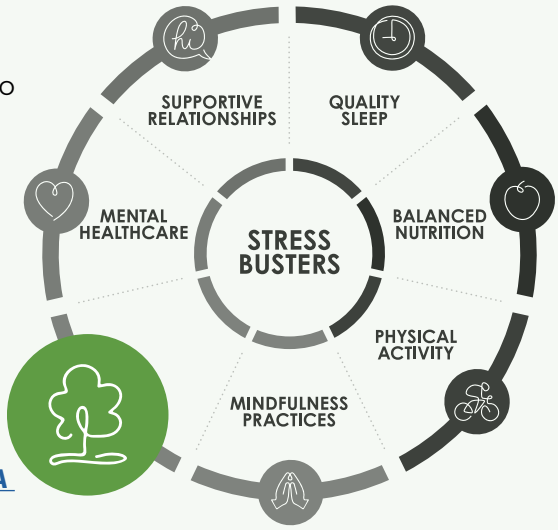
Experiencing Nature

You would like to collaborate with the client on experiencing nature as a Stress Buster! Before getting started, ask yourself:

- Has the client been connected to services and programs to address immediate needs or stressors?
- Has the client been presented with a brief overview of all seven Stress Busters?
- Did the client express interest in learning more about experiencing nature?

Use the information and trauma-informed steps presented here to ask and **listen** for what clients want to prioritize, **partner** with clients to find things they can do every day to help calm the stress response for long-term healing, and **connect** clients to programs and services if they want more support. **For more, see this chapter's *What you can do: Listen, Partner, Connect* and *A trauma-informed approach for experiencing nature* sections.**



Spending time in nature has been shown to improve our physical and mental health as well as our overall well-being.[1–3] Being in nature doesn't mean we have to visit a state or national park (although that is nice to do). At its most basic, "experiencing nature" can simply mean being near something green – grass, trees, or planted areas around work or school buildings; playgrounds; parks; community gardens; indoor plants; and even looking at nature through a window.[4]

Closures of state and national parks during the COVID-19 pandemic brought greater awareness about the connection between green spaces and health. A study found that those who maintained or increased their time in nature during the COVID-19 pandemic had better mental health.[5]

Experiencing nature can have both in-the-moment and longer-term health benefits. Nature can be calming, helping us feel less anxious and more focused. Parks and other outdoor public spaces can provide opportunities to socially interact with other people, helping lift our mood. Being in nature also can lower our stress hormones and blood pressure.

The science: How experiencing nature is a Stress Buster

Stress response	› Spending time in nature has been shown to decrease levels of stress hormones and calm the stress response system.[6–11] › Experiencing nature can boost resilience. For example, being able to accomplish something that may be a little scary or difficult such as climbing a tree or crossing a stream provides a sense that we are stronger on the other side and can face the next challenge that comes our way.[12]

Brain health	› Spending time in nature may improve our ability to think and learn, and improves attention, empathy, and impulse control.[3,13–16]
Heart health	› Interacting with nature is associated with decreased heart rate, blood pressure, heart disease, and mortality.[17–21]
Immune health	› There is emerging evidence that nature exposure may have anti-inflammatory benefits (i.e., calm down overactivation of the immune system in response to stressors) and relieve or counteract asthma symptoms such as wheezing and coughing.[3,22]
Overall well-being	› Being in nature with other people can promote positive relationships and build social ties.[3,11,13] › Studies show that a connection to nature is associated with feeling happy and satisfied with life.[23]

Challenges

Many different factors – including those beyond our individual control – can affect how and if we spend time in nature. Recognizing that there are structural/systems-level factors that can cause challenges to experiencing nature can reduce feelings of blame and shame. And, asking about these challenges can allow for more targeted individual-level solutions for clients.[24]

Following are some examples of challenges; this is not an exhaustive list. In addition, racism, discrimination, and inequities at all levels can contribute to and exacerbate any of these challenges.

Structural/systems-level challenges

Environmental factors	Lack of access to outdoor spaces; lack of access to safe spaces (free from violence and emotionally safe); insufficient infrastructure needed for safe and healthy outdoor time, such as sidewalks, bicycle lanes, public parks, and playgrounds; lack of access to transportation; infrastructure that does not accommodate physical differences and disabilities Feeling a lack of safety and inclusion for some communities of color in natural spaces that may stem from current and historical racism and acts of violence such as lynching and the genocide of Native American people.[24,25]

Policy-level factors	Environmental racism has resulted in communities of color being intentionally located near pollution sources such as landfills, chemical plants, and highly trafficked roadways, which pollute outdoor spaces or take the place of potential green spaces like parks.[26] Historically, "redlining" policies (i.e., the systematic denial of financial services such as mortgages or predatory lending practices against Black and Brown people[27]) forced minorities to live in locations that were less desirable and often had less green space.[4,28] Historical policies have led to forced displacement from land that was originally tribal. Therefore, it is important to recognize that in California (and other parts of the United States), we are living on tribal soil. We can incorporate practices that acknowledge the original stewards of the land, honor those who lost their lives to the genocide of Native American people, and support current tribal members in their struggle for justice and regain control of natural spaces that were historically taken from them.

Interpersonal/individual-level challenges

Psychological and cognitive factors	Feeling safe or uncomfortable outdoors (e.g., if doing an unfamiliar activity); negative associations (e.g., if a person associates the outdoors with a stressful job or experience)
Physical health factors	Households with individuals who have special needs may face unseen barriers in accessing nature and play spaces; in addition to physical barriers, there can be social barriers (e.g., bullies, people's attitudes and inexperience with people with disabilities or elderly people with dementia) that prevent people from accessing nature.[29]

This toolkit provides individual and organizational-level approaches to mitigate challenges (for organizational-level ideas, **see the chapter, *Promoting Stress Busters at the organizational level)***. To help clients and families increase their contact with nature, talk with them about any barriers they may face and collaborate to find ways for them to connect more often with something green, from indoor plants to outdoor spaces.

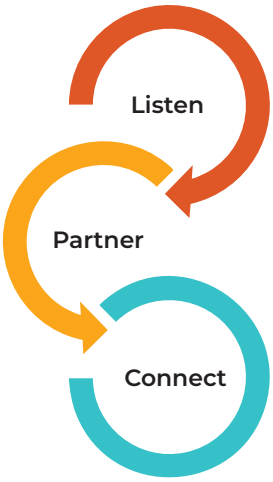
Disability justice and inclusive outdoor spaces

Disabilities impact a lot of us – perhaps more than we realize. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in four adults in the U.S. have some type of disability, including mobility issues, difficulty hearing or seeing, and cognitive or memory challenges.[30] Black and Indigenous people have higher rates of disability than other racial and ethnic groups.[30]

Disability justice is a way of looking at people's abilities and disabilities with a different lens. It sets an expectation of differences and acknowledges that all bodies are unique, complex, and essential, with distinct strengths and needs that must be met.[31,32] It also centers the needs of historically excluded groups such as people of color, women, people who identify as LGBTQIA+, and immigrants.[33]

Disability inclusion describes ways we can advance access and inclusion for people with disabilities.[33] When it comes to experiencing nature, meeting these needs and making outdoor spaces more inclusive involves enabling physical access[34] (e.g., ramps, boardwalks, tactile signage and maps, wider hiking trails), as well as ensuring people feel comfortable in these spaces (e.g., providing accessible information on an ADA-compliant website,[35] providing closed captioning on video exhibits, inviting those with disabilities to participate in activities in outdoor spaces, etc.).

What you can do: Listen, Partner, Connect



The way you talk about Stress Busters with clients matters. Community and clinical partners shared that in their experience, it is more effective to engage clients with Stress Busters through conversation and partnership versus telling a client how to "fix it."

Using the **Listen, Partner, Connect Framework** is a way to remember how to structure a client conversation about Stress Busters and how to interact with clients using trauma-informed and strength-based approaches.

Listen

Ask open-ended questions and use compassionate active listening to understand clients' needs and desires around the experiencing nature Stress Buster from their perspective.

Example questions:[36,37]

- What does "being in nature" or "spending time in nature" mean to you?
- What types of outdoor activities do you welcome or look forward to?
- How often do you get outdoors?
- What do you enjoy doing when you are outdoors?
- From your perspective, what are the good things about being outdoors or in nature, and what are the less good things?
- How would you like things to be different?
- When would you be most likely to spend time outdoors?
- Can you think of ways you could spend more time outdoors in your regular routine?
- How can I support you in spending more time in nature?
- What do you see as your next steps?

For more information about how to do active listening, see the toolkit chapter *Listen, Partner, Connect: Framework and skills for a trauma-informed approach with clients.*

Reminder: Create safety and trust

- Use outdoor spaces that are accessible and safe for people with disabilities.
- If someone is scared to try something (e.g., cross a stream when on a hike), don't force them to do it. Instead, validate the way they are feeling and support them as they build their resilience.

For more examples of how to apply SAMHSA's six key principles, see *A trauma-informed approach for experiencing nature* section of this chapter.

Partner

Base the conversation and next steps on what a client needs or wants. There is no need to lecture or tell someone what to do. This is a partnership and a collaboration. If a client gets stuck or is not sure what to do, check in with them by asking, "How do you see me being able to help?"

- **Use the ACEs Aware handout as a guide in the conversation if helpful:**
  - "Being in Nature Can Help Prevent and Manage Stress" (from www.ACEsAware.org/managestress).
- **Use strengths-based and collaborative approaches with the client,** such as motivational interviewing, to discuss strategies for experiencing nature and for them to choose what works best for them, such as the following ideas from community partners and clinicians:
  - Make plans with friends and family to meet up in outdoor spaces like a park instead of indoors.
  - Play with your kids outdoors with sidewalk chalk, an obstacle course, jump rope, bouncy ball, or hopscotch.
  - Go for a walk every day and mindfully engage the senses by noticing what's around: the smell of plants, sounds of birds, texture of tree bark.
  - Sit quietly outdoors for a few minutes and take some deep breaths and repeat a daily mantra (for more information, see the mindfulness practices Stress Busters chapter of the toolkit.).
  - Explore the community by visiting different parks or neighborhoods, going to farmer's markets, or hiking or walking local trails (see a list of resources at www.acesaware.org/managestress/cbotoolkit).
  - Go to free outdoor concerts or activities in local parks.
  - Join a community garden, start your own, or plant seeds or flowers in a pot on a balcony or deck.
  - Put some indoor houseplants near a window in places where you will see them every day.

For more information about how to use motivational interviewing techniques, see the toolkit chapter *Listen, Partner, Connect: Framework and skills for a trauma-informed approach with clients.*

Reminder: Focus on strengths and collaboration

- Provide structure, predictability, and mentally prepare participants for what will happen during the nature program or experience.
- Check in with participants and be flexible: Take breaks, change your instructional style (interactive Q&A versus a lecture), or switch activities depending on feedback from the group.

For more examples of how to apply SAMHSA's six key principles, see *A trauma-informed approach for experiencing nature* section of this chapter.

Connect

If clients are experiencing toxic stress and have stress-related mental or physical health issues (see a list of ACE-Associated Health Conditions), they may be interested in connecting to resources, programs, and services that can support them in experiencing nature as a Stress Buster to reduce stress, heal, and thrive.

Share online and community resources	› Help clients find: • local, state, and national parks. • accessibility information for parks and playgrounds. • calendar of events, bus routes, and facility information for local Recreation & Parks Department. • community gardens. • outdoor advocacy and protection programs (e.g., marine mammal centers, wildlife conservation organizations). • after-school programs for kids, such as those offered through school, the YMCA, or a Boys & Girls Club (discounts are often available). › See a list of resources at www.acesaware.org/managestress/cbotoolkit.
Refer to primary care doctor	› If the client is interested, connect them with an ACEs Aware-trained clinician to help them get needed interventions and referrals. Ask the client if they would like to ask their doctor about different types of nature-related therapy (ecotherapy[13]), such as the following examples: • Some health care providers offer therapy sessions in a garden or while taking a walk outdoors. • Animal-assisted therapy – Petting animals, such as dogs, lowers anxiety and helps people relax.[38] • Horticultural therapy – Gardening for therapy and physical rehabilitation; • Adventure-based treatment programs (e.g., white-water river rafting, surfing, fly-fishing, rock climbing) › For clients without health insurance, you can find help with Medi-Cal, health coverage, and other benefits on the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) website and find free primary care services at the California Association of Free and Charitable Clinics. › For resources, visit www.acesaware.org/managestress/cbotoolkit.

A trauma-informed approach for experiencing nature

When we say "take a trauma-informed approach," what does that mean? There are six key principles of SAMHSA's trauma-informed approach.[39] The following table provides examples from lived experience from community partners, clinical expertise, and the literature showing how to apply this Stress Buster across the six key principles. You can follow these practices with clients who are participating in group classes or programs, or when working one-on-one with a client using Listen, Partner, Connect.

SAMHSA's principles of a trauma-informed approach	**Ways to put the principles into action** Examples from community partners, clinicians, and the literature
Safety	› Being trauma informed does not always mean avoiding scary things. If someone is scared to try something (e.g., cross a stream), don't force them to do it. Instead, validate the way they are feeling and support them as they build their resilience. › Designate a "calm down space" away from a group activity for anyone who needs to take a break. › Use outdoor spaces that are accessible and safe for people with disabilities.
Trustworthiness and transparency	› Provide structure, predictability, and mentally prepare participants for what will happen during the nature program or experience. › Provide a tip sheet of what to expect and what to bring to help people prepare for things they may not have experienced before. › When you talk about rules, explain why they are important. Try to frame them positively, such as by saying, "Please stay on the path so we can preserve the delicate habitat" rather than "Don't go off the path." › Enable participants to pre-select activities ahead of an event and avoid publicly disclosing personal information, such as disabilities, allergies, or accessibility needs. › Consider what participants may need to feel comfortable in nature; e.g., floaties or pool noodles for people who don't swim, and snacks for those who might not realize how hungry they may get on a hiking trail.

Collaboration and mutuality	› Check in with participants and be flexible: Take breaks, change your instructional style (interactive Q&A versus a lecture), or switch activities depending on feedback from the group. › Engage a participant (where appropriate) or a group's leader or organizer to facilitate a calming activity, such as deep breathing or grounding techniques (see the *Listen, Partner, Connect: Framework and skills for a trauma-informed approach with clients* chapter of the toolkit). › Check in with a group's leader or organizer (e.g., from an after-school program or senior center) before and during the activity to discuss together if participants have expressed fears or hesitations. › Ask about and accommodate individual needs; e.g., a safe place to keep hearing aids or other equipment from getting wet or lost. › To help clients feel comfortable speaking up about what they want, work to level power differentials in your interactions with clients (for more information, see the *Listen, Partner, Connect: Framework and skills for a trauma-informed approach with clients* chapter of the toolkit).
Peer support	› As you talk with clients, notice their strengths (e.g., takes walks, enjoys gardening, etc.) and comment on them. › Use people's names to connect during conversations; provide name tags for larger groups. › Consider creating a buddy system so participants with more comfort in nature can buddy with someone who is less comfortable.
Empowerment, voice and choice	› Offer people a choice of which activities they want to participate in (e.g., have a variety of options at a single event like a hike and arts and crafts), and the pace at which they want to move through the environment. › Determine activity options to accommodate things like disabilities, comfort levels, allergies, or fitness levels. › Provide a sense of control in unfamiliar environments or situations where possible, such as giving participants their own flashlight or a walking stick to use (e.g., when camping or hiking).

Cultural, historical, and gender issues	› Recognize and honor the different cultural, historical, religious, and other customs that can influence how we can or want to engage with nature. Learn about the customs of clients and bring this learning into your conversations and programming. › Think ahead of time about what some potential triggers may be for different people in outdoor spaces, such as in historical sites (descendants of current or historical traumatic events), the wilderness, urban parks, farmland, etc. This can help you be ready to respond in ways that are healing and build resiliency. › Acknowledge that individual socioeconomic contexts and access to resources for access to nature (influenced by racism and discrimination) may vary. Accordingly, aim to take a nature equity approach to working with individuals and communities, such as identifying sources of nature that may be more appropriate for those living in shared spaces (e.g., gardening, parks).

With these tools and strategies, you can use the Stress Buster of experiencing nature to support individuals, families, and staff in preventing and treating toxic stress.

> **Take Stress Busters to the next level:**
>
> For ideas for integrating Stress Busters into your organization's operations, services, and physical environment, **see the chapter, *Promoting Stress Busters at the organizational level.***

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