

En Plein Air Counseling

A growing number of therapists are bringing mental health treatment to the trails.

BY ASHLEY MATEO

Daniel Gaines hikes the sun-drenched, chaparral-covered trails of Los Angeles' Griffith Park several times a week. But it's less about squeezing in a workout than it is *work*—these paths are his office, where he connects with therapy clients who want to challenge their bodies alongside their minds.

A lifelong outdoorsman who grew up hiking, camping, and backpacking in the Sierra Mountains, Gaines is a licensed clinical social worker specializing in the growing counseling sub-genre of hiking therapy. He moved his practice mostly outdoors (he still sees patients via telehealth) in 2021, partially because he was sick of sitting at his own desk all day, but also to try a new way of addressing a growing mental health crisis in America.

Wilderness therapy (think youth rehabilitation programs like Outward Bound) started popping up in the mid-1900s, and the idea of time outdoors as a prescription for mental health has long been gaining popularity (studies have shown that nature decreases mental distress and increases happiness). But more recently, the pandemic encouraged some everyday therapists to put away their couches in favor of working outside.

While research on the application of outdoor therapy is limited, a 2021 review of existing research published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* found reason to believe the change in scenery caused benefits from “moderately positive” to “effective.” Studies have shown that being in a safe, natural environment renews people's energy and ability to pay attention while reducing stress levels, all of which can be conducive to more cathartic therapy sessions.

Generally, Gaines' sessions last about an hour, with the pace determined by the client—some people walk more slowly as they reflect and process, others push the pace and the conversation flows from there. Either way, “physical momentum translates to psychological momentum,” Gaines said, leading to more open, productive conversations that can help them better process the things that have been dragging them down.

Similarly, Michael Alcee, a New York-based psychologist, takes clients on a secluded walking trail overlooking the Hudson River. Allison Page, a mental health therapist in Park City, Utah, not only meets clients at trailheads for “Trailtalk” sessions that can last anywhere from an hour to half a day, she even offers “Theracations,” three- to five-day intensive individual therapy sessions in nature.

Nature isn't a cure-all, but using the outside world as a venue for therapy can encourage people to tune into their inner world in a new way. And you don't even need to skip your workout to do it.



▲ Gaines speaks with a client while hiking the Fern Dell Nature Trail in Los Angeles.