

Meet a Tree

Geoffrey McMullan introduces a nature awareness game for family and friends, and asks if it might be used for therapy



Geoffrey McMullan has produced a dissertation on nature awareness as part of his studies. The full dissertation can be found at precentormarketing.com

Nature awareness has many facets. There are games that can be played simply for fun, or they can be used as a tool for teaching individuals about nature and raising our level of awareness by drawing our attention to our relationship with ourselves and others while in nature. The benefit of using nature awareness as a possible intervention for addicts has been recognised; and now its effectiveness for treating other behaviours like ADHD and Asperger's syndrome is appreciated.

Nature has been used as a healer around the world, from the spiritual journey taken by Shamans to the physical treatments of Western medicine, eg. using maggots to clean wounds. More recently our young people are being asked to look at their behaviours through programmes like Brat Camp, where they are exposed to the wilderness and wilderness therapy.

The objective of nature awareness is to get participants to connect with their heart and to transfer the lessons learnt from nature (be it connecting with a tree, an animal, plant or another human being) into an opportunity to change established behaviour. This creates the potential for a new, healthy approach to be adopted by becoming more self-aware.

- More games**
- Blindfold Tag
 - Drum Stalk
 - Thread of Intent
 - Fox the Fox
 - Sit Spot
 - Plant Meditation

Meeting a Tree
I've used nature awareness games and activities for the last 10 years with adolescents from various backgrounds. Adults on my survival/tracking courses have found nature awareness enhances and increases the level of understanding of themselves and their peers in a natural environment.

Meet a Tree is played in pairs. The aim is to locate an individual tree chosen by one of the pair, the 'sight guide'; then to make a 'connection' with the tree without the use of the sense of sight, finding it again unaided and to learn from the experience of the journey of being taken to and finding their tree.

“The aim is to locate an individual tree chosen by one of the pair, then to make a connection without the use of sight”

Before the game starts, I give only a very brief overview of how the game is played. This is done deliberately so I don't influence the outcome of the game. Because of the lack of information, participants will ask questions which are explored at the end of each game. I particularly ask them what



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Benefits of nature awareness

- Build trust
- Promote confidence and self-esteem
- Improve communication
- Promote working as a team, building relationship skills
- It's in the here and now
- Connect people to a sense of wonder, putting life into perspective
- Encourage individuals to take responsibility for their own actions
- Develop independence and creativity through improved problem solving and life skills
- Individuals to see that they can and do achieve things they never thought possible
- Reduce anxiety helping deal with anger
- Promote respect for oneself, others and nature



they learnt from their experiences. Having obtained permission from the participants to be blindfolded, I ask them to 'trust', keep an open mind and to set aside their belief systems for the duration of the game. The game is played in silence to reduce any potential distractions and influences.

The game begins when the sight guide leads their blindfolded partner out into the woods/park using a random, meandering, indirect route within the boundaries of the play area.

The sight guide leads their partner to a tree of their choice, then retreats up to five metres away and waits for about two minutes. This is necessary so they don't influence the outcome by answering any questions their partner might try to ask them.

It also gives the blindfolded participant sufficient time to connect with their tree. This is done by introducing themselves to the tree and trying to visualise it in their mind's eye. They can hug, touch or smell the tree to help with the connection.

After the allotted meeting time, the sight guide leads their partner back to me (the facilitator) using a different random, meandering, indirect route. When they arrive back at the start point, I ask the participant to remove their blindfold. I face the previously blindfolded participant and give them these instructions:

- "Look at me and maintain eye contact." (This is to keep them focused.)
- "I'd like you to see YOUR tree in your mind's eye."
- "I'd like you to see YOUR way back to YOUR tree in your mind's eye."
- Finally, "When you FEEL READY, I'd like YOU to go and find YOUR tree."

They then go off to find their tree with the sight guide approximately five metres behind them. The sight guide will not tell them which is their tree until

they state, "This is my tree". At this point, the sight guide will tell them if they've found the right tree.

The participants swap places and the sight guide now gets to find their tree, in the final game they continue to wear their blindfolds when looking for their tree, and without being lead by their sight

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guide. The instances of people returning to the exact tree with which they made a connection are really amazing.

According to some participants, Meet a Tree opened their eyes and touched them deeply. Even though they did not understand how it worked; they felt its impact, describing it as a profoundly life-changing experience.

To prove my point, here's the experience from one of hundreds of people who've gone through this activity and other nature awareness activities I use. Susan, a counsellor in active-recovery, had this to say about The Drum Stalk, where she moved through a cathedral of trees to the sound of a drum beat. "As he led me, I was aware of not being in control and liking the feeling. I had a sense that my chest and heart were open, my breathing flowed freely, my mind was empty and my body was vibrant in the effervescence of nature. That God-shaped 'hole' that I live with each day, felt like a God-shaped 'whole'. I felt safe and free within a sense of belonging."

Susan was talking about the emptiness that addicts feel and which they fill with their 'drug of choice'. Nature awareness helps them to replace their old unhealthy behaviour with a healthy new



one, which could be seen as a spiritual awareness, God or nature. This is the 'Whole' Susan mentions.

Other participants have had similar experiences. "The shock of being able to walk in a straight line whilst being blindfolded," recalls Robert. "I think I could have drawn you a map on how to get to my tree even though I should have no idea where I was or where I stood." Carl stated that "to feel the tree without seeing and to find it again like an old friend and to see a tree through the blindfold."

"I didn't understand how trees and nature could be so powerful," said Lucy. "I felt something I never felt before, I can't really explain it. I felt happy, I got in touch with my feelings for the first time. I started to feel spiritual as well. It was amazing." John said: "I feel that our countryside, woodland etc... is abused a lot in this country, and people should take steps to look after it all a lot better, because it's beautiful."

Independent research

Independent of my research, a smaller study on Meet a Tree was carried out by a colleague (Williams, 2008). During their workshops, they facilitated three games on separate days.

During the first game, three out of three participants found their trees. Two out of three found their trees during the second game, and in the third go two out of three found their trees. The participants were known as the Bricklayer, the Roofer and the Youngman. During the first game the Bricklayer pointed out his tree immediately. The Roofer had a near miss and then went on to find his tree later, without assistance. The Youngman wandered around the woodland for a while, before correctly identifying his tree.

The Bricklayer apparently formed a real bond with his tree and returned to it many times throughout the weekend workshop. He stated that his experience of Meet a Tree had made a real impact on the direction that he would like to take his life. When the Roofer (who was successfully overcoming

an alcohol issue) found his tree, he became very emotional to the point of crying. His wife stated that she had never seen him become that emotional in the 20 years that they had been together. The researcher cannot comment further other than record the facts as they were presented. However the figures I believe speak for them selves, in the first game 100% success rate and in games two and three a 67% success rate.

For more details contact Geoffrey McMullan at pathfinder777@btinternet.com or visit his blog at <http://wild-tracking.blogspot.com>.

Nature awareness

Nature awareness is 'Learning with the Heart'. It is known that Native Americans, and other 1st Nation cultures use an awareness based on a belief that there is a power greater than ourselves and that we are not separate from, but rather an integral part of nature. The American 1st Nation calls this 'The spirit that moves through all things'.

In essence it's about our relationship with self, our fellow wo/man and ultimately with the Creator (or a Higher-Power) in nature. It provides us an opportunity to look at the bigger picture both externally/internally by connecting with our heart, allowing us perhaps for the first time to explore our feelings, behaviours and relationships by using our five senses and connecting with our so-called sixth sense or our spiritual awareness.

