Divergent Prayer: Consideration of Queer Ex-vangelical Experience

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Imagine a trusted leader, close friend, family or community member…. Now, imagine that any time you're around them you encounter deep levels of embodied stress impacting your mental, emotional, psychological, and spiritual health…. As many LGBTQ+ members of evangelical communities have attested, these perspectives overlap simply as the result of engaging in destructive spaces that may have originally appeared to be helpful. "On the one hand, they longed to be part of a church community, while on the other hand, their church community was causing them harm" (Hollier, Clifton, & Smith-Merry, 2022). Authors cited here refer to the phenomenon as religious trauma, which is further subdivided into causes rooted in exposure to minority stress and microaggressions; issues common among ex-vangelical queers.

This truth is embodied by both of the authors of this group therapy curriculum. An aphorism endorsed by both authors, "research is me-search" was very present the desire to create this group. LGBTQIA+ communities are disproportionately affected by mental health challenges. An integrated literature review showed evidence that people within queer communities experience more emotional distress, and have higher rates of depression, suicidality, and substance abuse than cisgender-heterosexual people (Moagi et al, 2021).

Religious trauma is considered a Ballung concept; there is no singular definition and queer people raised in fundamentalist religions frequently endure adverse experiences that lead to religious trauma, internalized bigotry, social isolation, and shame. Religious trauma may be viewed as the inevitable outcome of spiritual abuse. It is "pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs and experiences" (Stone 2013, p. 324).

Queer people are subject to "stigma, prejudice, and discrimination," as well as "a hostile and stressful social environment that causes mental health problems" (Meyer, 2003, p. 674). As a minority member within a church community, "insidious trauma" frames much of one's experience; it has no beginning or ending (Robinson & Rubin, 2016). In conceptualizing microaggression theory, contributors emphasized stigma as presenting more frequently in subtle rather than overt ways. Accumulated small, even unnoticed, discriminatory experiences add up to high levels of stress and anxiety when studied in comparable medium and long term trauma (Lomash et al, 2019; Robinson & Rubin, 2016).

The need for support and corrective group experiences for queer folx who have religious trauma is vast. Establishing a therapy group specifically tailored for queer individuals grappling with religious trauma will be profoundly beneficial, given the scarcity of dedicated support in this realm. Many queer individuals face unique challenges within religious contexts, ranging from rejection to discrimination, contributing to the complex intersection of identity and faith. A therapeutic space crafted specifically for addressing religious trauma provides a safe, understanding, and validating environment. It allows participants to share their experiences, confront the impact of oppressive religious narratives, and collectively navigate the healing process. The group becomes a vital support network where individuals may find solace, share coping strategies, and foster a sense of community that is often absent in mainstream therapeutic settings. In creating such a group, it not only acknowledges the distinctive struggles of queer individuals with religious trauma but also empowers them to reclaim agency over their narratives and embark on a collective journey toward healing and resilience.

For those focused on escaping abuse, managing related PTSD over the long haul, or recently coming to understand their experience in these terms, it may be difficult to define how one has encountered frequent mischaracterization, been viewed as a threat, experienced erasure, or found themselves subjected to relational distancing (Hollier, Clifton, & Smith-Merry, 2022). Perspectives gained through sharing stories of lived experience in similar situations may unlock lessons and accelerate group or individual progress. A closed group, owing to the vulnerable sharing required in such work, with participants in similar age ranges or other demographic groupings, would provide for the most effective therapeutic container.

Theoretical Orientation

A social justice lens is essential to effectively addressing pervasive minority stress and the impacts of recurring microaggressions found with religious trauma. Ex-vangelical queer struggle is not resident in, or exacerbated by, cognitive or behavioral deficits; their very identities are under attack by groups offering aide (to the compliant faithful). As such, trauma-informed practices are essential from a clinical perspective. Knight identifies four fundamental principles for use in such cases (2015, p. 25):

- normalize and validate client feelings and experiences
- assist in understanding the past as well as its emotional impacts
- empower survivors to better manage their lives in the present
- help clients understand how current experience relates to past

Depicted in Figure 1 are concentric circles naming social justice competencies for group leaders to hold during workings: counselor self-awareness, client worldview, counseling relationship, and counseling and advocacy interventions. It also shows how privilege and marginalization in clients and counselors intersects in varying ways, though each one may hold multiple hidden identities as well. Also note the flow of information leading toward client action, largely driven by counselor attitude, beliefs, and knowledge.
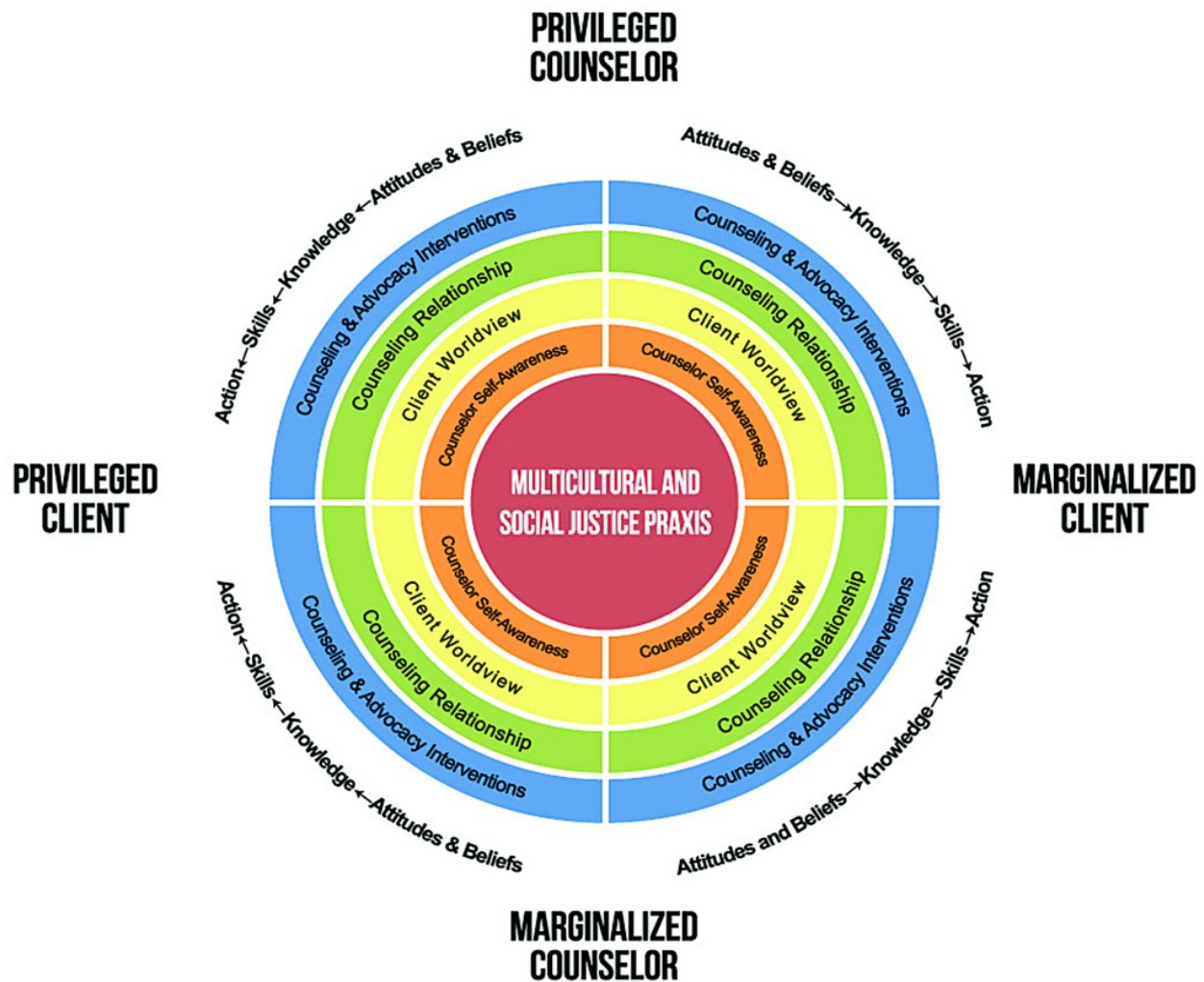

Figure 1 - *Multicultural and Social Justice Praxis* (Ratts et al, 2015)

Social justice is not something we do, its who we are (Hui-Spears & Park-Saltzman, 2022). Queer people face significant discrimination in society and historically in psychotherapy. Applying multicultural and social justice frameworks when working with queer individuals is vital for providing culturally competent, affirming, and effective mental health support. It acknowledges the unique challenges faced by queer communities and promotes resilience, empowerment, and well-being.

Participant Selection

The target population for this program is comprised of evangelical and ex-vangelical queer people, no clinical diagnosis is necessary, but attention to the various ways that trauma presents allows for any number of reasons for clinical referral into the *Embraced by Nature* group. Self-selection based on response to public messages advertising the existence of, or enrollment window for, the next iteration of the therapeutic collective would also be encouraged.

Owing to the sensitive nature of content and experience likely to be shared by group members during working sessions, a closed group is required by design. This stability would be necessary for vulnerable clients regardless, though especially so in such a short six week curriculum. Assuming continual funding, and facilitator availability, the *Embraced by Nature* group may cycle through many different iterations during the calendar year, potentially varying locations for optimal access during challenging weather, and encouraging continual enrollment where needed by those who prefer to continue their journey with the support of queer peers. Providing similar programming in parallel would allow for simultaneous work with adolescents, young adults, etc., based on age groupings

that may also lend themselves to increased cohesion among groups as well as increasing the effective outreach and coverage provided for groups.

Ethical Considerations

Inherent to any framework focused on social justice and trauma informed practice is the widely acknowledged need for clinicians to embody cultural humility, looking to the client's ancestry, personal history, accommodation needs, identities, and community wisdom before ever presuming to offer advice. Enforcement or deferral to oppressive normative behaviors has no place in healing spaces; informed consent and mutual accord for behavioral standards set enforceable norms, with an expressed default of radical acceptance and curiosity.

Exploration of whatever arises in session, whether it is rooted in behavioral, biological, emotional, psychological, social, theological, or existential concerns, must remain confidential; lessons travel well but stories must stay within each iteration of an *Embraced by Nature* group. It is important for facilitators to approach information handling, especially when recruiting and informing members of group assignments, like the protected health and identity data guarded by legislation codified in FERPA and HIPAA (CDC, 2020). Require expressed informed consent for release of any details of what took place in session, detailing how long the consent applies, and to specifically whom the information is allowed to be distributed. Clients maintain the right to revoke consent for collection or distribution of protected information at any time.

Group Details

Selection criteria for *Embraced by Nature* group members is necessarily loosely structured. This allows for self-identification and self-referral into consideration for group membership. Any trusted clinical network peers may be invited to refer clients of individual therapy, and individual therapy is not a prerequisite for inclusion in a group. Social media or therapeutic practice website assets may also be utilized to raise public awareness and solicit engagement in future group sessions. Some likely divisions in group membership include tiered age ranges, identity-specific groups (e.g., gay cis men, non-binary people), religion-specific (e.g., Lutheran, Baptist), or groups may be tailored to (and led by facilitators from) specific racial, ethnic, or cultural populations.

Participants will be contacted before the group convenes for individual interviews. These sessions are meant to set explicit expectations for how the work is approached, how long groups run, and how frequently meetings occur. Client fit within a given group roster may also be evaluated during this time. In addition, their understanding of concepts related to biophilia, ecopsychology, internal family systems, oppression, identity, trauma, and queer theory may be polled in order to establish any possible adjustments to curriculum relevant to the baseline for a given group in a given topic area.

The specific plan offered here may be adjusted as needed, or expanded to suit the needs of any given iteration of an *Embraced by Nature* group. The daily session headings from the included curriculum sets out six weekly 2-hour sessions:

- Introduction and Connection
- Nature Connection and Mindfulness

- Queer Identity and Nature

- Therapeutic Art in Nature

- Boundary Setting and Empowerment

- Closure and Future Growth

One may see how any of these topics might be stretched to multiple weeks, moved through more rapidly, or eliminated depending on the needs of a given membership, space access requirements, or available budget.

Most of the group experiences are planned for a natural habitat. In the first week, the importance of human-nature connection is explored by each individual. The following week, a shared walk through a natural space explores group connections and consideration of nature's contribution to our wellbeing. Our third week examines queer intersectionality with the natural world. Following this, the group comes together to create artwork while revisiting religious trauma experience. The fifth week continues with boundaries and establishing empowerment practices with more group involvement. The final meeting is devoted to closing tasks and planning for continued nature-based practices outside the group context.

Facilitator Information

While budget is a dominant concern in planning the hosting and facilitation of group work, the authors prefer to see two facilitators (at least one with lived experience relevant to the workings) for every 8-12 member group. This co-facilitation allows for individually addressing emergent emotional or medical urgency while the remainder of the group continues with pursuit of healing as planned. Given exposure to undeveloped spaces,

Wilderness First Responder certification (or better) coverage is also needed to ensure

biomedical safety.

In longer running groups, individuals might periodically drop out of larger

experiential sessions to process private check-ins with a facilitator, enabling progress

tracking for personal development goals or program evaluation feedback. With a lack of

high-risk activities planned, no additional expertise or certifications are anticipated for

those leading an *Embraced by Nature* group. Any leaders or volunteers may scout for

session locations as needed, though adaptations of the group plan should await

implementation until future iterations wherever possible, to limit engaging triggers for

clients battling social or cognitive disabilities relating to unexpected or sudden change.

Group Counseling Outline and Detailed Curriculum

The *Embraced by Nature* curriculum is broken down by week, including possible

learning outcomes relevant to each focus area:

Week 1: Introduction and Connection
- Icebreaker activities to foster a sense of community.
    - Common Ground: Members find connections among each other and then introduce other member and their commonality
    - Wishing Stones: Find a rock and write intentions/wishes for the group on it, with the option to share aloud
- Introductions and sharing of personal goals for the outdoor therapy experience.
- Ground rules and expectations for the group.
- Brief overview of the therapeutic approach and benefits of nature-based therapy.
    - Eco-Social Justice
- Possible Learning Outcomes:
    - Improved Communication:
        - Participants develop effective communication skills through icebreakers and group discussions.
- Increased Trust:

- - ■ Low-intensity activities, such as the trust circle, promote trust and cohesion within the group.
  - ● Goal Clarification:
    - ■ Introductions and goal-setting activities help individuals clarify personal objectives for the therapy experience.
  - ● Nature Connection:
    - ■ Through nature-based activities and therapy, participants develop a deeper connection to the natural world, contributing to overall well-being.
  - ● Community Building:
    - ■ Icebreaker activities and group discussions create a sense of community, fostering a supportive environment for therapeutic exploration.

Week 2: Nature Connection and Mindfulness
- ● Guided nature walk to connect with the environment.
- ● Mindfulness exercises tailored to the outdoor setting.
  - ○ Mindful walking, noticing activity in pairs
  - ○ "I see you X, I've been you X
- ● Group discussion on the healing power of nature and its impact on mental well-being.
- ● Reflection on personal experiences during outdoor activities.
- ● Possible Learning Outcomes:
  - ○ Increased Mindfulness Skills and Gratitude:
    - ■ Participants develop and enhance mindfulness skills through guided outdoor activities, leading to improved present-moment awareness and the ability to manage stress.
  - ○ Stress Reduction:
    - ■ Engaging in nature-based mindfulness practices contributes to a reduction in stress levels and an increased ability to cope with life's challenges.
  - ○ Improved Emotional Regulation:
    - ■ Learning mindfulness techniques outdoors can help participants regulate their emotions, fostering emotional resilience and well-being.
  - ○ Enhanced Self-Awareness:
    - ■ Connection to nature and mindfulness practices promote self-reflection, helping individuals gain a deeper understanding of their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.
  - ○ Greater Connection to Nature:

- - ■ Participants develop a stronger sense of connection to the natural world, leading to increased environmental awareness and a sense of belonging in nature.
  - ○ Increased Focus and Concentration:
    - ■ Mindfulness practices contribute to improved attention and concentration, which can have positive implications for various aspects of life, including work and relationships.
  - ○ Enhanced Coping Strategies:
    - ■ Participants learn and practice healthy coping strategies for dealing with life's challenges, promoting resilience and adaptability.
  - ○ Building a Supportive Community:
    - ■ Group therapy in an outdoor setting fosters a sense of community and support, providing individuals with a network of like-minded peers who share similar goals for well-being.

Week 3: Queer Identity and Nature
- ● Facilitated discussion on the intersectionality of queer identity and nature.
  - ○ Queer Ecology talk
- ● Group activities to explore personal connections with nature and how it relates to one's queer identity.
  - ○ Queer Nature Photography: Equip participants with cameras or smartphones. Encourage them to capture images in nature that resonate with their queer identity. Share and discuss the photos as a group.
  - ○ Identity Mandala: Using natural materials (leaves, twigs, stones), participants create a mandala that represents different facets of their queer identity. Share and discuss the symbolism
  - ○ Seasons of Identity: Relate the seasons of the year to different aspects of queer identity. Participants discuss how their feelings, experiences, and personal growth align with the changing seasons.
- ● Possible Learning Outcomes:
  - ○ Increased Awareness of Intersectionality:
    - ■ Participants gain a deeper understanding of the concept of intersectionality and how various aspects of identity, including sexual orientation and gender identity, intersect with experiences in nature.
  - ○ Recognition of Diverse Queer Perspectives:
    - ■ Participants learn about the diversity within the queer community and how different identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences influence individuals' relationships with nature.
  - ○ Understanding Historical and Cultural Contexts:

- Exploration of historical and cultural contexts helps participants understand how societal attitudes toward queer identities have influenced the relationship between the LGBTQ+ community and nature over time.
  - Empowerment through Connection to Nature:
    - Participants explore ways in which connecting with nature can empower individuals within the queer community, fostering a sense of belonging, healing, and self-discovery.
  - Identification of Barriers and Challenges:
    - Discussion highlights the unique challenges that queer individuals may face in accessing and enjoying natural spaces, addressing issues such as discrimination, safety concerns, or a lack of representation.
  - Cultivation of Environmental Stewardship:
    - Exploration of the intersectionality between queer identity and nature can inspire participants to become advocates for environmental conservation and sustainability within the LGBTQ+ community.
  - Development of Allyship Skills:
    - Participants learn how to be allies to queer individuals in the context of nature, recognizing and addressing any biases or discriminatory practices that may exist.
  - Exploration of Queer Nature Narratives:
    - Participants examine and share personal or community narratives that reflect queer experiences with nature, contributing to a broader understanding of queer environmentalism.
  - Encouragement of Self-Expression:
    - Participants explore how nature serves as a space for self-expression, creativity, and authenticity for queer individuals.
  - Promotion of Queer Ecologies:
    - Discussion encourages participants to explore the concept of queer ecologies, understanding how queer identity intersects with ecological relationships and systems.
  - Inspiration for Artistic Expression:
    - The intersection of queer identity and nature may inspire participants to express themselves artistically, creating works that reflect their unique experiences and perspectives.

Week 4: Therapeutic Art in Nature
- Creative art therapy activities in an outdoor setting:

- ○ Sun Prints (Cyanotypes): Use sunlight to create cyanotype prints. Arrange objects on light-sensitive paper and expose it to the sun. Discuss the metaphor of bringing hidden aspects to light.
- ○ Breathing Canvas: Participants paint on large canvases using their breath. Blow, exhale, or create rhythmic breath patterns to explore the connection between breath, movement, and creativity
- ○ Silhouette Self-Portraits: Trace participants' silhouettes on large paper. Fill the silhouettes with images or symbols representing aspects of their identity, growth, and connections to nature.
- ○ Sensory Exploration Bags: Create individual bags filled with different natural materials. Participants use their hands to explore the textures and then express their sensory experience through drawing or writing. Expression of personal narratives related to religious trauma and queer identity through art.
- Group sharing and discussion of the art created.
- Supportive and affirming feedback from peers.
- Possible Learning Outcomes:
  - ○ Self-Expression and Communication:
    - ■ Participants learn to express emotions, thoughts, and experiences through various art forms, improving their ability to communicate in non-verbal ways.
  - ○ Stress Reduction and Relaxation:
    - ■ Therapeutic art in nature provides a calming and serene environment, promoting relaxation and stress reduction through creative expression.
  - ○ Enhanced Coping Skills:
    - ■ Individuals develop healthy coping mechanisms as they use art to process and navigate challenges, fostering resilience in the face of adversity.
  - ○ Connection to Nature:
    - ■ Engaging in artistic activities outdoors fosters a deeper connection to the natural environment, promoting a sense of peace, wonder, and belonging.
  - ○ Encouragement of Playfulness and Creativity:
    - ■ Therapeutic art in nature provides a space for participants to embrace their creative instincts, fostering playfulness and encouraging innovative thinking.
  - ○ Building a Sense of Achievement:
    - ■ Completing art projects in a natural setting can lead to a sense of accomplishment, boosting self-esteem and confidence.

- ○ Improved Emotional Regulation:
  - ■ Through artistic expression, participants learn to regulate and manage their emotions, contributing to emotional well-being.
- ○ Encouragement of Personal Growth:
  - ■ Therapeutic art in nature provides a platform for personal growth, allowing individuals to explore new aspects of themselves and their creativity.
- ○ Cultivation of Resilience:
  - ■ Overcoming challenges in the artistic process promotes resilience, teaching participants that setbacks are a natural part of growth and creativity.
- ○ Exploration of Symbolism and Metaphor:
  - ■ Participants learn to use symbolism and metaphor in their art, gaining insights into their own experiences and perspectives.
- ○ Encouragement of Cultural Sensitivity:
  - ■ Exploring various art forms allows participants to express and appreciate diverse cultural perspectives, fostering cultural sensitivity and understanding.

Week 5: Boundary Setting and Empowerment
- ● Group discussion on setting healthy boundaries in personal and religious contexts.
  - ○ Role-play scenarios to practice assertive communication
- ● Empowerment activities in nature to build resilience.
- ● Sharing of strategies for navigating religious trauma while affirming queer identity.
- ● Peer support session for discussing challenges and successes debriefing role play activity
- ● Possible Learning Outcomes:
  - ○ Understanding Healthy Boundaries:
    - ■ Participants gain insight into the concept of healthy boundaries in both personal and religious contexts through group discussions and shared experiences.
  - ○ Enhanced Communication Skills:
    - ■ Engaging in the group discussion on boundary setting helps participants develop effective communication skills for expressing their needs and limits.
  - ○ Increased Self-Awareness:
    - ■ Through exploration of personal and religious contexts, participants develop a deeper understanding of their values, beliefs, and boundaries.
  - ○ Building Resilience through Nature:

- Participants engage in empowerment activities in nature, fostering resilience by connecting with the natural environment and experiencing a sense of strength and capability.
- Promotion of Empowerment Strategies:
    - Sharing empowerment activities and strategies empowers participants to apply these tools in their daily lives, enhancing their ability to navigate challenges.
- Validation and Affirmation of Queer Identity:
    - The session focusing on religious trauma and affirming queer identity provides a platform for participants to share strategies, fostering a sense of validation and affirmation within the group.
- Development of Coping Mechanisms:
    - Participants learn and share coping mechanisms for addressing religious trauma, contributing to the development of effective tools for managing stress and emotional challenges.
- Encouragement of Empathetic Listening:
    - Group activities and discussions foster empathetic listening skills, promoting a supportive environment where participants feel heard and understood.
- Cultivation of Empathy and Understanding:
    - Through sharing experiences of religious trauma and queer identity, participants cultivate empathy and understanding for the diverse experiences within the group.
- Empowerment for Assertiveness:
    - Group discussions on boundary setting empower participants to assertively communicate their needs, promoting self-advocacy and a sense of empowerment.
- Identification of Personal Strengths:
    - Engagement in empowerment activities in nature helps participants identify and appreciate their personal strengths, contributing to a positive self-image.
- Application of Learning in Real-Life Contexts:
    - The integration of empowerment strategies and boundary-setting skills encourages participants to apply their learning in real-life situations, promoting practical and sustainable change.
- Encouragement of Reflection and Goal Setting:
    - Participants engage in reflective activities to assess their progress, fostering a sense of accomplishment and supporting the development of personal and group goals.

Week 6: Closure and Future Growth
- Reflection on personal growth and insights gained during the outdoor therapy group.
- Group celebration and acknowledgment of each participant's journey.
    - Art Gallery: Showcase what has been created and impactful in the group
- Sharing of resources for continued support and self-care.
- Development of a plan for integrating nature-based practices into daily life post-group.
- Closing
- Possible Learning Outcomes:
    - Self-Reflection and Personal Growth:
        - Participants engage in reflective activities to assess their personal growth and insights gained throughout the outdoor therapy group, fostering self-awareness.
    - Recognition of Individual Journeys:
        - The group celebration and acknowledgment provide a platform for recognizing and appreciating each participant's unique journey, fostering a sense of validation and community.
    - Artistic Expression and Impact Showcase:
        - Through the art gallery, participants showcase and discuss the creations that have been meaningful and impactful in the group. This promotes self-expression and group cohesion.
    - Increased Self-Esteem:
        - The acknowledgment of personal achievements and contributions within the group supports the development of positive self-esteem and confidence.
    - Knowledge of Support Resources:
        - Sharing resources for continued support and self-care equips participants with tools and information to maintain their well-being beyond the structured therapy sessions.
    - Empowerment for Continued Growth:
        - The development of a plan for integrating nature-based practices into daily life post-group empowers participants to continue their personal growth and well-being journey independently.
    - Application of Learning in Real-Life Contexts:
        - Participants are encouraged to apply their learning and insights from the outdoor therapy group to real-life situations, fostering practical and sustainable change.
    - Community Building:

- ■ The collective reflection and celebration contribute to a sense of community within the group, fostering connections that may extend beyond the structured therapy sessions.
- ○ Cultivation of Gratitude:
    - ■ Reflecting on personal growth and achievements encourages participants to cultivate gratitude for the support, insights, and experiences shared within the group.
- ○ Personalized Self-Care Plans:
    - ■ Participants work towards developing personalized self-care plans that incorporate nature-based practices, enhancing their ability to maintain balance and resilience in the face of life's challenges.
- ○ Encouragement of Reflection and Goal Setting:
    - ■ Participants engage in reflective activities to assess their progress, fostering a sense of accomplishment and supporting the development of personal and group goals.
- ○ Promotion of Lifelong Learning:
    - ■ The closure activities provide a structured and meaningful way for participants to bring the therapy experience to a close, fostering a mindset of lifelong learning and continuous self-improvement.
- ○ Preparation for Transition:
    - ■ Participants are prepared for the transition beyond the structured group therapy, equipped with insights, tools, and a plan for integrating nature-based practices into their ongoing journey of growth and well-being.

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