

Nature Therapy for Grief



Photo: SIMBA tree of tranquility at Inverness Botanical Gardens
www.simbacharity.org.uk

A guide for those experiencing loss



Introduction

Grief is a natural response to loss, but it can feel unnatural and unlike anything we have experienced before. Grieving can have a negative impact on our health and wellbeing. People commonly can have trouble with a variety of emotional and physical issues such as anxiety, low mood, sleep and appetite disturbance, along with a lack of motivation to do anything. Connecting with nature, even for the shortest amount of time, on a regular basis, can support us through the process of grieving.

Just as there is no “right” way to experience grief, there is no “right” way to use nature to deal with it. Each of us has our own view of nature, and different opportunities to connect with it, depending on where we live and our individual emotional and physical needs.



Photo courtesy of David Clyne

What is Nature Therapy?

Nature provides a frame of reference for death and dying - reminding us that death is a natural phenomenon that we can neither escape nor ignore. We have a natural instinct to seek nature's aid in times of sorrow. The peace and tranquillity of nature can provide solace and the cycle of nature can bring hope of new beginnings.

Nature Therapy describes a broad group of activities used to improve wellbeing, usually, but not always, within outdoor surroundings, including back gardens, local parks and footpaths. Even when we can't get outdoors, bringing aspects of nature indoors is known to have therapeutic effects.

Nature Based Activities

Creating a routine to get out into nature more can be helpful after the loss of a loved one. This might take the form of feeding the birds, sitting in your garden, a regular walk on your own, with friends and family, or with a group.

Below are some other ideas:

- **Visit a special place** – an outdoor space that was a favourite of a loved one we have lost can often be a comfort.
- **Create nature based rituals** – anniversaries, birthdays and other dates can be particularly difficult. Knowing they are approaching can give you time to plan ahead, perhaps take a trip to a special place or catch a sunset. Write a poem or say a few words and scatter wildflower seeds in your loved ones memory.
- **Take a walk** – breath in some fresh air and feel the sun on your skin to give you energy to help face any challenges ahead.
- **Plant a tree or memorial garden** - flowers and plants have long been a symbolic part of our ceremonies around death. Planting something and tending to it as it grows can be restorative, and help to build long-term connections with nature.
- **Connect with others** - Join a walking group. Taking Steps is a walking group led by staff and volunteers of Highland Hospice and is open to those in the first year or so following their bereavement. It is not necessary to have had any previous contact with the hospice. Walk in companionable silence or to chat with others who have had similar experiences. More information can be found at www.pathsforall.org.uk
- **Create music or art** - use nature as inspiration to sketch and paint, or to write a poem, a song, or even a book in your loved ones memory.
- **Bring the outdoors in** - watch a wildlife documentary, listen to bird song, or make creative artwork using items brought inside from nature.
- **Hold images of nature in your mind** - images of the regenerative cycles of nature, can help us to keep going.

How can contact with nature improve our health & wellbeing?

Time outdoors can encourage us to take more exercise which is known to help relieve acute stress; reduce the symptoms of anxiety and depression and improve sleep.

Opportunities to connect with nature are largely free, accessible to most people wherever they live, work or go to school and require minimal specialist equipment. They can lend themselves to group activities which help build social connections.



Photo courtesy of Gill Hubbard

Further Advice and Support

Highland Hospice is the only provider of specialist palliative care in the Highlands. Their aim is to support people, their families and carers, living with an advancing, life shortening illness to live the best possible life and to prepare for the best possible death. The hospice offers support and advice with emotional, social and spiritual issues that may arise, working with patients and their loved ones at a time of transition, and into bereavement, to help them enjoy, value and commemorate life.

www.highlandhospice.org



Highland Green Health Partnership aims to encourage more use of the outdoors to help increase physical activity, improve mental health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities. Further details can be found at:

www.thinkhealththinknature.scot



The Highland Green Health Partnership is helping to make more use of Scotland's outdoors as **Our Natural Health Service**, a national initiative led by Scottish Natural Heritage and supported by national partners:



Scottish Forestry / Coilltearachd na h-Alba

