

Narrative Approaches to Bush Adventure Therapy

Using an unfamiliar, novel physical environment and experiential process in responding to people who have experienced difficult times

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Bush Adventure Therapy is a diverse field of practice combining adventure and outdoor environments with the intention to achieve therapeutic outcomes for those involved (www.aabat.org.au)

Important principles of a narrative approach to bush adventure therapy and community practice when responding to those who have experienced trauma

- It is highly important that the work is initiated and is ongoing in people's local communities, where relationships are built and people can voluntarily choose to be involved.
- Following this initial stage, therapists and participants have the opportunity to venture out into new places, particularly the unfamiliar environment of the bush or remote properties. Working with people in a physical environment other than that in which they routinely live and understand life creates the possibility of thinking, feeling and understanding themselves in a different way.
- Within this environment, away from (a) social constructions, roles and relationships that support known and familiar identity conclusions and (b) places associated with traumatic experience (e.g. in the instance of natural disaster), people participate in achievement-focused program content. The adventures and challenges of the program are carefully scaffolded to give participants the best chance of experiencing themselves in a way that feels good, and also to minimize the risk of people (re)experiencing themselves as 'a failure' or 'hopeless'.
- The events of the program (such as bushwalks, canoe trips, building skills in wood and metal workshops) are constructed in a way that participants routinely have experiences of 'success', achievement, capability and competence. These are often experiences that stand in contrast to dominant stories and negative identity conclusions. As such, the bush context is a landscape in which many unique outcomes can emerge and the therapist works gradually to scaffold participants in their meaning making, from the immediacy of their environment and task to broader understandings about life and possible ideas about their identity.
- The experiential aspects of the program offer numerous opportunities for inquiry and meaning making, which are possible entry points for alternative, preferred story development. Many narrative practices are useful in this story development, including unique outcome conversations, re-authoring conversations, re-remembering conversations and use of metaphor. Importantly, as work is generally done in the bush in groups, there is significant opportunity for outsider witnessing of the events of the day and emerging individual stories.
- Trips away from home and local community to bush environments are often extended, up to two weeks in length. This extended and cumulative context for activity, meaning-making and performance can consolidate and reinforce preferred identities, in ways that might not otherwise be possible due to the often ephemeral nature of therapeutic conversations.

- Both (a) the reinvigoration of a preferred sense of self and (b) a different physical environment contribute significantly to repositioning people in a way that offers **a safer ground** (both metaphoric and literal) from which to give expression to experiences of trauma and other hardships, if they choose to do so.

- For the experiences and meanings made in the bush context to be transferred to people's everyday lives in a meaningful and sustainable way, people must have

a) the opportunity to enact and perform these meanings in their day-to-day lives

b) audiences of significant others in their everyday lives that can acknowledge preferred storyline developments and support future actions that are in harmony with these preferred identities

c) their experiences in the bush context documented in a ways that are personally and collectively resonant and renders meanings accessible and available for sharing with others

d) a therapeutic relationship that is stable and continuous from the local community to bush context then ongoing upon return to local community for extended follow-up support (of 1-2 years)

Narrative practices such as definitional ceremonies, therapeutic documents, generating of collective documents of skills and song writing, amongst others, are significant in the task of supporting the consolidation and sharing of preferred stories that have been 'uncovered' in the bush context.

- The therapist is involved as a co-participant and co-author. He/she participates in the outdoor and adventure activities and does everything parallel to other participants on the program. Thus, the therapist and participant are audience to each other's experiences on the program. The therapist position is de-centered and does not attribute meaning to the experiences of the program, but rather is influential in providing space for people to attribute their own meanings to events in the program and, then, to broader understandings of life and identity.

- In the bush context, in challenging outdoor activity, there are numerous opportunities for participants to not only support themselves, but also to support others (including the therapist!) to get through challenging times. This is highly significant as an opportunity for people to experience themselves as expert, knowledgeable, useful and contributing to the lives of others and is often a key aspect of building preferred identity.

- The challenge of the bush experience reflects the idea of 'symbolic stress', as evoked by Victor Turner (1967) in his writing on the liminal period of a rites of passage journey. In working with people who have experienced trauma, generating a rich description of the steps taken to overcome the often significant challenges of an extended bush trip can be an entry point to broader conversations about skills and knowledge in getting through hard times in life. These skills and knowledges can be linked to social, cultural and relational history, as well as other physical environments that are significant in people's lives.

- **It is fun!**

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