how grateful they were to WHY for being able to attend the course and how the course had arrived at a perfect time in their cancer journey. Camilla said that her overall experience was “really positive, yeah, really great. I knew I really wanted to do it, I was surprised to get a place, so I was very happy about that”.

The main reason the participants were pleased to have done the course was being able to do something by themselves and for themselves, and many spoke about the importance of slowing down and practicing self-care. Matilda echoed this as she said:

*It was really, really helpful for me. I think in a time where nothing is, seems possible like travelling, I love travelling and doing things, just to be able to go to the woods and pick up things and thinking actually it's really beautiful.*



## Expectations beforehand

None of the participants had any expectations beforehand other than looking forward to spending time in nature. They had all heard about WHYoutdoors from slightly different sources such as friends, GP, nurse at the cancer clinic, or found WHY online whilst searching for cancer support services in their area. When asked about expectations, Violet commented “no, none at all, other than it might help me but I had no idea in what ways it would help me”. This is very similar to the others' responses, and the only one who added something was Matilda, who said: “I thought it would be more walking, that we'd do more walking, so my expectation was probably that it would be more active, but I hadn't really thought about it”. One participant said she did not know what to expect and decided to attend with an open mind. Most did not ask too many questions before, with some of them saying they had a ‘feeling’ WHYoutdoors was going to be perfect for them.



## Psychological impact and healing

The psychological impact of cancer was another frequently mentioned topic, and the participants stressed that it can take a long time to recover mentally and accept the effects of cancer. This seemed to also be why some participants were reluctant to access support services as they did not want to talk just about cancer, as for some cancer had become part of their everyday life. Camilla commented: “I have to say that I’m aware of having had surgery and breast cancer and those kind of effects from it every day really to be honest”. She found it difficult to come to terms with having had a mastectomy – which was a common experience. Camilla later added “I’ve got long-term psychological complications yeah, I feel quite upset now actually, yeah definitely got long-term psychological issues, about having had a mastectomy and what that’s done to me”.

Patricia also spoke about her long-term psychological difficulties and thought that WHYoutdoors had been an excellent opportunity for her to address these:

***“we did lovely things, which nourished our souls which is super important, always need plenty of soul nourishment”***

The participants also mentioned how hard it was when loved ones said they looked well when they actually felt very distressed and a completely different person post cancer. Some had experienced both anxiety and depression and feelings of uncertainty after finishing treatment and spoke of how WHYoutdoors helped them gain some perspective and reflect on some of their psychological difficulties. Violet explained that after treatment she “started to have the what-now feelings and really unsettled, real evening heebie-jeebies as I called it, getting really anxious about it coming back. I was put on and I’m still on a small amount of antidepressant in the evening cos I’d be going to bed and brain wouldn’t shut up. Just would not shut up”, which is similar to others’ experiences. She later added that after WHYoutdoors she “got some real sense of calmness”.



## Socialising with others in the same situation

The social aspect of WHYoutdoors was valued highly as it allowed the participants to connect with others going through similar experiences and were able to chat without having to cover every detail. Gemma felt that “there's an unwritten understanding that you don't have to say, and I think that's, that's really helpful”, and this allowed them to connect more easily. Many also mentioned the facilitators being good at managing the group dynamics and letting everyone speak and share their thoughts without taking over. For Gemma it was also important to meet other women who have had cancer and said:

***“I really wanted to have some sort of connection with other women going through this. I live on my own, so it already felt very isolated being in the COVID situation not being able to see friends and family, and then cancer”.***

The social aspect therefore seemed to be incredibly important.

Lastly, the participants also mentioned the group aspect was also helpful for their own healing as it allowed them to witness others' progress. Most of them had never attended any group counselling or support groups in the past and did not know what to expect. One participant was apprehensive about attending WHYoutdoors to begin with because of this but felt that she found her space within the group very quickly. Some mentioned feeling privileged to be part of such a powerful shared experience and that it was empowering, something which Gemma commented on:



**“That was so helpful to reflect on other people cos that's the beauty of a group, which I can appreciate now having done that kind of thing, was observing other people's journeys, which you can learn from too you know! It doesn't always have to be about you, you can learn so much from other people even if it's not directly what you've experienced, and to see people growing through the weeks was fascinating, lovely to watch”.**

# Findings for counsellors

## Themes and subthemes



### **Main theme - Many changes in personal life after WHYoutdoors**

The training and course led to a number of changes within the counsellors' life as it altered some of their core beliefs

#### **Subtheme - Positive and transformative experience**

WHYoutdoors is a positive and powerful experience for both the counsellors and the participants

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### **Main theme - WHYoutdoors has something for everyone**

WHYoutdoors is a multifaceted course which offers something for everyone, covering everything from a positive nature-based experience to changing one's spiritual beliefs and feeling more connected to nature

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### **Main theme - Using nature in counselling**

WHYoutdoors gave the counsellors several tools to use in their day-to-day counselling sessions and changed some of their usual practices

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It's another avenue for people to benefit from kind of a therapeutic type experience but not in the traditional way and maybe there are people that wouldn't necessarily kind of come into kind of a traditional counselling but are more likely to access the outdoors, eco therapy type approach so that's nice, it opens up the possibility of therapeutic support to more people.

Luke



## Many changes in personal life after WHYoutdoors

The training and course itself led to many changes in the facilitators' lives as the concepts of WHYoutdoors and nature connection were new to them. The training changed the way they thought about counselling, some of their own core beliefs surrounding spirituality, and informed how they self-care and how nature can underpin this. Kenneth said:

***"I think that's what WHYoutdoors offers. It lets us reconnect with parts of lost self"***

which illustrates how deeply WHYoutdoors can impact a person and allow them to rediscover who they are. Some of the facilitators had lived in urban environments previously or otherwise been disconnected from the natural world and were initially sceptical of nature connection. Luke commented:

***"I was very kind of prejudiced I guess about the type of people that engage in nature therapy, and I was kind of thinking, well, it's not really me, I would consider myself to be quite pragmatic person and not particularly creative or anything like that so I was definitely a sceptic, which is why it surprised me even more that I had the connection that I had"***

It seems that the training and WHYoutdoors course can have a huge impact on a person's life, regardless of whether they were expecting it or not. The quote also shows that WHYoutdoors can change a person's perceptions of themselves after discovering nature connection. Not all the counsellors were sceptics though, as some had previous experiences from their personal life and were very open to the idea of a nature-based therapeutic experience "I'd experienced my own, I guess in my personal life I had done nature experiences but not in my work life" (Michelle). However, regardless of their preconceived ideas of WHYoutdoors, they all had experienced some kind of change in their beliefs, personal life, or attitudes towards nature-based therapy.

## Positive and transformative experience

The counsellors thought WHYoutdoors was an overwhelmingly positive experience both for themselves and the participants as their own nature connection deepened whilst simultaneously, they were able to open the participants' eyes to the natural world and what it can offer them.

***“When it comes to kind of facilitating you've got the whole of the natural world as a resource which is quite helpful and very supportive in its kind of endless possibilities of what it can mean to people and how they can engage with it. It makes the work easier, really varied and really sort of just kind of held in a unique way because the nature is there to be within and to be used and thought about, there's a kind of endless resource”***

**Anna**

Having the whole natural world at their hands was something most of the counsellors were not used to, as they typically work in a room or over the phone/video call. Luke also enjoyed this aspect of WHYoutdoors, “as a facilitator I guess it's lovely to get outside, outside of the counselling room, and do something different and a new challenge”.

Some of the counsellors had spent a lot of time in nature prior to WHYoutdoors and not realised that what they were doing could be considered a form of evidence-based therapeutic practice. For example, Michelle said:

**“Well, you know. my personal favourite part is this concept of wandering, and how you can just drop into your senses and follow your feet instead of your mind, I've been doing that for years and years in my life and not realised that it was a thing, and it was really lovely to do the training and go, oh, this is validated, this is a proper practice, and then to be able to show that to people and it just goes wow, it just, sort of blows their minds, it's lovely”.**

The counsellors enjoyed seeing the participants deepen their connection with nature through the various practices, and several mentioned the reciprocal relationship they all experienced during the course and as Kenneth added, “it's a palpable experience, it's a transformative experience”, both for the participants and the counsellors.

## WHYoutdoors has something for everyone

As already mentioned, some participants had already some level of nature connection from previously whereas to others this was a fairly new concept. One thing that the counsellors mentioned frequently was how multifaceted the WHYoutdoors course is and how everyone can gain something from it, whether that was simply spending time outdoors, taking time to themselves, or learning more about their spiritual beliefs:

***“I think the most common thing that hits them immediately is suddenly having time to themselves. And that’s instantly a wellbeing factor. They’ve taken a day out of their week, when they normally struggle to find 30 minutes to go for a walk, you’re taking a whole day of their week to sit in nature around sit around a fire, go for walks, and self-care” (Michelle).***

Many also mentioned the social aspect of WHYoutdoors and how beneficial it seems to be for the participants to share their experiences, both cancer and nature connection ones. Another important aspect was supporting the participants’ different journeys as they all engaged slightly differently with the course, as Anna explained: “[it] does vary a lot, and with our group, there was one person in particular who went very deep and you know I think probably it was life changing for them... And there were other people who really enjoyed it really benefited from but you could tell it was a slight slightly, a level down from that person who was kind of totally immersed in it” which illustrates that although it can be a great tool for participants to consider their core beliefs and emotions, it can also give them a positive outdoors experience.

It was also pointed out that it may be easier for people to attend WHYoutdoors instead of traditional therapy as they may not want to be confined to a room with a counsellor and be confronted about their cancer experiences:

***“it’s another avenue for people to benefit from kind of a therapeutic type experience but not in the traditional way and maybe there are people that wouldn’t necessarily kind of come into kind of a traditional counselling but are more likely to access the outdoors, eco therapy type approach so that’s nice, it opens up the possibility of therapeutic support to more people” (Luke).***



## WHYoutdoors has something for everyone (cont.)

Some of them also talked about the issue of getting more men involved, which is a dilemma encountered in many support services. However, they thought WHYoutdoors might bridge this gap as it is more of a workshop rather than therapy. Other than trying to get more men involved, the counsellors could not think of any ways in which to change the course, although offering a deeper second level was something some had thought of. Michelle said, “I think the course just as it is spot on, I think one of the things we've been talking about is offering somehow like a level two, like somehow the next level of that cos that course is so introductory so I think somewhere down the line I think that could be added, but not to the actual course as it is now, I think it's a really well-designed course how it is”.



Due to COVID they had run WHYoutdoors on Zoom once during lockdown, and although the participants' experiences were not perhaps as deep as in the in-person courses, the counsellors still thought this was beneficial as the concept of nature connection could successfully be delivered virtually. Some of the counsellors had also done part of their training online and found that this worked as well, although they all agreed it may be more difficult to create social bonds online and feel the same connection to other course attendees.

## Using nature in counselling

WHYoutdoors gave the counsellors another tool to use in their day-to-day counselling practice and has given them the opportunity to use nature-based metaphors as a way of explaining the circle of life. For some, the training had also challenged their ways of thinking about counselling, as Michelle explained:



***“as a counsellor I think the most important thing I took is that in regular talking therapy, we talk about a container in therapy, that the room and the therapist offer a container for a person to feel they can safely explore things in this containment. And the training and nature work really blew my mind with this because suddenly the container could be nature, and actually nature is there all the time, and it can contain and hold and support us all the time. And in that it's immediately, you can have a relationship that way, and that relationship is reciprocal”.***

This is another way in which WHYoutdoors had a clear impact on the counsellors' wider practice outside of WHYoutdoors. Others had also experienced similar revelations and said that the pandemic had made them consider walk and talk type of counselling as a way of including nature as an implicit part of counselling, as Anna mentioned “we're kind of thinking about doing walk and talk sessions so actually kind of being outside with individuals as well as groups and kind of doing the therapy outside which really appeals to me ... kind of using what I've learned from WHYoutdoors and sort of the benefits of that and try to bring that in in other ways.”

Kenneth was looking forward to using nature more in his counselling practice especially since he had been slightly sceptical towards WHYoutdoors in the beginning but had changed his mind completely after the training:

***“I think definitely elements of the benefits of kind of nature and how it can be a resource for improving wellbeing, mental health, that kind of thing so yeah this is definitely added to my kind of toolkit of what interventions I use when I'm seeing clients privately”.***



## Using nature in counselling (cont.)

As some of the counsellors were specialised in art, drama, or creative therapy, they were looking forward to incorporating parts of WHYoutdoors once they can return to having in-person counselling sessions, as doing so over the phone or online comes with a few limitations. They spoke about giving their service users another tool which to use in their day-to-day life, which is something that Kenneth had found helpful, “whilst I’m still making use of creativity, I’m pulling on that nature aspect, that nature parts of that triangle and bringing that into my work whether it’s a way to ground people within the work, whether it’s something that they can take away and use for themselves after the therapy that they’ve had from me”.



## Discussion

WHYoutdoors brought a range of positive changes into the lives of those who have attended the course after a cancer diagnosis. The course was based on the nature connection pathways contact, emotions, compassion, meaning, and beauty, as described by Lumber<sup>16</sup>, who were among the first researchers to systematically unpick nature connection development. WHYoutdoors was designed in such a way that everyone was able to pick out different pieces which aided their personal understanding, acceptance, and reflections, or simply allowed them to have an enjoyable shared experience in the nature. None of the participants who agreed to take part in an interview had anything negative to say and only gave some minor suggestions for improvement, indicating that this had been a positive experience for them. As hoped, their experiences were similar to what the counsellors thought the participants might gain from the course, such as taking time to self-care, increase their nature-connection and relationship with nature, and help them come to terms with their diagnosis.

## Discussion (cont.)

The counsellors also experienced a range of benefits and changes, as both the training and the WHYoutdoors course had a huge impact on their personal and professional lives, possibly due to them being able to experience WHYoutdoors first-hand and seeing all the potential benefits nature connection can offer. Although the course was aimed at those living with or after cancer, this showed that the course has the potential to positively benefit others too, both sceptics and non-sceptics, suggesting that there may be more at play than some sort of placebo effect. WHYoutdoors may be useful and helpful for a range of people, both those who are healthy, perhaps those living with anxiety or panic disorders, or other illnesses. Of course, there are some mobility considerations for participants to be able to immerse themselves fully physically in a WHYoutdoors experience, as is the case with many nature-based courses.<sup>19, 32</sup>



*I've been totally inspired by it. Simple things like listening to the rain, two years ago I would have been sat at the laptop and I wouldn't have even noticed it, I wouldn't have taken the time to go out and stand in it, which I would now because it's priceless. It was a gift to have the time to be outside, be peaceful, be alone in good company, I couldn't wait to get there every week.*

**2018 WHYoutdoors feedback**

There is a fast-growing interest into nature-based therapies with many of them looking very different from traditional therapy available to cancer patients and survivors. To the best of the author's knowledge there is no research available on the WHYoutdoors course specifically, as this is a new novel course. However, WHYoutdoors have several common elements with forest bathing, garden therapy, ecotherapy, and various other nature-based courses. A recent systematic review found that forest bathing can improve both physiological and psychological health in both a healthy population and those with various illnesses such as COPD or hypertension,<sup>33</sup> which could explain why both the participants and counsellors had positive experiences during the course. However, neither the participants nor the counsellors had any physiological measurements taken before or after the course took place, so it is not known if they only experienced psychological benefits or also physiological ones.



## Discussion (cont.)

Perhaps one of the most important findings from the current evaluation is the positive impact WHYoutdoors had on the participants' psychological wellbeing. It is a well-known fact that many people living with or beyond cancer suffer from anxiety,<sup>1</sup> depression,<sup>2</sup> body image disturbance,<sup>34</sup> among others. And since it is currently estimated that one in two people will at one point in their life receive a cancer diagnosis,<sup>35</sup> this could become a widespread problem, and is why courses such as WHYoutdoors are so important. Although there has thus far not been a lot of research carried out in outdoors-based therapeutic programmes for cancer survivors, there is promising research from healthy populations. Research has shown that exercising outdoors in a green space can decrease a person's anxiety and increase their nature relatedness, which in turn can improve psychological well-being.<sup>36</sup>

Something which was evident was that both the counsellors as well as the participants enjoyed the fact that WHYoutdoors was not traditional therapy, and they were able to discover and discuss things in their lives that were not explicitly about cancer only. The counsellors enjoyed the nature and creativity aspects and have since then started thinking more about facilitating walk and talk counselling sessions independent of WHYoutdoors. Another study<sup>14</sup> found that women going through breast cancer enjoyed being part of an exercise group with other breast cancer patients as they all understood what the others were going through. However, the main finding was that the women enjoyed not having to talk about cancer and were able to focus on something else i.e., the exercise class, rather than cancer. This was echoed by the current evaluation as several participants said they wanted something different to counselling and they all enjoyed the outdoors, which made the course a perfect fit for their circumstances.



*I liked listening to everybody else talking about their experiences and being vulnerable, and it's a privilege you know, to be in a group of people, who are being held, that was one of the things that was so good about the facilitators".*

For some cancer was also still part of their everyday life and they did therefore not want to talk about it even though they recognised they had long-term psychological effects negatively impacting their quality of life. This is a common finding, as others have found that women who have had breast cancer choose not to share too many details or their emotions with those around them as they find it upsetting themselves but are also concerned it may be upsetting for their loved ones to hear.<sup>37</sup>

## Discussion (cont.)

Being outdoors without any kind of course or intervention has also been found to have a range of positive effects. For example, a large-scale summary of studies showed that being exposed to greenspaces has a huge range of physiological health-benefits such as reducing salivary cortisol levels (which are a measure of a person's stress levels), reductions in type II diabetes, and reduced prostate cancer incidence in those living in an area with vast greenspaces and also overall cancer mortality.<sup>38</sup> This indicates that perhaps people with mobility issues would also be able to participate and benefit from WHYoutdoors even if they are not able to use all their senses in the same way as able-bodied people to foster their nature connection.

## Limitations

The current evaluation is at risk of having selection bias, as it is possible that the participants who responded to the recruitment email all had a really good experience, whereas those who did not respond did not have the same kind of positive experience. All the participants were also women, which is another limitation as several men were emailed in the recruitment phase as well and there is a possibility their WHYoutdoors experience differed to that of the women. Another limitation is the fact that there was no second independent researcher to check the codes and themes.

## Reflexive statement

The researcher has had a lot of personal and professional experience of cancer and healthcare and used this knowledge both implicitly and explicitly when writing the interview schedule, carrying out the interviews, and analysing the data.

# Future recommendations

There are a number of possible next steps for WHYoutdoors.



First off, an online follow-up session to give everyone an opportunity to reconnect with their groups and discuss how WHYoutdoors has impacted their lives.



Secondly, those who fully immersed themselves in the WHYoutdoors experience were interested in a second, deeper level of WHYoutdoors as they wanted to increase their nature connection even further.



Thirdly, offering either the course or a one-off day for people who have had cancer but also their loved ones such as their children or partner. If this was organised for children this could be made more hands on with animals, obstacle course, and building huts in nature, whilst still incorporating nature connection (with elements of adventure therapy for instance). Could also be a bonding experience for couples who have gone through cancer.



Fourthly, as the social support was a huge aspect of the course, offering different kinds of workshops and nature days might be a good idea as not everyone wants to commit to a whole six-week course. It could also be a great way to spark an interest in those who are interested in WHYoutdoors but have their doubts about whether it is something they would enjoy or not, similar to the taster days already organised by WHY. Some examples of workshops could be a one-day workshop in basic woodcarving, making flower wreaths, or any other kind of activity with elements of both creativity and nature where the participants would be able to meet and socialise with others in a similar situation, but also learn a new skill and spend time in nature. These workshops would also be more accessible to those with mobility issues or fatigue caused by cancer treatment.



And lastly and perhaps most importantly, a more controlled evaluation study needs to be carried out in WHYoutdoors. One way of doing this could be by giving the participants at-home test kits for salivary cortisol levels (an indicator of stress levels) and questionnaires measuring psychological well-being and nature connection before the course, halfway through, at the end, and then at a follow up point perhaps six months later, to see if there are any long-term effects and what these are. Those on the waiting list would act as a control group and fill out the same questionnaires and give salivary samples as well. The easiest way to do this would probably be to work with a university and PhD student, simply because it would be a fairly lengthy process and ideally the data would be collected from several courses so that the sample size would be larger.

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