

BU | Be Well & Center for Urban Ecology & Sustainability

CAMPUS ECOTHERAPY GUIDE

*By Marissa Byers with support from Dr. Blair McKissock,
Beth Lohman, & Dr. Julia Angstmann*

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WHAT IS ECOTHERAPY?

Ecotherapy is a type of mental health and wellness practice that involves engagement with the natural environment to work through stressors and increase wellbeing. There are many forms of ecotherapy, including horticultural therapy, animal-assisted therapy, walking meditation, shinrin-yoku (forest bathing), and more. Whatever form ecotherapy takes, the main goal is to facilitate a connection with the environment that eases stress and other symptoms of mental health challenges.

With this said, it is important to note that ecotherapy practices are not new, even though research on evidence-based nature interventions has become more mainstream in the U.S. Many indigenous cultures have prioritized and understood the relationship between human wellbeing and our environment since long before these practices were ever studied in a lab! The publishers of this guide acknowledge that Butler University and the surrounding areas included in this guide occupy traditional, unceded Miami, Potawatomi, Shawnee, Kickapoo, and Kaskaskia lands. We are committed to continual learning to be better stewards of the environment and prioritizing social justice through this practice. You can learn more about native lands and territories at <https://native-land.ca/>, and learn about Liberation Ecotherapy at <https://theaesj.com/>.

WHY ECOTHERAPY?

We'll start with the bad news. According to the [National Recreation and Park Association](#), Gen Z spends the least amount of time outdoors compared to other generations. A [2019 survey](#) also found that Gen Z is the least likely generation to self-report very good or excellent mental health. The good news is, there is a potential fix for this: ecotherapy.

One of the biggest benefits of ecotherapy is that it is a relatively simple and cost-effective practice. While it is not a solution for advanced mental health challenges on its own, it is an accessible practice for mental health protection and overall wellness. It can be as easy as stepping outside and breathing! We could fill an entire book reviewing the research showing how nature has beneficial impacts on our minds and bodies (and this has been done—check out the Resources page!), but to save space for our hands-on activities, let's summarize:

WHY IT WORKS: Ecotherapy

Intentional contact with nature (the more-than-human world) can provide both mental and physical benefits.

PHYSICAL BENEFITS

- Reduced stress
- Better sleep
- Lower blood pressure
- Improved immune function



MENTAL BENEFITS

- Reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression
- Increased happiness and self-esteem
- Enhanced cognitive performance and creativity



SOCIAL BENEFITS

- Increased feelings of social connectedness
- Greater life satisfaction
- Sense of community and generosity



BEYOND ECOTHERAPY

If you or someone you know needs direct mental health support, reach out to [Butler's Counseling and Consultation Services](#).

If you or someone you know is considering self-harm, call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 800-273-8255 (TALK) and find additional resources [here](#).

Getting outside is great, but getting support from community mental health resources when you need them is even better!

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

The [NOAA](#) defines environmental stewardship as “the responsible use and protection of the natural environment through conservation and sustainable practices to enhance ecosystem resilience and human well-being.” This is all a fancy way to say, “*Take care of the space around you.*” Just like you wouldn’t leave your spilled coffee in the middle of the campus Starbucks floor for others to slip on or clean up after you, don’t leave a mess or negative impact on the natural spaces you explore! **Consider the impact your actions have and preserve the space for others.** An important aspect of ecotherapy is remembering that we are working in tandem with the natural environment, not simply using it for our own gain.

Leave No Trace is a principle of environmental stewardship that includes leaving an area as you found it and minimizing your impact on the land. This includes avoiding littering and picking up after yourself, staying on the designated trail, and respecting wildlife. You can read more about Leave No Trace from [LNT.org](#) or from [REI](#).

Hammocking is a popular way to relax and spend time outside. It is important to apply Leave No Trace principles when hanging your hammock to avoid damaging trees. You can learn how to hammock responsibly with [this quick guide](#).

Being a good steward of our community and natural spaces includes **good trail etiquette**. You can learn about guidelines for sharing the path or trail [at this website](#).

WHAT TO BRING:

Before you set off for your outdoor activity, make sure you check the forecast so you can choose weather-appropriate clothing and footwear that is comfortable for walking. (May we also suggest applying some sunscreen?) We recommend bringing a full reusable water bottle, a journal, and something to write with. If there are any other mindful activities you want to enjoy outside, like creating art, bring the necessary supplies. Most importantly, bring your curiosity and a willingness to try something new!

WHAT NOT TO BRING:

Consider putting your phone on “Do not disturb” mode for your mindful outdoor activities so that you don’t bring your notifications and to-do list with you! If you want to listen to music, bring headphones instead of a speaker so others using the space can enjoy their own activities too. Plan ahead to avoid bringing things that will create trash, unless you have a strategy for disposing of any litter properly!

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

Curious about what you might find on your adventure? Wondering what that colorful bug or bird or flower you saw on the trail is called? Use these guides to learn more:

- [Indiana Native Plants Species](#)
- [Indiana Native Animal Species](#)

Consider seasonal changes as you make your observations, such as which bird species migrate and which stick around all year, or how different plants look in each season.



CAMPUS NATURE RECOMMENDATIONS:



The above map provides examples of nature areas right here on Butler's campus. More details about activities for these areas can be found using the Ecotherapy Trail QR codes.

Plan ahead to make walking, rolling, or biking to your destination easier! Active transportation and exercise provide benefits for your mind, body, and environment. The [Central Indiana Ride Guide](#) and [Pacers Bike Share](#) have maps to help you plan your trip if you are exploring natural environments off-campus.



TIPS FOR GETTING OUTSIDE:

Spending just [20 minutes a day outdoors](#) can add up to make an impact on your mental health and wellbeing. Here are some tips to up your outside time:

- **Start small.** Contrary to what your Instagram feed may tell you, you don't need to travel far or spend days in the wilderness to benefit from immersion in nature. Committing to taking a short walk a few days a week or staying off your phone and paying attention to your surroundings on your walk to class can be a great place to start.
- **Bring a friend.** Having an accountability partner or a friend to help you feel more confident exploring is an excellent strategy for getting outside more. Take turns choosing a destination or outdoor activity!
- **Make it part of your routine.** Building time outdoors into your routine is an easy way to prioritize mental wellbeing. Maybe you start by changing your route to the HRC and walk through Holcomb Gardens to get there. Maybe you spend some time studying outdoors each week. Think of ways to naturally build time outside into your regular schedule. Notice what works and what doesn't, it's okay to try different strategies to find what fits your lifestyle best!

10-MINUTE ACTIVITIES (OR LESS!)

DO NOTHING FOR TWO MINUTES:

[This free website](#) starts a two-minute timer that resets every time you touch your computer. Take a moment to pause and breathe while listening to the sound of waves!

CAMPUS HOT SPOTS FOR MEDITATION:

Use the campus map from Page 7 to check out nature “hot spots” on campus for a quick meditation or break between classes. The below activities can be completed when you have limited time to de-stress—every moment counts!

- **Attention to breathing:** As you sit outside or walk to class, focus on breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Pay attention to how it feels to circulate fresh air through your body. Notice where you feel the sensation of breathing. Visualize exhaling stress from your body with cleansing breath. End your mindful moment by setting an intention for the rest of your day!
- **Body Scan:** Find a place to sit comfortably. You can close your eyes or keep them open if you prefer. Take a few deep breaths to start to calm your mind. During a body scan, you will bring your acute attention to each part of your body to observe sensations there. Start by bringing your full focus to your feet. Continue moving your focus up your entire body until you reach your head. Notice any pain, temperature, tightness or pressure, or tactile sensations like the seat or ground beneath you or clothes on skin. Release any tension you noticed and end with the deepest inhale and exhale you’ve taken all day!
- **Mindful walking:** There are a few ways to participate in mindful walking. One is to engage all five senses and pay intense attention to your surroundings as you travel. Another is to link your breathing with each step (inhale one step, exhale the next step, as you walk slowly and evenly). You can also do a body awareness exercise, bring your focus to your feet and legs as you walk. Pay attention to the lifting and falling of your foot, the shifting of your body side to side, and the muscles your body moves in order to walk. (If you are a wheelchair user, you can do the same activity paying attention to the muscles you use to move yourself!) To end, set an intention for bringing this present moment awareness to the rest of your day.

5 SENSES GROUNDING:

This activity is common for anchoring yourself in the present moment during times of stress, anxiety, or difficulty with regulating emotions. It can be done indoors or outdoors.

- Start by taking five deep breaths. Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth.
- Identify, name, and acknowledge five things you can see in the space around you.
- Acknowledge four things you can touch and feel around you.
- Notice three things you can hear in the environment around you.
- Identify two things you can smell in the space around you.
- Acknowledge one thing you can taste at this moment.
- Take a few more deep breaths to end the activity. Repeat as often as necessary to help cope with escalated emotions.

FOUNTAIN MEDITATION:

One of the age-old traditions at Butler is fountain hopping. This brief mindfulness meditation uses the sounds of running water to align yourself in the present—both [seeing and hearing water](#) can help us to release stress. Choose your favorite campus fountain, or even walk to the Canal or White River for this exercise.

- Find a comfortable place to sit near the fountain or water and ensure you feel comfortable and safe. You may close your eyes to focus on listening to the flowing water or keep them open to observe the water as well.
- Start to lengthen your breath. Inhale to the count of four, and exhale to the count of five. As your breath lengthens and evens out, begin to notice how your cycles of breath sound like waves on the shore.
- Bring your attention to the sound of the fountain or other water. Immerse your senses in experiencing the water—if your mind wanders, gently bring your focus back to the water. Maintain this state of focus for as long as you enjoy!
- Imagine water flowing through your body, clearing away any tension you are feeling. You can visualize specific stressors or negative emotions being washed away in the flow of water.
- When you feel ready, blink open your eyes (if they were closed) and take your deepest breath yet to end the activity and move into the rest of your day feeling refreshed!

30-MINUTE ACTIVITIES

EXPLORE NATURE ON CAMPUS:

The Center for Urban Ecology & Sustainability and BU | BeWell have partnered to develop two Ecotherapy Trails on campus. These trails combine eco-therapy practices, mindfulness meditation, and physical wellness strategies to provide a relaxing and exploratory experience using our campus' natural resources. Route A takes about 30 minutes to complete, but you can take as much time as you need to move through the activities. Meditation's benefits accumulate with practice, so visit the trail as often as desired. We suggest returning in each season to observe how your environment changes throughout the year. Visit the Ecotherapy Trail website to get started with the trail map and activity guide.

DEALING WITH CLIMATE ANXIETY/GRIEF:

[Climate anxiety and climate grief](#) are feelings that may arise when learning or thinking about climate change and its impacts on our society. These can be overwhelming feelings, but it is important to understand and process them so that we can overcome the paralysis that comes from these emotions and move into action to protect and heal our environment. [A survey of 16-25 year old's](#) from 10 different countries found that climate change invokes feelings of sadness, fear, anxiety, anger, powerlessness, and guilt for many young people. Coping strategies for these feelings will depend on what you feel and how those emotions show up for you, but here are a few ideas to get you started:

- [Naming feelings](#) you're experiencing can help to understand, manage, and move past strong emotions.
- Connecting with nature can help you to relax and serve as a reminder of the natural systems we want to protect through climate activism.
- Make a list of steps you can take for climate action and activism. Coming up with ways that you will make your lifestyle more sustainable and help others learn about improving their environmental impact can help you move from anxiety to action! [Here are some example ideas](#) for college students.

FACULTY FEATURE

ON BEING, by Professor Jason Goldsmith

Our lives are so busy that it is hard to slow down. Between classes, jobs, social life, and social media, many students find it difficult to justify taking the time to be simply be still and observe the world. This particular assignment [Weekly Field Journaling] is one of several strategies I designed to force students to quiet their minds – forget about the argument you had with your best friend, stop worrying about your organic chem exam, quit consuming TikTok – and just be in the present moment. It offers students an opportunity to attune to their bodies and the natural world around them. Initially, I had two intentions. First, journaling would be a way to train our observation skills. It would, I hoped, provoke a shift from everyday consciousness to a more intentional awareness. Second, the practice of keeping a journal would provide students with raw material for their art and writing projects. And while it still accomplishes both of these, it has become less a means to those ends than an activity valuable in itself.

I ask the students to find a location in nature away from “campus” because we want as few everyday distractions as possible. And studies have shown that surrounding ourselves with trees and greenery actually improves emotional wellbeing and cognitive ability.

Students inevitably come to identify the location they have chosen as “my spot,” and this is significant; the space should be symbolic of the sacredness of the act. We are, after all, performing a sort of personal ritual. The space becomes special, because they visit it repeatedly, attend to it intentionally, come to know it intimately.

Although some students find the instructions vague, I am reluctant to proscribe exactly how they should respond in the journal. The act of intentional observation is more important than what they attend to. There are many different ways that students can fulfill the assignment. Some students look inwards. They think about their purpose or their hopes. Others turn outwards to the sway of grass, the rustle of leaves, or the buzzing of insects. What happens over time, however, reveals to the students so much about themselves, the world, and their place in it. For many, it unlocks their curiosity about the natural phenomenon they see, plants, weather patterns, local animals. They become aware of how all these are interrelated. They come to know impermanence; everything changes, themselves most of all.

Most students come to look forward to their weekly journal sessions, finding them therapeutic, an opportunity to slow down and step outside the hustle and bustle of campus life. They begin to appreciate and anticipate time to themselves. They grow more comfortable with silence. At the end of the semester, many indicate that they want to continue this practice, although I doubt they will. Everything in this day and age conspires against solitude and silence. That's why I require it.

Try it: *Conduct weekly observations with a field journal*

Scientists, writers, and artists keep field journals for many reasons: to think about the world in a deliberate manner, to ask questions about what they see, to discern patterns in nature. Keeping a journal encourages us to slow down, listen, and observe. In order to help you see the natural world more clearly, I would like you to identify a specific location on campus away from your dorms and the classrooms. This might be down by the canal, in the woods by the fountain, at the Butler prairie. Find a place that you would like to return to repeatedly throughout the semester. The location you select should be away from the bustle of campus somewhere out in nature.

Each week you will visit your location and sit for thirty minutes paying close attention to the world around you. Do nothing but observe for the first ten minutes; let the business of the day fade as you become attuned to your place. Use all of your senses. The more you see, feel, hear, smell, and taste, the more you know and understand. For the next twenty minutes, record in your journal the details of the scene and your own reflections on them. As you observe an object or an event, allow yourself to fully enter into it. Be curious. How are things connected? Discovering these connections can be thrilling, but it takes conscious and concerted effort to fully engage your senses and your mind. Over time, you will begin to notice patterns, small changes. This is the essence of journaling.

Keep in mind:

- The point is not to create great literature or frame-worthy art, but to observe, experience, and record the world around us. The journal is a work in progress.
- Never depend on your memory. Write your observations down at the moment of observation. Use as much detail as possible. Find the most precise word possible to describe the texture of that Burr Oak tree's bark. Weeks or months from now, you will want to be able to get as much information as you can from your journal entries.
- Question what you see and write down your questions.

-from Seeing the World & the Self with Professor Goldsmith

NATURE JOURNALING:

Journaling and putting your reflections on paper can [facilitate better mood and decrease stress](#). You can build on the Field Journal activity or switch things up with one of the following journal prompts. You can also visit one of the websites below for more topics and activities. Spend some time sitting outside or looking out a window to reflect before putting pen to paper.

Resources:

- Find journal prompts by nature [category](#).
- Learn about observational journals and find example [prompts](#).
- Explore [creative writing](#) prompts.
- Using nature metaphors helps to process feelings and describe them in writing!

Example Prompts:

- When & where do I feel most in-tune with myself?
- What does community look like for me? Where do I feel most connected to community? What makes me feel connected?
- How do I react to change or transition? Where do I see change and transition happen in nature? What strengthens me through changes?
- How does my body feel in this moment? What can I do today to take care of myself?
- When did I experience joy this week? What lesson did I learn this week?
- What is the view from where I am sitting? Write about one similar quality that you share with an object that you can see.

TRY FOREST BATHING:

[Shinrin-yoku](#), also known as [forest bathing](#), is the practice of sensory immersion while in a forested setting, which originated in Japan. Many of the activities previously listed in this guide are suitable for forest bathing. The goal is to observe with all five senses while calmly moving through the environment or sitting. You can read this [forest bathing guide](#) to learn how to get started!

60-MINUTE ACTIVITIES

EXPLORE MORE NATURE ON CAMPUS:

Need a longer nature break? Look no further than the campus Ecotherapy Trail, Route B. This is a longer version of the trail that covers new areas of campus, including the Farm, Holcomb Gardens, and the Canal Towpath. Find the map and activity guides for this trail on the Ecotherapy Trail website.

IRVINGTON HOUSE GARDEN BEDS & VOLUNTEERING AT THE FARM:

Looking to get your hands dirty? Get gardening on campus! Gardening is beneficial for both [mental and physical health](#):

- There is a positive association between gardening and reduction in depression and anxiety symptoms
- Gardening (and flow state) can decrease stress
- Gardening activities can increase sense of community, cognitive function, and physical activity levels
- Low-intensity movement exercise like gardening can improve BMI
- Specific soil microbes have been proven to [stimulate serotonin production](#)

Irvington House has garden beds for student volunteers to tend. You can also learn about gardening and urban farming at the CUES Farm (by I-Lot). [Contact CUES](#) to get involved!



TAKE A HIKE:

Butler University is in a very connected neighborhood, featuring multi-use paths that make nearby locations accessible by walking, rolling, or biking. On campus, you can visit the CUES Farm and Holcomb Gardens, but if you're looking for something different try exploring these nearby resources:

[Canal Towpath](#): Head down to Holcomb Gardens and cross the bridge to access this five-mile gravel multi-use path.

[Newfields](#): You can take the Canal Towpath from Butler to the Newfields campus & 100 Acre Woods to explore peaceful indoor galleries, vibrant outdoor gardens, or wild prairie and forest paths.

[Indy Arts Park](#): The Indianapolis Art Center has free galleries as well as an Arts Park nestled between the Monon Trail and the White River. Ride a bike or scooter up the Canal Path and Monon Trail to the park and view statues or sit on a bench near the river.

[Marott Park](#): If you keep going up the Monon Trail past the Indianapolis Arts Center and Arts Park, you'll find Marott Park. There are multiple entry points along the Monon that lead to forested trails along the White River.

[Broad Ripple Park](#): Broad Ripple Park also offers an expansive view of the White River and walking paths. Take the Canal Path to the Monon Trail to reach this park.

[Holliday Park](#): This park is not accessible from campus without a car, but it does offer a network of wooded trails for a more rugged experience.

[View the full map.](#)

GROUP ACTIVITIES

START A WALKING GROUP:

Starting a habit is easier with a friend! Planning a regular group activity creates accountability to help you remember to get outside. Your walking group can be as official or informal as you want. Include whoever and however many people you want, walk however far you want, and choose the time and day that work best for you.

Step 1: Decide who you want to invite to walk with you.

Step 2: Collaborate to plan a regular meeting place and time.

Step 3: Walk and de-stress! We recommend walking for at least half an hour to reap both the benefits of being outdoors and physical activity.

OTHER IDEAS:

Take your study group outdoors.

Set up hammocks with your friends.

Walk or bike to activities near campus. (See the “Take a Hike” section in 60-minute activities!)

Tap into your inner child. Gather friends for energizing classics like frisbee, capture the flag, or whatever gets you outside!

Volunteer. You can get gardening at the CUES Farm or pick up litter and plant trees with local organizations like [Keep Indianapolis Beautiful!](#)

ECOTHERAPY INDOORS

Greening your space with houseplants can be an effective way to bring the benefits of the natural world indoors. Intentional interactions with plants can [help to lower stress](#) or give your [brain a break](#). Small changes like placing your desk near your window and keeping the curtains open to let in natural light can also make a difference in mood.

The Biology Club Plant Sale is a great place to find houseplants on campus and get advice on what species can thrive in your current living space. Pay attention to the light sources you have in relation to what the plant you are buying needs! You can also add a full-spectrum plant light to help sustain greenery if you don't have windows with sufficient natural lighting.

Bring nature indoors by **listening to audio recordings** of soothing ambient sounds while you study, relax, or go to sleep. Even without being outside, research shows [that listening to nature sounds can decrease stress](#) and improve positive affect. Here are a few example resources we recommend:

YOUTUBE CHANNELS:

- [The Silent Watcher](#)
- [The Relaxing Town](#)
- [RainRider Ambience](#)
- [Involving Ambience](#)

APPS:

- [Naturespace](#)
- [Rain Rain](#)
- [A Soft Murmur](#)
- [Portal](#)
- [Calm App](#)

OTHER WEBSITES:

- [Calm Sound](#)
- [Nature Sound Map](#)
- [Rainy Mood](#)
- [National Parks Livestream Webcams](#)

RESOURCES & FURTHER READING

BOOKS:

- [The Nature Fix](#), by Florence Williams
- [Losing Eden](#), by Lucy Jones

PODCASTS & MEDIA:

- [Switchback](#): An Outdoor Community Podcast
- [WHY?!?](#) A Good Grief Network Podcast

ARTICLES & RESEARCH:

- [EcoPsychology Benefits](#)
- [Why Water Relaxes Us](#)
- [Socially and Environmentally Responsible Outdoor Travel](#)
- [Dealing with Climate Anxiety](#)
- [Good Grief Network Resource List](#)

CAMPUS RESOURCES:

- BU | BeWell
- Center for Urban Ecology & Sustainability
- Counseling & Consultation Services

"In every walk with Nature one receives far more than he seeks."

-JOHN MUIR