

WEATHERING LOSS TOGETHER: NAVIGATING ECOLOGICAL GRIEF IN OUR COMMUNITY

FIYYAZ KARIM, PSY.D.
KARIO057@UMN.EDU



ABOUT ME

Fiyyaz (Fee-Oz)

He/him/his



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1) Identify the psychological, social, and ecological dimensions of community-level grief related to environmental loss and climate change.
- 2) Analyze how ecological grief influences community functioning, institutional responses, and systems of support.
- 3) Apply community-based strategies to foster collective resilience, healing, and adaptation in response to ecological disruption and loss.

COMMUNITY GRIEF—AN OVERVIEW



Community grief is a shared emotional response to loss or trauma impacting a collective group, whether a neighborhood, cultural group, or nation.

- It differs fundamentally from individual grief: it involves shared narratives and symbols that link members' experiences.
- This grief affects group identity, social cohesion, and collective memory, often altering cultural practices and societal norms.
- An understanding of disenfranchised grief (grief not socially recognized or validated) helps contextualize some community grief experiences, as individuals may feel uncertain about their entitlement to mourn.

Features & Differences of Community Grief

Key Features of Community Grief

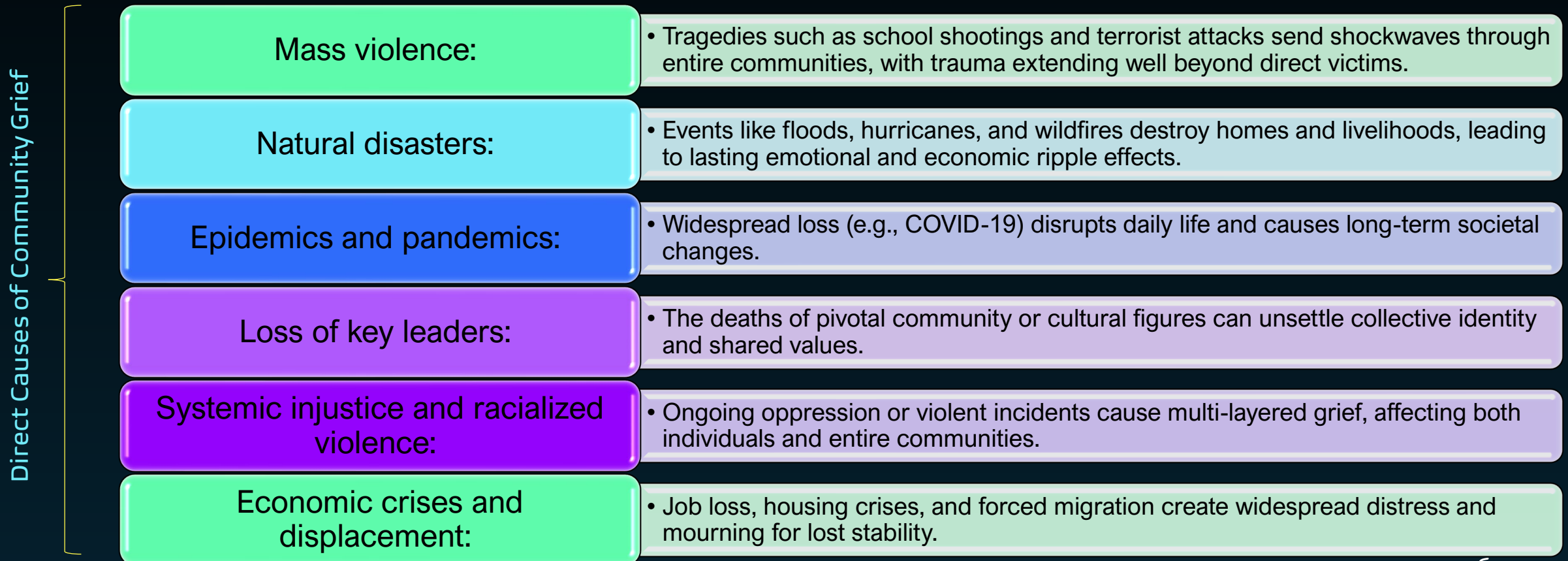
- Shared narratives unite members through storytelling, reflecting collective experiences and interpretations of loss.
- Communal rituals (vigils, memorials, ceremonies) reinforce solidarity, offering spaces for mutual support and public mourning.
- Group identity is reshaped, as grief may forge new bonds, shift values, or create a sense of “us” forged in adversity.
- “Ripple effects” occur as emotional, social, and cultural impacts extend widely, affecting schools, workplaces, religious institutions, and social norms—not just those closest to the loss.

Differences from Individual Grief

- Community grief is experienced collectively, with group responses such as public gatherings, collective silence, or widespread displays (flags at half-mast).
- Often visible in public spaces and rituals, which can include art installations, marches, or symbolic gestures that communicate shared sorrow to a larger audience.
- Involves cultural symbols like monuments, songs, or shared language, which help encode the event into collective memory and shape how future generations understand the loss.
- Emphasizes the creation and maintenance of collective memory, with ongoing anniversaries and rituals that sustain the community’s connection to the event and its meaning.

Community Grief: Examples and Causes

What Activates Community Grief?



How Grief Spreads Beyond Individuals

Indirect Causes of Community Grief

Media and Collective Witnessing

- Widespread reporting and vivid coverage of tragedies amplify emotional reactions, even among those not directly affected.
- Continuous exposure to traumatic news can deepen empathy and foster parasocial grief, where people mourn victims they do not personally know.
- Social media enables rapid sharing of loss and suffering, leading to communal responses and mobilization.

Accumulated Societal Stressors

- Long-term exposure to multiple distressing events, such as economic uncertainty, ongoing violence, or environmental threats heightens vulnerability to collective grief and can lead to chronic stress within communities.
- Restrictions on traditional mourning rituals (e.g., due to pandemics) and fragmented support systems complicate grief, making recovery more difficult.
- Devaluation or delegitimization of grief, where loss is ignored or minimized socially increases feelings of isolation and compounds communal sorrow.

Secondary and Contextual Influences

- Social, cultural, and political contexts shape the magnitude and expression of community grief, such as disparities impacting marginalized groups.
- Collective memory and ongoing injustice can create a sustained sense of mourning, especially when losses are repeatedly experienced or unresolved

EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY GRIEF

<u>EVENT TYPE</u>	<u>EXAMPLE/EVENT</u>	<u>COMMUNITY RESPONSE/VISUAL SYMBOL</u>
Natural Disaster	Hurricane Katrina (U.S. Gulf Coast, 2005): Large-scale loss of life and homes, affecting entire cities.	Rescue teams, rebuilding centers, community memorial services
Mass Violence	Sandy Hook School Shooting (Newtown, CT, 2012): School and community-wide grief after tragedy.	Vigils, memorial walls, public gatherings
Accident	Humboldt Broncos Bus Crash (Canada, 2018): Small-town collective mourning for young athletes lost in accident.	Hockey sticks on porches, team ribbons
Pandemic/Event	COVID-19 Pandemic: Worldwide grief as families and communities lose loved ones.	Online remembrance pages, city-wide moments of silence
Death of a Public Figure	Loss of beloved local leaders, community volunteers, or celebrities (e.g., James Earl Jones 2024).	Public shrines, candlelight tributes, mural paintings
Community Violence	George Floyd's death (Minneapolis, 2020): Triggered grief and protests in Roseville, MN, and worldwide.	Marches, murals, collective advocacy meetings
National Tragedy	9/11 Terrorist Attacks (U.S., 2001): Country-wide grief with global solidarity.	National memorials, flag-lowering, annual ceremonies

What is Ecological Grief?



Ecological grief is the emotional response to environmental loss (actual or anticipated) caused by environmental change or degradation, such as:

Symptoms can include sadness, helplessness, anxiety, and existential distress regarding the future of the planet.

Social context: Ecological grief may bring communities together through shared mourning, but can also create tension or apathy if unaddressed.

Loss of ecosystems (forests, coral reefs)

Disappearance of animal species (extinction events)

Transformation of culturally significant landscapes (e.g., melting glaciers, recurring wildfires, droughts)

Intro to Ecological Grief

- ❖ Ecological grief arises from losses related to environmental destruction—land degradation, biodiversity loss, climate change impacts.
- ❖ This grief often contains a futuristic or anticipatory aspect, mourning losses that are ongoing or expected in the future (e.g., glacier melting, species extinction).
- ❖ It frequently involves feelings like sadness, guilt, helplessness, anxiety, and anger.
- ❖ Because ecological grief can lack traditional mourning rituals or social acknowledgment, it may be compounded or disenfranchised, affecting mental health silently.
- ❖ Indigenous populations and rural communities may experience particularly acute ecological grief due to profound cultural and economic ties to their environment.

Who Is Affected by Ecological Grief?

Indigenous peoples

- Deep grief over loss of sacred lands, traditional knowledge, and cultural identity.
- Climate change compounds historical traumas from colonization, forced relocation, and loss of access to culturally significant species and landscapes.
- Cultural mourning includes threats to languages, storytelling, spiritual practices, and kinship with animals and places.

Rural communities dependent on land/nature

- Smallholder farmers, herders, and fishers face direct threats to livelihoods and food security due to extreme weather, droughts, or environmental shifts.
- Loss of ancestral lands and local ecological knowledge leads to distress, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness.

Urban populations losing green spaces, community gardens

- Diminished access to parks, gardens, and neighborhood nature reduces well-being and social connection.
- Urban ecological grief can involve frustration and sadness over community spaces being lost to development or climate impacts, exacerbating social inequities.

Children and youth concerned about climate futures

- High levels of eco-anxiety and fear for personal and planetary future, with 60% of young people worldwide expressing worry about climate change.
- Emotional responses range from sadness, anger, and despair to activism and resilience; these feelings can affect daily functioning, hope, and educational engagement.

Emotional Responses to Ecological Grief

Sadness and despair

- Profound sorrow over the destruction of landscapes, loss of species, and fading community traditions tied to the environment.
- Mourning for both personal and collective memories associated with places and ecosystems.

Helplessness and anxiety

- Feeling powerless to prevent or reverse environmental damage, especially when loss seems inevitable or uncontrollable.
- Heightened anxiety about further disruptions to home, life, and cultural identity as changes continue or accelerate.

Anger and guilt

- Anger can arise toward external causes of ecological harm (industry, government policies), or at a lack of public action or awareness.
- Guilt may accompany feelings of personal complicity or inability to protect nature, even when responsibility is shared.

Emotional Responses to Ecological Grief

Prevalence of anticipatory grief

- Grief is not just about losses already experienced, but extends to losses anticipated in near and distant futures: the mourning of ecosystems, ways of life, and species projected to disappear.
- Ambiguous or anticipatory grief can be particularly distressing because the extent and timing of loss remain uncertain, leading to chronic sorrow, eco-anxiety, and pre-traumatic stress.

Coping and resilience

- Emotional impacts can motivate adaptation, connection, and activism, but may also require new forms of community support, mourning practices, and resilience-building.

Unique Challenges of Ecological Grief

Absence of Rituals and Official Mourning

- Unlike bereavement following human death, ecological loss rarely receives formal recognition, ceremonies, or cultural rituals, leading to “disenfranchised grief”—grief that is not socially validated or publicly mourned.
- Few social structures exist for expressing sorrow about destroyed environments, extinct species, or climate displacement, leaving affected individuals and communities to grieve in isolation.
- Efforts are emerging to create new rituals (e.g., Remembrance Day for Lost Species, glacier funerals) but these are still limited in visibility and scope.

Unique Challenges of Ecological Grief

Compounding and Intersection with Other Losses

- Ecological grief may intersect with dislocation, forced migration, loss of livelihood, and profound cultural grief—especially for indigenous and rural populations whose identity and survival are closely tied to the land.
- Ongoing environmental change intensifies pre-existing traumas and can disrupt community support, leading to a reduction in social relationships and resilience.
- Multigenerational impacts (historical injustice, loss of sacred sites, ongoing discrimination) contribute to long-lasting patterns of distress and complicate recovery.

Ecological Grief as Ambiguous Loss

Lifelong adaptation:

- Individuals and communities may mourn the partial or gradual loss of familiar environments without knowing if restoration is possible.

Chronic sorrow:

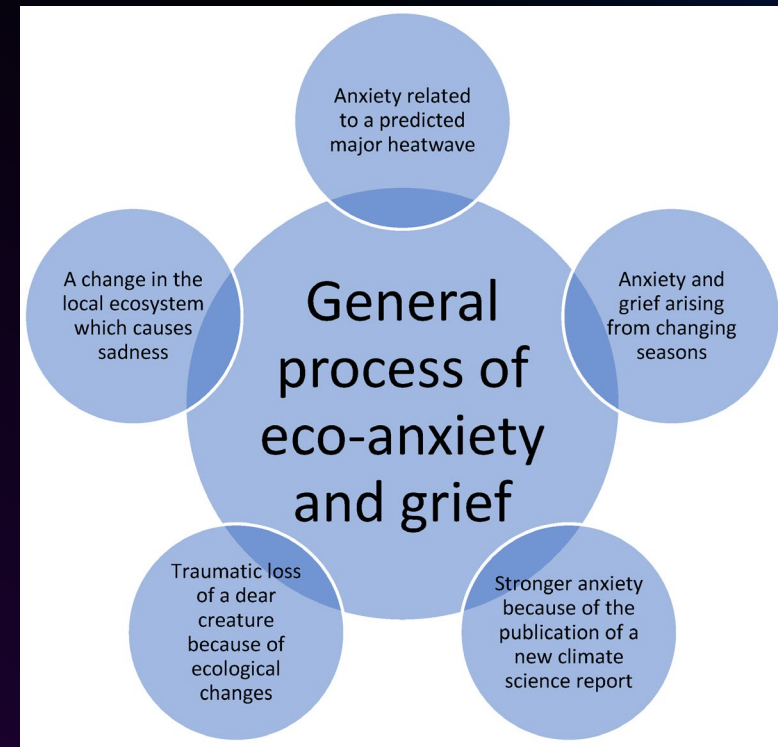
- Like ambiguous loss, ecological grief can create ongoing, unresolved sorrow—there is no funeral or closure for a disappearing coastline or species.

Risks:

- Increased vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and feelings of disenfranchisement (“no right to mourn” environmental loss in many cultures and policies).

LIFESPAN TAKEAWAYS

- Children may express eco-anxiety or confusion (“Why is the park gone?”)
- Adults may feel guilt, responsibility, or existential dread.
- Elders may experience nostalgia, loss of tradition, or historical perspective.



Mental Health Consequences

Increased Emotional Distress

- Both community and ecological grief can trigger depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and complicated or prolonged grief, especially after acute disasters or through ongoing losses.
- Symptoms may include hypervigilance, sleep disturbance, loss of hope, and somatic complaints such as headaches or fatigue.

Compounding Risks for Marginalized Groups

- People with pre-existing trauma (e.g., due to previous displacement, violence) or marginalized identities often face higher vulnerability to severe psychological effects and may lack access to culturally sensitive support.
- Systemic drivers such as discrimination, stigma, and invisibility of their grief further intensify distress and complicate help-seeking or recovery.

Mental Health Consequences

Impact of Loss of Place or Community Identity

- Losing home environments, cultural touchstones, or the sense of community can lead to displacement, social isolation, and a fractured identity, deepening grief responses.
- Social isolation is both a consequence and a risk—without community connection, coping becomes more difficult.

Disenfranchised Grief and Its Recognition

- Ecological grief is often disenfranchised: not officially acknowledged, ritualized, or supported, leaving sufferers feeling alone or illegitimate in their grief.
- Validating these experiences through recognition, language, and social support is vital to reducing isolation, shame, and the risk of chronic mental health difficulties.

ASSESSING COMMUNITY GRIEF

- ❑ Effective assessment includes exploration of collective narratives, social support, and cultural mourning practices to understand communal impact.
- ❑ Instruments like the Community Trauma Assessment and grief inventories adapted for groups can help evaluate the breadth and depth of grief.
- ❑ Clinicians should engage with community leaders to gauge collective mood, needs, and resources.



Community Grief Assessment Tools

1. Adult Attitude to Grief Scale (AAG)

- A 9-item Likert scale that captures individual grief responses but has also been validated in community-wide contexts, such as COVID-19 bereavement studies.
- Assesses vulnerability, resilience, and control in the face of grief, and can be administered widely across affected populations to measure the impact of collective loss.
- Useful for mapping “range of response to loss” at both individual and group (community) levels.

2. Community Trauma Assessment Tools

- Tools like the TRUST (Trauma Responsive Understanding Self-Assessment Tool) evaluate how well organizations, agencies, or communities are responding to trauma and loss collectively.
- These surveys aggregate responses from multiple community stakeholders to gauge psychosocial needs and trauma-informed capacity within a community setting

3. Brief Grief Questionnaire (BGQ) and Inventory of Complicated Grief (ICG)

- Standard brief screeners (like the BGQ) and scales like the ICG can be used in community contexts after mass traumas to quickly identify individuals or subgroups at risk for problematic grief responses.

Community Grief Assessment Tools

4. Bereavement and Grief Cultural Formulation Interview (BG-CFI)

- A 10-question, open-ended interview that can be adapted for community settings, especially for diverse or multicultural populations and after collective traumas.

5. Culturally Informed Trauma and Grief Recovery Toolkit

- Developed by the American Psychological Association, this toolkit addresses interpersonal, collective, and community trauma and grief—offering assessment practices aligned with community and culturally informed care.

6. Group/Community Adaptations of Existing Tools

- Common individual grief tools (e.g., Texas Revised Inventory of Grief, Prolonged Grief Disorder-13) have been adapted for community and collective use, especially following disaster, violence, or mass loss.

THE ROLE OF RITUALS IN ECOLOGICAL GRIEF

Restoring Meaning, Connection, and Hope

- Rituals help individuals and communities reestablish purpose and belonging after profound ecological losses, such as the disappearance of species or degradation of treasured landscapes.
- They offer structure and symbolic actions to acknowledge what has been lost and reaffirm ongoing commitments to the natural world.



The Role of Rituals in Ecological Grief

Examples of Ecological Grief Rituals

- Funerals and vigils for lost species, habitats, or landscapes.
- Memorials or altars created in natural places, sometimes involving offerings, songs, or storytelling.
- Communal storytelling sessions, sharing memories and feelings about valued places, animals, or ecosystems.
- Public art projects (murals, sculpture) that externalize grief and raise awareness in community spaces.
- Creation of healing gardens or restoration projects that honor what was lost and foster new growth

The Role of Rituals in Ecological Grief

Therapeutic and Transformative Functions

- Rituals allow grief to be expressed and witnessed, validating emotional responses that may otherwise be dismissed or pathologized.
- They foster collective support—connecting people in shared mourning and activism, which counteracts isolation and hopelessness.
- Preserves cultural identity, especially for Indigenous and rural communities, linking past, present, and future generations through tradition and care for the land.
- Ritual practice can transform emotional energy into restorative action (habitat restoration, policy advocacy, sustainable living).
- Encourages meaning-making and resilience, helping mourners reimagine their relationship to place and community after loss.

COPING AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE



Validation: Naming and discussing ecological grief legitimizes feelings and supports mental health.



Community rituals: Memorials for lost places, shared storytelling about lost landscapes, or collective environmental action can foster healing.



Building resilience: Engaging in restoration, activism, or advocacy (e.g., replanting, cleanup efforts, environmental education) helps reclaim agency and fosters hope.



Role of helpers: Leaders, clinicians, and educators should recognize and address ecological grief in communities as part of holistic well-being.

THERAPIST'S ROLE FROM A COMMUNITY LENS

- Therapists act as facilitators of individual and group healing by bridging gaps between individuals and their communities.
- Working alongside faith, cultural, and civic leaders can amplify community support efforts.
- Advocating for resources and broader societal acknowledgement of collective loss is essential.
- Therapists promote cultural humility and validate diverse grief experiences

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES



Psychoeducation to normalize collective grief and to validate a range of emotional responses.



Group therapy helps people process shared trauma and rebuild social bonds.



Narrative therapy can help communities co-create meaning from traumatic events.



Resilience work strengthens individual and community coping mechanisms, creating hope.



Tailoring interventions to local cultural and socioeconomic contexts enhances relevance and effectiveness

INTERVENTIONS FOR ECOLOGICAL GRIEF



Eco-therapy uses nature exposure to reconnect grieving individuals with the environment, offering solace and empowerment.



Activism and advocacy transform grief into action, providing a sense of agency and purpose.



New rituals to mourn ecological losses help fill the gap where traditional cultural mourning is absent.



Collaboration between mental health professionals, environmental scientists, and cultural leaders supports holistic responses

Eco-Therapy in the Context of Community and Ecological Grief



What is Eco-Therapy?

- Eco-therapy (also called nature-based therapy or green therapy) involves structured therapeutic practices that intentionally incorporate nature and outdoor environments to support mental health and healing.
- Rests on the premise that connecting with the natural world is fundamental to human well-being, especially during grief and trauma.

Eco-Therapy in the Context of Community and Ecological Grief

Key Eco-Therapy Modalities:

- Nature Walks & Forest Bathing: Guided time in natural settings to reduce stress, foster mindfulness, and cultivate feelings of peace.
- Gardening & Planting: Community or individual gardening projects as rituals for renewal, memorializing lost spaces or people.
- Wilderness or Adventure Therapy: Experiential, often group-based programs focused on resilience, cooperation, and navigating change.
- Conservation Activities: Engagement in community-based restoration, clean-up, or stewardship efforts for damaged landmarks or habitats.

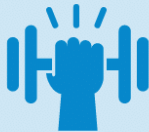
ECOTHERAPY



Ecotherapy is sometimes called green therapy, nature therapy, or Earth-centered therapy. It is a holistic therapy that can help increase your physical and mental health. In addiction treatment, it is used alongside evidence-based treatments to address some of the physical and emotional effects of addiction and to give people a way to manage stress without using drugs or alcohol.



BENEFITS OF ECOTHERAPY IN ADDICTION TREATMENT



**STRENGTHENING
YOUR BODY**



**REGAIN A SENSE OF
BALANCE**



**IMPROVE SENSE OF
WELLBEING**



**DEEPEN OR FORM
NEW RELATIONSHIPS**



**MAKE LIFE AFTER
ADDICTION MORE
ENJOYABLE AND
APPEALING**



**LEARN HOW TO
REDUCE STRESS**



**IMPROVE OVERALL
PHYSICAL AND
MENTAL HEALTH**

Main Techniques USED IN ECOTHERAPY

Forest Bathing

Immersive, mindful walking in forests to calm the mind and body.

Eco-Art Therapy

Outdoor art-making to support self-expression and emotional release.

Animal-Assisted Therapy

Interaction with animals to reduce stress and provide emotional support.

Horticultural Therapy

Gardening to enhance mindfulness, patience, and well-being.

Nature Meditation

Practicing mindfulness in natural settings to aid relaxation and manage cravings.

Green Exercise

Physical activities like hiking or beach yoga to improve both physical and mental health.



Eco-Therapy in the Context of Community and Ecological Grief

The Role and Benefits of Eco-Therapy for Community Grief:

- Offers shared rituals for mourning loss of place, home, or environment.
- Promotes collective meaning-making, agency, and hope through environmental stewardship and restoration.
- Supports both individual healing (reduced depression, anxiety, PTSD symptoms) and community resilience (increased social connection, advocacy).



Eco-Therapy in the Context of Community and Ecological Grief

Evidence and Considerations:

- Research links regular nature exposure to lower stress, improved mood, increased emotional regulation, and deeper connection to community identity.

Effectiveness enhanced when eco-therapy practices:

- Are culturally sensitive and co-designed with local communities.
- Integrate storytelling, ritual creation, and meaning-making specific to losses experienced.

○ CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY GRIEF AFTER NATURAL DISASTER – FALCON HEIGHTS, MN

Background and Context

- Type of Disaster: Falcon Heights, MN, has experienced severe flooding in recent years, with extensive property damage, temporary displacement, and impacts on local infrastructure.
- Community Profile: A suburban area with a mix of long-term residents, families, and university affiliation, Falcon Heights values community identity and neighborhood cohesion.



Case Study: Community Grief After Natural Disaster – Falcon Heights, MN

Timeline and Phases of Community Response

Immediate Impact

- Initial shock, confusion, and heightened anxiety as floodwaters rose.
- People expressed fear for personal safety and overwhelming concern for neighbors and community spaces.
- Rapid mobilization of emergency resources and informal support networks (neighbors helping neighbors, local religious groups opening shelters).

Short-Term Response

- Emergency shelters and resource centers established by the city and local nonprofits.
- Faith leaders and mental health professionals organized vigils, prayer services, and emergency support hotlines.
- Media coverage both elevated awareness and, at times, increased community distress through graphic depictions.

Medium- to Long-Term Effects

- Persistent Stressors: Homeowners faced uncertain insurance claims, repairs, or total loss; disruption of routine, schooling, and community activities.
- Feelings of “loss of place”: Parks, landmarks, and community spaces altered or destroyed—impacting local identity.
- Social fragmentation as some families relocated, while others struggled to rebuild.

Case Study: Community Grief After Natural Disaster – Falcon Heights, MN

Community Healing and Mental Health Outcomes

Collective Mourning

- Community memorials for spaces and homes lost: park re-dedications, planting of new trees, public art projects featuring flood recovery themes.
- Annual remembrance events reinforcing unity and acknowledgment of loss.

Role of Professionals

- Mental health therapists and school counselors provided crisis debriefing, group processing, and bereavement support for both children and adults.
- Social workers and city officials worked collaboratively to assess unmet needs, facilitate resource access, and design inclusive recovery initiatives.

Long-Term Impacts

- Elevated rates of anxiety, sleep disturbance, and grief-triggered depression reported in local clinics.
- Increased awareness and conversation about community resilience, climate impacts, and ongoing preparedness needs.
- Greater engagement in civic activities: community preparedness exercises, climate adaptation discussions, and block grant applications for sustainable rebuilding.

Case Study: Community Grief After Natural Disaster – Falcon Heights, MN

Best Practices for Therapists

Leverage Local Strengths

- Identify and collaborate with community connectors (faith leaders, teachers, neighborhood organizers) who organically support recovery and promote cohesion.

Facilitate Meaning-Making

- Foster narrative development: encourage storytelling that integrates loss, community support, hopes for renewal, and future preparedness.

Address Disenfranchised Grief

- Recognize individuals whose losses may not be visible (e.g., renters, displaced families, those losing sentimental public spaces) and promote inclusive mourning opportunities.

Support Adaptive Coping

- Introduce creative interventions: art therapy memorializing community change, group walks through restoration sites, participation in rebuilding projects.

Promote Sustainable Recovery

- Advocate for trauma-informed policies in local government and long-term planning for climate resilience and community mental health services.



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