

Connection to Nature or Nature Relatedness

Since the beginning of time people have sought nature for its healing properties. Plants were the basis for all medicines. Nursing interventions such as animal-assisted therapy and nature therapy have beneficial healing qualities. ‘Connection to nature’ or ‘nature relatedness’ means having personal, sensory contact with plants, animals, earth, water, sun, sky, season and climate. The natural world encourages exercise and movement by prompting us to go outside. Other benefits include sensory stimulation, restoration, pleasure, distraction and reduced blood pressure. Research has shown that the physiological benefits of going outdoors include improved appetite, sleep patterns, postural system, mobility and coordination. Psychological benefits include improvements in orientation, mood, memory and motivation. Nature and being outdoors also reduces stress, agitation and aggression. In a nursing home we would expect everyone to have these benefits regardless of their nursing needs.

In Nursing Care

Nature relatedness is particularly important for people who are frail or disabled and who live in a nursing home. Patients who have lost their independence can only go outside with assistance. Walking, planting bulbs, feeding the birds, playing a game or having a snack outside can provide a patient with exercise, fresh air, sunshine and social interaction. Assisting a person to get out into the world and enjoy simple pleasures, such as birds and sunshine can lift their mood, refresh their spirit and renew their hope. Being outside is also a benefit for nurses and carers as it gives them a welcomed break from the ward environment.

In Dementia Care

For people with dementia the loss of nature in their lives is often dramatic and occurs when they move from their own home into a long term care facility. With all the best intentions, we often keep people safe and secure by keeping them indoors. For this reason we need to better understand the benefits of nature relatedness to an institutionalized person with dementia. Four years of research by the author in a residential care home in the UK provided evidence that connection to nature is particularly beneficial for people with dementia for various reasons.

Independent or Assisted

Benefits of nature-relatedness are possible and essential for a patient with dementia. If a safe, secure and appropriately designed environment exists they will be able to go outside unsupervised. Simply going outdoors offers fresh air, exercise and sensory stimulation. But to stay outside longer, some assistance, supervision or companionship is necessary. Social interaction helps the person with dementia to focus and to engage in an activity. Being stimulated by nature and discussing it with someone at the same time unlocks further benefits.

The Prosentia Hypothesis

Natural stimuli during conversation helped a person to remember experiences she had in the past and recall those memories. Sharing memories helped her stay present and be who she is. Also, the person

“Connection to Nature or Nature Relatedness” by Dr. Garuth Chalfont – English translation

with dementia spoke symbolically by using nature as a metaphor. This means nature helped her share feelings which are sometimes hard to express.

A woman with dementia picked a flower, smelled it and put it back on the plant (Figure 1). ‘I’ll leave it here, with the others’, she said. The flower would be lonely if she kept it. She used the flower as a symbol to say something about her own experience as a thoughtful, caring and perhaps vulnerable person. This brief interaction with nature and another person provided her with an unexpected opportunity to express her self.

Based on the author’s research, the Prosentia Hypothesis recognises two dynamics occurring simultaneously (Figure 2). The person with a dementia is experiencing a pleasant sensory connection to nature (A) while also enjoying social interaction (B). The Prosentia Hypothesis states:

IF a person interacts with nature and another person, they are able to maintain a sense of self.

What is unique about this hypothesis is that it describes a situation with two interactions. One is *sensory stimulation* which occurs when we relate to nature through sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, etc. We know from ample research that having a connection to nature is beneficial. The other interaction is *communication* with a friendly trusting person. We know that social interaction is beneficial - simply spending time talking to a patient benefits them in many ways. When these both occur, there can be several positive outcomes. The main outcome is *manifestation of self*.

Any hobby we share with a friend (even shopping!) would contribute to our sense of self. This would include going fishing, hiking in the woods, knitting, or helping dig vegetables in a community garden. By sharing the activity and talking about it with someone we know and trust, we store up memories and experiences. Essentially, over our lifetime, such memories (both pleasant and sad) contribute to our knowing who we are. You can see why this may be particularly important for a person with dementia who is at risk of losing a sense of self.

Summary

This Prosentia Hypothesis focuses on the human importance of having a personal connection to nature. This dynamic is especially important for nurses because it offers a therapeutic intervention that is easy to use and contributes to the wellbeing of patients with dementia. As research continues to grow in this area, it is useful to have this theoretical framework to better understand the dynamics involved, and to be able to build a body of knowledge in support of nature-relatedness as a therapeutic concept.

References

Chalfont, G. (2010). Connection to Nature at the Building Edge: towards a Therapeutic Architecture for Dementia Care Environments. Saarbrücken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.

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Figure 1.



Figure 2.

