Wilderness Therapy for Abused Women

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a wilderness weekend retreat for abused women facilitated by the authors. An overview of wilderness therapy, addressing its historical roots, key theoretical perspectives, as well as issues of emotional and physical safety, is presented. Special emphasis is placed on how to create a wilderness experience that is empowering to these women and helps them deal with the challenge of leaving their partner and children for a weekend. Facilitation issues are also addressed and recommendations to enhance the delivery of programs of this nature are given.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit une retraite d'une fin de semaine en pleine nature avec des femmes victimes d'abus, animée par les auteurs. On y présente une vue d'ensemble de la thérapie en pleine nature, qui aborde ses racines historiques et ses perspectives théoriques essentielles de même que les questions de sécurité émotionnelle et physique. Un accent particulier est mis sur les façons de créer les conditions nécessaires à une expérience en pleine nature qui améliore le contrôle de ces femmes sur leur vie et les aide à relever le défi de quitter leur partenaire et leurs enfants pour une fin de semaine. L'article aborde aussi des questions d'animation et formule des recommandations sur la la façon d'améliorer la livraison de ce type de programme.

The notion that wilderness is somehow therapeutic would have astonished early pioneers, who laboured hard to bring their vision of civilization to often inhospitable and unforgiving surroundings. However, with skill and care, the wilderness can be used to provide a gentle healing environment to help abused women relax, gain self-awareness, and engage in much needed self-care activities.

This article will provide an overview of the historical roots of wilderness therapy and then discuss why wilderness therapy is an appropriate intervention for this population. Details of the wilderness retreat will be outlined, and observations regarding problematic areas will be presented. The article will conclude with recommendations for counsellors and researchers who wish to use wilderness retreats as a method of helping abused women.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Wilderness therapy was based on a concept originating in Germany as described by Russell (2001), with the specific goal of preparing young men for

battle during World War II. In other words, the objective was to encourage mental and physical toughness, self-reliance, and bonding under stress. This concept has been enlarged, most notably in Outward Bound courses that are offered all over the globe (Asher, Huffaker, & McNally, 1994; Kiewa, 1994). Such courses are designed to enhance a sense of connection, personal competence, and mastery as a result of meeting difficult physical challenges in a small group (Marsh, Richards, & Barnes, 1986). Since the 1980s, these types of outdoor experiences have become an increasingly popular means of treating out-of-control and at-risk adolescents (Marx, 1988), as well as other marginalized populations such as female offenders (Mitten, 1994) and sexual abuse survivors (Levine, 1994). Essentially, the basic paradigm of this approach rests on the notion that one is strengthened by overcoming nature. In contrast, a more recent paradigm views appreciating and co-operating with nature as a key to personal empowerment. Among its proponents are Mason (1987), who stressed the need to work in harmony with nature to obtain an emotionally satisfying experience; and Mitten, whose eco-feminist perspective suggests that the strength-through-overcoming-nature paradigm is not appropriate for marginalized or vulnerable women. Because women tend to be more relationally focused than men, they are more likely to experience a sense of power and mastery by successfully connecting with others, rather than by overcoming adversity.

We wanted to offer a retreat that aligned with the eco-feminist perspective, which encourages participants to develop a relationship with nature, rather than demonstrate one's ability to dominate it (Mitten, 1994). This view fits our experiences of abused women, who tend to value affiliation more than independence. For the purposes of this article, we will define wilderness therapy as an intentionally created experience involving recreational activities in a natural outdoors setting with the intent to foster personal healing and growth.

abused women and wilderness therapy

Although wilderness therapy has been used with incest and sexual assault survivors (Asher et al., 1994; Levine, 1994), single mothers on welfare (Aubrey & MacLeod, 1994), women with body image problems (Arnold, 1994), and women with psychiatric disorders (Kessell, 1994), an extensive literature review found no peer-reviewed material specifically pertaining to abused women. And yet, it seems well suited to benefit this population because of the common experiences of learned helplessness, dependency, emotional numbness, and feelings of low self-worth (Tuel & Russell, 1998; Walker, 1994). A loss of the ability to make healthy and independent life choices (Burgess & Roberts, 2002; Davidson & Connor, 1999) is also typical of this population. Wilderness therapy challenges these notions with its potential to foster perceptions of capability and personal power (Bacon & Kimball, 1989).

For example, it is common for abused women to focus on their failings. By tapping into the courage needed to tackle perceived difficult challenges such as

hiking up a mountain, a powerful opportunity to question negative self-definitions opens up (Bacon & Kimball, 1989). Furthermore, many women in abusive relationships sincerely believe that it is not possible to have fulfilling lives, or even happy moments, without their partners (Mulligan, 1991). The experience of enjoying themselves on their own is a powerful demonstration of the fallacy of this belief.

Wilderness therapy can also be used to create opportunities to foster personal empowerment, which includes "increased self-esteem, increased self-efficiency, and increased personal responsibility" (Mitten, 1994, p. 59). In the same vein, Bandura's self-efficacy theory suggests that when accomplishments are regarded as significant, they can be generalized to other situations (Bacon & Kimball, 1989). Thus, an important goal for this retreat was to enable the participants to recognize how their accomplishments during a weekend in the wilderness (such as the ability to show competence and perseverance, being successful in reaching a goal, enjoying themselves, and connecting to others) were possible. Once these outcomes were experienced as possible, expectations of success could then be transferred to overcoming the difficulties faced in the domestic sphere.

Another important reason that wilderness therapy can be utilized for this client population is the fact that many women are under considerable stress for a large part of their daily lives (Tutty, 1993). The opportunity to experience an environment free of the usual stressors could become highly conducive to mental relaxation and reflection on the possibility of new directions in their lives.

One element that we hoped the participants would gain was increased self-awareness, of which body awareness is an integral part. Abused women commonly focus their energy away from themselves and onto others, and body awareness is generally low. The wilderness provides a powerful medium to focus on the self. For instance, just as Mason (1987) documented, we found that the mere act of walking on a rocky path forced clients to ignore internal dialogue and to concentrate on, and be aware of, their bodies.

RETREAT DETAILS

Agency Setting

At the time of the retreats both authors worked in a major Canadian city at a large counselling agency that provided services to women, men, and children who were struggling with abuse in their lives (the second author continues to work at the agency). Programs included a shelter for women and children as well as an extensive outreach program for ex-residents. Clients were predominantly Caucasian, from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds.

One of our responsibilities at the agency was to coordinate and facilitate an outreach group program for all current and former shelter residents. This weekly group had a steady attendance of about 10 to 15 and was composed of women who had either left, returned to, or remained with their abusive partners. We

adopted a feminist and solution-oriented framework that focused on building members' strengths and engaging them in problem-solving strategies. As experienced hikers, both of us organized and facilitated the retreat trips and volunteered our time.

Participants

We arranged to take approximately 12 women each summer for two years on a weekend wilderness and hiking retreat. Participants, ranging in age from mid-20s to late 40s, were self-selected and signed up voluntarily. There were no eligibility criteria, and women who participated in the previous retreat were welcome to return. To preserve group cohesion, however, we had to discourage members from inviting their friends to the outing.

Preparation

We began laying the groundwork and inviting the women about two months before the actual departure. The clients made their own arrangements for time off work and childcare, and negotiated with their partners about being away for the weekend. Due to the cost of securing camping gear, we decided to book accommodation in a wilderness hostel. Therefore, the financial obstacles were minimal, as the only direct costs were the low hostel accommodation fee plus a few dollars to share the cost of gas.

Transportation was by car pool and food was donated by the agency. Women were provided with a list of items to bring on the retreat (e.g., extra socks, towels), and alternatives for needed equipment were suggested. For example, they could use socks as mitts, wear a plastic bread bag inside each shoe to create a waterproofing effect, and make ponchos from large garbage bags. In addition, we visited second-hand stores looking for hiking equipment such as packsacks to give to the women.

We took ample precautions to ensure the physical safety of the women. For example, we selected hikes that were recommended by the provincial park staff as being appropriate for inexperienced hikers. Furthermore, we carried first-aid kits, had training in CPR (one of us had extensive first-aid training), and were aware of any health problems that would impact the women's participation on the retreat.

Therapeutic Approach

Our retreat involved the four components that Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) believe are necessary for a restorative, healing experience: (a) temporarily relocating, (b) being in a place that is different from one's everyday environment, (c) developing a sense of appreciation for the beauty in the new location, and (d) feeling part of a group. These components will be described in more detail below.

The notion of being away in a setting removed from the everyday environment is one of the elements that Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) believe is necessary to facilitate a healing experience. Both of us have experienced the healing quality of

solitude, quietness, and beauty that is connected with being in the woods. We felt it was important to remove the women from the noise, rush, and pressures of city life by offering them a wilderness setting.

The second component requires the setting to be extensive enough to feel like a completely different environment (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). The base for our trip was a youth hostel located in a provincial park in the southern part of the Canadian Rockies, easily accessible by a relatively short two-hour trip on a paved road. Considerations of weather, comfort, and equipment necessitated using a hostel rather than camping. We wanted to encourage the women to utilize hostels in the future, because most of them had limited financial means and would not be able to afford hotels nor acquire the necessary equipment for a tenting experience.

The third concept is described as "soft fascination," which entails being in a location that offers interesting and beautiful sights such as clouds, sunsets, and fast-moving river water to engage one's attention (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). While pleasant, such visual experiences do not demand total concentration and hence are very conducive to reflection and internal processing.

Finally, Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) suggest that the wilderness and activities within it engender a sense of belonging and purpose. We aimed to create a cohesive group environment where we encouraged opportunities for the women to connect and to receive and offer support. For example, our hikes were set at a leisurely pace that permitted easy chatting, in order to provide the time and opportunity for relationships to form and deepen (Mitten, 1994). We also arranged for the women to complete chores in small groups to promote working relationships. The women slept in a dormitory, which provided further opportunity for socialization. We also made efforts to privately check in with each woman to make sure she was feeling a part of the group and was processing her thoughts and feelings.

Structure of the Retreat

During each retreat we completed three hikes over a span of a day and a half. Each hike lasted for approximately three to five hours, including rest breaks. If the women were not hiking, they were usually in the hostel helping to prepare the meals or socializing around the campfire. Structure was mostly geared toward creating time for hiking, debriefing, and preparing for departure. Essentially, the retreat was designed to be an informal gathering of women.

During the hikes, one of us always stayed near the front of the group, while the other remained in the rear with those walking at a slower pace. These positions were rotated in order to share the responsibility for dealing with the dynamics of those eager for the physical challenge and those who lacked the stamina to move at a similar pace.

Rest breaks were characterized by an invitation to the group to reflect on their thoughts and feelings about the hike. Because it was our intention to help the women process the meaning and relevance of their wilderness experience, we introduced the hikes as a "metaphor for interdependence, healthy social func-

tioning, and compassion" (Bacon & Kimball, 1989, p. 134). To this end, we modeled self-disclosure and utilized Rogerian counselling skills such as empathy and unconditional positive regard to facilitate processing of thoughts and feelings. During the rest breaks and while at the hostel, we provided the women with time alone for reflection, and also invited them to share their thoughts and feelings in the group setting. A few participants chose to process by journaling. It was also important that, during the group sessions, we provided some structure in order to ensure everyone felt heard and had an opportunity to speak. To that end, we used a round format in which women took turns sharing an answer to a debriefing question we raised (e.g., "We are curious how your thoughts and feelings in the last half hour of climbing that tough section compare to your thoughts and feelings when you encounter a problem at home"). We also used one-word checkout rounds to end the group session, similar to the group sessions held at the agency. Further details about the processing experience can be found in the section titled "Emerging Themes."

OBSERVATIONS

Preparation

The mere process of preparing to leave on the retreat provided growth opportunities for the participants. Making their own arrangements to attend proved to be a strong incentive to express their needs and wants. Generally, this is extremely difficult for women struggling in abusive relationships, yet many demonstrated great creativity and persistence in ensuring their participation. Most worked in low-paying and unstable jobs, and getting time off involved negotiations with authority figures. Doing this successfully provided a powerful antidote to their commonly held belief that they do not deserve any "breaks" or special treatment. The concrete, time-limited aspect of the trip made it easier to ask for something they seldom initiate or request: namely, taking time for oneself without any expectations of providing for, or taking care of, others. It has been our experience that the concept of caring for self is foreign to many abused women, who will usually focus on meeting the needs of others before considering their own.

Participants' Challenges

Finding appropriate childcare was a significant obstacle. Frequently, abused women have learned to tolerate abuse from early childhood, and past or current abuse is not conducive to developing and practicing good parenting skills (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990). It is our experience that this history commonly leads to one of two approaches to childcare. On the one hand, mothers tend to be hypervigilant and have great difficulty entrusting their children to strangers or partners. On the other hand, we found that some mothers were willing to entrust their children to unproven babysitters, being either oblivious or indifferent to potential problems. Our concern was the children's well-being, and also to

ensure that mothers would not resent their offspring if lack of childcare blocked their participation. As a precaution, the possible negative consequences (e.g., anger and/or guilt for the mother, and feeling unwanted and/or being foisted upon inappropriate caretakers for the children) were addressed in group sessions.

Another challenge encountered by the participants was opposition from their partners. Abusive men often have a lengthy history of being extremely and irrationally jealous (Dutton, van Ginkel, & Landolt, 1996). It became apparent from feedback received how even a short weekend trip away could easily trigger strong fears of abandonment in the woman's partner. Underlying these fears are usually concerns that the woman might experience joy and competence without him, and realize she needs him less than he wants her to believe. (In fact, there were several instances where the women's partners arrived in the parking lot just before the group's departure. We later discovered that these surprise visits were to ensure that there was indeed a group of women leaving, led by female facilitators, and not a secret rendezvous with a boyfriend.) In many relationships, and abusive ones especially, physical distance is often associated with emotional abandonment (Dutton, 1995). On several occasions, a male partner agreed to look after the children, only to renege at the last minute, or a crisis would be provoked shortly before the intended departure. This was perhaps the most significant reason that, on each trip, a few confirmed and paid-up participants failed to show.

Interpersonal Issues

Once in the mountains, certain patterns of relating to others became quite overt. Initially, the women tended to be clingy and quite tentative, with many becoming somewhat fearful. As have others before, we found it necessary to offer a significant amount of structure and guidance early in the weekend (Mitten, 1994). There were numerous questions around general logistics and details about safety as well as the meals. Tension and anxiety eased considerably after the women focused on specific tasks related to unpacking, organizing for the meals, and preparing for the hikes. Within a relatively short time, the group members became more trusting of their own abilities. As time went on, it became more common for the women to venture ahead or wander away from the facilitators.

In support of our philosophy that there is value to experiencing the wilderness in a gentle, nonpressured manner, we frequently invited the participants to be mindful of their wilderness surroundings rather than focusing on reaching the top of the mountain at a rapid pace. When a woman struggled with the decision to continue on the hike, we gathered as a group to explore the situation. All participants were invited to express their feelings and thoughts about the hike and the possibility of returning to the hostel. What we usually found was that women who were feeling discouraged needed to debrief these feelings of being tired and frustrated with their bodies. It was striking how readily the participants continued with the hike after having their feelings validated and normalized.

To promote emotional safety on the retreat we recognized the need to monitor, anticipate, and deal with the various emotional reactions of the participants (Bacon & Kimball, 1989). We found that frequent check-ins, either one-on-one or as a large group, helped us to keep a pulse on the needs and the level of processing required. Therapeutically, it was vital to distinguish between emotional releases due to physical exhaustion, and sudden insights that emerged as a consequence of having time to process and reflect. In the former case, a woman may not have been ready to disclose and process her intense feelings in the same way as a woman who had reflected on her feelings and thoughts. Thus, it was important for us as facilitators to assess the situation and provide therapeutic feedback appropriate to each individual.

EMERGING THEMES

As described above, therapeutic work with the participants was accomplished even before leaving the parking lot. We found that the mere act of inviting a woman to come for her own pleasure was a powerful demonstration of the possibility of achieving balance between nurturing herself and staying connected to loved ones. It is this balance that is invariably missing in the lives of these women. They desperately need to be connected, but they associate connection with self-sacrifice and having to give up essential parts of themselves to be in a relationship (Schnarch, 1997). It may be difficult for the reader to appreciate the powerful impact of an enjoyable social connection for an abused woman. It serves as direct and irrefutable proof that there is an alternative to a life often dominated by anxiety, denial, fear, and hopelessness.

During the retreat, three dominant themes emerged regarding the processing of the wilderness experience. One was an almost overwhelming awe at the vastness of the mountains and at how good it felt to be away from the city. This awareness seemed to help in some cases to put personal issues in a larger perspective; many women discussed a need to revisit their values and priorities. Others began to examine their daily habits around self-care, in particular their eating habits. We found it very useful to adopt Mason's motto "how we hike is how we live our lives" (1987, p. 100) into our discussions with the women so that they could apply various insights gained from the retreat experience to their daily lives. Observations regarding their tendencies to procrastinate, fear the unknown, be over- or underprepared, and hold self-defeating beliefs became metaphors for exploring their approaches to life.

A second theme that emerged was an initial tendency by some to complain (e.g., they were cold, they were tired, their packs were too heavy, they had sore feet). Feedback from group members about how this negative mind frame affected others on the trip provided opportunity to reflect on how one's negativity may be souring interactions with children and perhaps even jeopardizing connections to a support system. Women who had expressed pessimistic views about what they saw and felt realized how focusing on the negative prevented them

from recognizing the positives in their surroundings. Some were able to transfer this insight to learning how negativity prevented them from honouring and appreciating the positive in their lives. It is interesting to note that many of these women had to be constantly re-invited to focus on the positive aspects of their surroundings before they were able to recognize the frequency and impact of their negative comments.

The third and last theme we observed related to body awareness. Some of the women who had been raped had an adverse relationship with their bodies. Yet after a day of hiking, it was not uncommon for them to note with pride that their bodies had more strength and endurance than they had expected. This is similar to Powch's (1994) therapeutic retreat experience with a woman who stated: "I can still trust my body. It still works" (p. 16). Participants talked about how wonderful they felt after a strenuous hike, and some spontaneously decided to incorporate more physical activities into their lifestyle, such as going for long walks with their children.

CONCERNS

In hosting a retreat of this nature, three main concerns need to be recognized. The first is the increased power differential between the facilitators and the clients in a wilderness setting. Mitten (1994) notes that taking clients out of their comfort zone can create feelings of insecurity and thereby lead to disempowerment. To minimize this possibility, we actively encouraged the group's input on details such as the dates for the trip, car-pooling, and the type of food to bring, and we also asked them to make their own arrangements for childcare and time off from work. Furthermore, we kept the retreat client-centred by keeping the focus on connection, de-emphasizing the physical aspects of the retreat. This approach likely helped to reduce the power differential between the participants and ourselves.

A second concern, lack of money, can be a realistic obstacle to many women's participation in wilderness adventures, which has also been noted by Asher et al. (1994). As discussed earlier, this obstacle can involve cost of childcare, lost wages, and inability to take time off work. To minimize costs, we found it necessary to be adaptable in acquiring the necessary supplies, be willing to volunteer our time, and seek donations of food and juices from the agency in order to lessen the cost for the participants.

A third concern evolved around the impact the retreat had on us as facilitators. Although we viewed the experience as professionally very rewarding, we also found it quite draining and stressful due to the need to be emotionally available to our clients at all times. There were few opportunities to debrief or process with each other until a few days after we had returned. Consequently, for the second trip we recruited a group-facilitator-in-training to accompany us, and this lessened the individual workload considerably. Thus, we recommend three facilitators to every 12 women as a good ratio in order to sustain each facilitator's emotional and physical well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to differences in physical ability among the participants, it was tempting to split the group by offering two hikes at the same time (i.e., a high-intensity hike and a slower-paced hike). However, we decided to keep all the participants in one group, irrespective of their fitness levels. This decision proved advantageous as it reinforced some key goals of the retreat, such as group cohesion, connection, opportunities for reflection, and enjoyment of self. All of these had the potential to help the women explore alternatives to abuse and gain inner strength to continue with their healing journey. Furthermore, because the focus of the retreat was not on physical accomplishment, dividing the group into separate hiking groups would have sent a contradictory message. We also recognized that if the group split, the facilitators would also be separated, thus eliminating the possibility of working as a team and providing mutual support. Overall, we would highly recommend that all participants in this type of group remain together.

In terms of programming, we recommend providing opportunities for women to process their experiences by using creative expression techniques, such as creating a symbol that reflects a personal meaning related to the wilderness experience. Due to a lack of materials and time, we were unable to accomplish a project of this nature during the retreats, but direct the reader to the work of Cohen, Barnes, and Rankin (1995), Free (1997), and Simonds (1994) as valuable resources to explore the creative opportunities that could be integrated into a wilderness setting.

An additional recommendation is to actively encourage women to return to the wilderness area that was explored on the retreat. We wanted to empower each woman to create a wilderness experience on her own, or by including her partner, children, or friends. We believe this message reminds women to take responsibility for their self-care and to seek out activities that inspire them to be more independent, all of which could contribute to the process of healing from abuse. To help women accomplish this goal of returning to the wilderness, we found it necessary to educate women about the hostelling network as well as provide ample tips and strategies on how to spend time in the wilderness with the least amount of expense or inconvenience. We suspect these efforts met with only limited success, as we only heard of a few women who used the hostel on their own after the retreat.

Finally, given that an extensive literature review found no publication on this form of intervention with abused women, and given the prevalence and social cost of domestic violence, we see a strong need to investigate the usefulness of integrating wilderness activities with the healing process for this population. For example, research could investigate whether there was change in a woman's belief system as it relates to self-esteem. It would also be useful to have narrative accounts of the abused women's experience on the retreat as well as have the group complete a formal evaluation of the weekend program. Overall, we believe there are ample research opportunities to discover how wilderness can be integrated into the healing journey of women who have experienced abuse in their relationships.

CONCLUSION

The wilderness appears to hold significant potential to provide a gentle healing environment for abused women to gain self-awareness, to relax, to connect with others, and to begin to take care of themselves. Facilitating such an adventure can be very rewarding, but also quite demanding due to the need to assume multifaceted responsibilities (Bacon & Kimball, 1989), such as having sufficient skills to ensure a safe trip and to have the therapeutic training to help clients debrief and find meaning in their experiences.

The eco-feminist philosophy seems considerably more suitable for this population than offering the women a more physically demanding experience designed to have them conquer the wilderness. We also felt that a retreat of a shorter duration was more economically feasible for everyone involved, as it minimized the women's childcare issues and reassured the women that any problems at home or on the trail could be managed for a weekend. Overall, we highly recommend offering and evaluating wilderness programs for women who have been abused in their relationships; the informal feedback we have received from retreat participants has been highly inspirational and positive.

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