**Ruth Allen transcript**

Hello and welcome to the BACP Therapy Today Podcast.

Hello. My name is Sally Brown and today I'm delighted to be talking to Doctor Ruth Allen, a psychotherapist who specialises in working with nature. We'll be talking about the ethics and practicalities involved in taking therapy beyond four walls. Ruth features in 'Therapy Today's 'Analyse Me' in the April 2021 issue. She has worked outdoors, with clients, since 2017 in the Derbyshire countryside where she lives. She's also a PHD qualified geologist, who once specialised in Himalayan geology and she's a writer. Her first book is published by Welbeck Publishing and is called 'Grounded: How connection with nature can improve our mental and physical well-being'. Welcome Ruth.

Thank you. What a lovey introduction. Thanks very much.

So there's been a surge of interest in working outdoors since the pandemic, but your interest in working with nature, started way before that. Can you tell us a bit about how you came to work in this way?

Yes. So I think I've always found that nature has been my greatest ally, I suppose, in my own personal health and well-being and just in my life, it's been ubiquitous. Whether that's as I've been older, going on long distance treks. Spending time outside, on my own, in nature doing big run adventures or just wandering. Hanging out. Going out for bimbles at the end of a day but, also, from an early age, just playing in the garden or playing in the woods. It's speaking with animals. I talk about that in my book. It's always been there. So when I thought about counselling and retraining and I had been moving into that direction via Samaritans, and getting interested in people, rather than rocks. I can into it wanting to work outside and I met my now supervisor, Hayley Marshall, before training and I said, 'One day, will you be my supervisor?' She said, 'Yes, come back to me when you're ready to begin.' So I'd already had it prepped in my mind. This is how I want to work.

Um, okay, we'll come back to the supervisor later. That's very interesting, but first I'd just like to clarify. So obviously there's walk and talk therapy and since COVID, more of us have done that, but am I right in thinking the way you work is more than just talk therapy outdoors? You work with nature, rather than just in nature. So can you clarify the difference?

Yes. It's a great question. I was just thinking about that then, what is the snappy answer to that? I think it really now, my understanding of it, is it varies client to client. Some sometimes it's very talk-orientated and sometimes it brings in other aspects, and it's talking plus an awareness of body and movement. So I think the point where I'm getting to, is that working with, means holding in awareness the possibility, or the potential, of nature, as a third. Hayley, speaking of Hayley and Martin Jordan, formulised this idea of the living third and the therapeutic relationship, and I think working with is holding an awareness of that potential third. Working in, I think, speaks more to the container of it. So working in a room, as opposed to working with a room. In a room, you're just there and it happens to be where you are. It's a methodological choice, perhaps, whereas, working with is an appreciation of everything that's in that, that might be in the space with nature. I think that's where I'm at with it now and, as I say, that varies, I think, from client to client, and I try not to bring a directivity to that. I'm just interested in how that unfolds, or shapes, the therapy.

You mentioned the room and I wondered, do you ever bring your therapy into the room and was just thinking if it really is raining?

Yes. I only now work, well, this was the sort of decision prior to lockdown. The first lockdown. I now only work outside and online. So yes, I have this opinion that we don't choose the weather in which we heal. So we go out in all of those but, obviously, if it's dangerous, if it was thunder and lightning, I work in quite an exposed space. If it was dangerous, or it was inhibiting to the work. So if it was so windy, I couldn't hear, or the client was struggling in the weather, or I was, then we will make a different choice and we'll go inside. So there are definitely parameters that I won't be out. Yes.

Yes. Yes. Absolutely. Is there a way to still work with nature, even though you've brought it inside? Does it still come into the work?

Yes, I think so. I mean, I've worked online forever. For me, it's a way of being. So I think outdoor therapy is, I think, something about there's a location to it. There is that element of out or in, but working with an ecopsychological principles in your work, or being interested in, so a broader definition of what nature is, is not just restricted to outside working. So I feel that it's always in the work. It's in the client. We are nature. I'm quite keen in expanding this idea of what nature is. If you're working with nature, it's not just, 'Oh, I go outside and I work.' Our bodies are nature. Our self-will authentic selves are nature, arguably. So it's expanding that definition and, if you do that, then it's possible to work in that way anywhere. I think just working outside offers a different dimension, potentially, to that.

Yes absolutely. So I often feel there is this juxtaposition in that many practitioners, and I'm including myself in that, I find deep, personal solace in healing from being in nature. Yet, until recently, we haven't really considered it and including it in our work. But for me, and I'm guessing for many others, the biggest barrier to taking the work outdoors seems to be the boundary issues. How do we ensure it remains therapy, rather walk and chat, for instance and, also, how do we ensure there's proper confidentiality outside of four walls?

Yes. I always think this is fascinating. I think there's a lot of worry about what happens to the old ways if we go outside. It's imagined, I think, that there's this inexorable creep to unethical and unboundaried practice but, in many ways, the same rules apply. Working outside does stretch the container in new ways. It stretches the boundaries. There's no doubt about that. Sometimes you notice, for example, a drop in the formality. There's a sense of being more seen in your humanness, perhaps. Both of you soaking away in waterproofs or tripping over a tree root. These things don't happen in the room. So you're quite seen in the entirety of your person and you're side by side. So there's a degree of mutuality, perhaps, in more neutral space. I don't want to overstate this. It's not neutral because if I, as a therapist, know it very well, it changes the dynamic again. There are changes to the boundaries, and to the container, and I think we need to be more interested, instead of seeing the problems, invited to see the benefits of it really. There's something about 'professionalism' that's for the therapist's sake, and not always for the clients. So I think what can a client gain from working outside? That's my question and what can be gained outside of, perhaps, a more medicalised setting? So going back to the boundaries, I work in a very boundary-contained way. I work with a threshold. We go into a space and we come out of it. There's a sense of closing it down in a way that you would do with a room with a door. I know my space. I know how far we can get. So I know what an hour of therapy will buy us, if you like, in the space. So I think movement, there's almost this idea that movement is a corollary to unethical practice, and I think that the only real difference is we're just changing the way we do some of the work. So in terms of the confidentiality, that's a really big one and it's one that people often ask about and I say, 'Well, it can never be guaranteed', and I'm a big believer is cocreating the contract and the parameters for every therapy that I do. So everyone's unique. Every therapy is unique, and we work together to face things as they arise. So I'm very clear there are no guarantees but what will we do? What do you want to do if we see someone you know, or if I see someone I know, or how do you feel about walking past people who might hear? How are we going to handle that? So I'm a big fan of working that out together. We discuss things that we can't predict and breaches of certain conditions, or confidentiality, and I think in therapy, as in life, we can't create a perfect environment, but we have to work together for it to be good enough. So I think we cocreate it and, I think, if we cocreate it, from the outset, anything's possible.

Yes. It sounds as though you've got some tried and tested routes that work well. That you know well. Do you try to change it up for each session, in terms of each client gets a different route every time, or do the clients have preferred routes? How does that pan out?

I used to be a bit of a roaming therapist and I'd be open to going anywhere, and wherever, clients are, if anybody had a good idea, but these days I have a space, and I know my space very well. So I know it in all the seasons. I know the edges, the perimeter. I know where the walls are. I know where all the paths are. So I know all of the potential issues. So I see it as I have my arm, as I'm doing the action now. I my arms around the space but, within that, the clients are invited to move freely, and do what they want in that. So I provide that holding. That perimeter. Yes, so week by week, session by session, it's over to clients, really, and sometimes, we'll walk the same route over and over again. Sometimes we'll work, depending on how they're looking, and working, with the landscape. They'll be drawn to certain areas and we'll go there. So that's very much part of the work, I think. So I don't want to be too directive in that. I just hold that space and then I work with what emerges. I do think I've learnt, over time, there's value in having a space, rather than going anywhere. I think we're here to do therapy and if my mind is occupied with where are we going, or I don't know what's ahead, and I don't know what my turnaround time needs to be, then it's no longer therapy. It's me trying to be mountain leader or it's me trying to keep physical safety. I think, for me, it's one of those things you experiment with. You think, oh, I'll push that boundary and you realise it's there for good reason and that actually having a workable space. What you do in that is open, but having something that's known, I think, is really valuable and very containing for the client to come back week after week, but to have that diversity within it. I just find that really works.

Yes absolutely. So what would you say to purists who might question whether therapy outdoors is, actually, real therapy? You're smiling at me. I'm guessing you've had this question thrown at you before?

I think change is often scary, and it feel likes a threat, and people, and systems, are invested in things staying the same. I think I don't entirely understand what the accusation is. I know that there's suspicion, but I think once you've covered off confidentiality and boundaries and containment what is the accusation beneath it? I've never really heard anything, personally, that has swayed me to think, oh you're right. Yes, this is terrible, and this isn't therapy. There is a difference. I'm a trained psychotherapist. I'm not just going for a walk and a chat. So it's all the stuff we've been talking about and it's bringing all that learning and that way of being in a therapeutic relationship that makes it therapy. So I feel for the purists, but I think there's work to be done, and I love my work, and I take ethics and boundaries and good practice very seriously. I'm always thinking about it. So I suppose I would invite purists to come and have a session and come and see, because I haven't got time to be persuading you. I've only got enough time on this planet to be doing my best work. Also, I suppose, I'd say, 'Do some research.' There's lots of evidence for why nature is very good for our health, immersion in nature and connection and nature's the oldest healer, isn't it? We wouldn't have medicine if we didn't have nature. We've been working with nature, as a partner, in our health since the beginning of time, really. Since we could innovate. Long before therapy took place in a room. So I would say, 'Come and try it, purists', and then tell me what your reservations are.

A good challenge. So you mentioned, obviously, your training in traditional psychotherapy, but how do we ensure we're then competent to work outside? So is any qualified and experienced therapist competent to do this, or would you advise them to seek specific training? If so, where do we look for that? I know you mentioned your supervisor earlier. Is that an important part of it?

I think so. I think there's loads of threads to this. Firstly, I think, there's the outdoor competency. I think there's working within your competency. So as I mentioned, I'm quite experienced outside anyway. So I'm happier in a rougher terrain, or a wilder environment, and sometimes I do coaching days, and work outside, in that kind of wilder setting. So I think, firstly, there's working constantly outside, in different weathers. Different terrains. Different settings. So I think there's that. Then I think it's really valuable to do two things, because there isn't, as yet this formulised pathway. This is the way that I felt that I was encouraged in. One was to go on that journey of self-enquiry. Be curious about your own relationship with nature. Start with yourself. Start tuning in. I feel like we shouldn't really be going into anything. If you want to just go outside and use it as just a space to be, I think, I'm a bit sceptical about putting interpositions on people in that way. Just be informed about what happens, but if you're interested in working at a greater depth, perhaps, with nature, then, yes, be curious about your own as a starting point. So take on that self-directed learning and then work with other people. Work with an outdoor therapist. Work with a supervisor, perhaps, bringing on a second supervisor for the outdoor component of your work. Join groups. Read the literature. There's lots out there. I think there's a lot that can be gained through that process of enquiry. As I say, nothing's to stop us from going outside and walking and talking. I don't think we should ringfence it, but there's something about exploring a richness of the work, isn't there? In the broader, ecological perspective, that I think is worth doing. There are frameworks being developed now, as a way of benchmarking competency, and I think this is probably really important, but frameworks also keep people and ideas out. So I think I'm really sitting and watching, at the moment, and thinking where do we take this? At the route of ecological practice, in this way, it's quite a radical underpinning about how, ideally, it will be taking it out of a dogmatic medicalised environment, and into a broader web of life and, I think, it's always been a bit more radical. So if we then try and constrain it, and build frameworks around it, and keep certain ideas out, and somebody says how it should be and it risks something at the core of this practice. Yet, at the same time, and you can see me, I'm moving my head. Yet, at the same time, we need to have a way, as well, I think, of saying, 'This is what this is', and there's something that was created by some colleagues for the Institute of Outdoor Learning, which is quite a nice move towards this is what wilderness therapy is. This is what outdoor therapeutic activities look like. It's trying to define something on that scale. So we know, quite clearly, what's psychotherapy and what's an ecotherapy horticultural project through groups. So we've got a clearer sense of what's what. So I think, at the moment, it's very much a case of piecing things together. I get a lot of queries, all the time, every day, from people, saying, 'How do I get into this. I like what you do. Where do I go?' So it's taken me years to piece this together that these are the places to start. Self-enquiry. Supervision. Your own therapy. CPD. Books and build. Build up and, maybe, one day, they'll be a set route in, and I think new modules are coming up all the time on courses.

Absolutely okay. Let's move on to clients and the types of clients that are drawn to this approach and the issues they wish to address. I wonder if it's usually those who've experienced traditional therapy before and now want a different approach? Also, I'm curious about how your clients find you?

Yes. On one hand, I was thinking I don't think I can generalise and then, on the other hand, I think there are patterns. I often hear prospective clients saying, 'I'm not really a therapy person, but it sounded interesting.' That's a really common one or, 'I've always found the outdoors is good for me, so this seemed like a good fit.' So I do think there is an element of, 'I was looking', or, 'Then I came across you', or, 'Someone told me about the way you work, and I thought that fitted me.' So it sounds, from that, I'm hearing a I didn't feel like I fitted into the more traditional way of working. So I think there is an aspect of that. At the moment, in my practice, I have more male clients, than female, outside. So I would say it was somewhat overrepresented in that way. So I think there is an element of, perhaps, it speaks to a stigma that's still there for male mental health. I think there is a sense of wanting to try something different. I do work with some people that want to just try a different way. Maybe they have tried therapy and, maybe, they've had a good experience of traditional therapy, but they're just interested in something different, at the time. Some will come for the nature and I get the feeling, sometimes, they're combining their therapy with a walk in a busy life. Sometimes, I think they're coming with an intention around moving and body and they know something about my interests. So I think those are the high-level patterns. Beneath that, I think I work with the same problems and issues that you would see inside. There's a huge variety. Sorry, you asked how they found me as well, didn't you? It's funny, isn't it, the local issue, because it's a very local way of working, when we work face to face, in any capacity. So I think I used to get a lot of enquiries through things like social media, then it became word of mouth. Then I did a little bit more of advertising locally and doing a few things on the local radio. Stuff like that. So I think it's a real mix but, mainly, now, I usually hear someone saying, 'Someone's told me that you work in this way', and I don't ask too many questions, beyond that. Just, 'Okay, that's cool.'

The word of mouth. The power of word of mouth. Yes. Can you give us some examples of the kind of results that clients have seen through this work with you?

Yes. That's an interesting question. I think something in me baulks at the idea of results. I feel that that's a bit challenging because I don't tend to think of therapy in terms of results. I'd say that the impacts, or the outcomes, of therapy are the same as online, or face-to-face. I see people able to understand and work with their anxiety better. Improvements in feelings of depression. Improvements in confidence in self. Understanding of trauma and their history. In many ways, I see exactly the same but, perhaps, I also see and, perhaps, I'm also looking out for, so I don't know how much is me looking out for it, increased expressions of nature connectiveness. Sometimes it is stated. At the of the therapy, a client will say, 'Oh, it's been so nice, and I feel like I've got a better appreciation of how nature can help me in my day-to-day life.' Sort of the textbook outcome you probably want. Sometimes they say that, but sometimes, it's not. Sometimes you never really know. So I think there is an increase in body awareness, because I work with embodied mindfulness or relational embodied mindfulness. Again, I do these things online. So I don't know that I would be confident enough to say these are the specific results of working outside. I feel like that's something I was anxious about that, in the beginning, because I felt like I needed to be able to quantify that to legitimise the practice. Whereas now, I feel much more confident to say, 'Sometimes it's this and sometimes it's not', and that's between the client and themselves, sometimes. It's not much of an answer, is it, sorry.

It's a fantastic answer. Absolutely. You mentioned the mindfulness of the body and I know you said that you analysed the [?column 0.24.02.9] in 'Therapy Today' that you can see yourself moving towards body psychotherapy, in the future. So tell me about, what's the pull there for you?

Yes. You're saying that I like sat up. I just find it so exciting. I'm in the middle of a process with my own therapist, at the moment, so for me, I've got a real sense of aliveness around working with the body more so than I have in previous years. I came into therapy living my brain. Living in this kind of top triangle of my body. Head, shoulders and chest. I knew that I was having a relationship with nature through my body, but I didn't have a language for it. Nobody asked me about it. I just didn't know anything about it. Clearly, I was taking my body and moving it around in the world but was not really aware of the links of it. So I guess we are all suffering under the same duality of thinking this Cartesian duality, that there's a mind, and there's a body, and they're separate. In my journey, in the last five years, has really been one of unification and now I work, as I say, with a dance movement psychotherapist. I self-study embodied anatomy and I'm just really interested in semantic work, particularly for anxiety and trauma and PTSD. I feel like my greatest gains, myself, have come from connecting, mapping into, other aspects of my body. I feel like I've lived with my brain for, well, I'm 39 now, all of these years and I've given it so much primacy and the school gives it primacy. Now, I'm like, oh my god, I've got a body, and it can tell me stuff, and I can discover stuff and I can become the person I want to be, through my body and not just through my thoughts and my brain. When I work with clients with body and movement, they make the greatest gains, as well. It's blowing my mind, at the moment. I just feel like I'm being pulled. The power, for me, is in the two. It's our ability to connect with our body and then verbalise what we're learning. Verbalise that reflection. Verbalise what we're discovering. I think the two, brought together, are like a dream combination. So I think, as I'm talking about it, I'm just getting more and more excited. I was saying the other day, it feels like, because of things like 'Blue Planet', we now do know more about the ocean than we know about our body. It used to be that the oceans and space were like the last two frontiers, but I think we know so much more about these great mysterious places, like the abyss that we do. What's going on attached to ourselves. So I think we're going to see huge things in therapy in coming years, the more that we tap into the body and bring it into mainstream therapy, so that there probably won't be like a body psychotherapy. It will all be all of this in one. I want to be there.

Okay. Watch this space. So you have a very successful Instagram account. It's called @whitepeak\_ruth, but many therapists often have a conflicted relationship with social media. It brings up all those issues of self-disclose, doesn't it, which is complex? So how do you make that work? What kind of a response do you get from it? Is it a source of client referrals, for instance?

Yes. I have a conflicted relationship with it, too. Absolutely. I think it's not plain sailing and I want to throw my phone in the toilet, as much as other people do, all the time. I think, I don't know, there was something for me a couple of years ago. I thought I'm really pushing boundaries going outside. Why not push all boundaries, and also have a social media account? I work very hard for it to be ethical and boundaried. So it works, I think, because I think about everything. I show the world what I care about my social media feeds. That, I think, is exposing, in its own way, but I'm kind of confident to work with anything that arises, and I never post what I wouldn't be willing to talk about with a client. So it might look as if I'm being quite disclosing, or quite open, particularly on Instagram, I suppose, but actually, there's a lot that isn't there. I don't ever share anything in the rawness of the moment. I'm a big fan of process. Taking time processing some of that stuff. I also don't show family and people. So it's quite boundaried, really, to my relationship with nature. Photography is really big for me, so there's something about showing my place, this year, there's been a lot of my local place. In a way, my social media feeds are really about that broader reach out. We know what it's like, as therapists. We're restricted. It's amazing, working with the people we work with, but it doesn't have that scalability, does it? So there's something, for me, about reaching a broader audience, in some of the ideas that I work with, which are now in the book, as well. In a way, it's a bit of a different thing, but I do get clients through social media. I have clients on social media. So I have to be quite careful and quite specific in the contracting stage, with going through the counselling agreement, that I am on there and how are we going to do this? How are we going to navigate it? That's usually absolutely fine and sometimes we don't follow each other during the course of therapy, or they've got no interest in following. They've found me there, but it's not an issue. Sometimes it's an issue, and that's why I talk about it now, but I would say that 99 per cent of the time, the issues I have, with social media, are from people I don't know, dropping into my direct messages and asking for life advice and telling me all of their woes. I feel for those people. There's a real vulnerability and, perhaps, they see I'm a therapist. Maybe I invite some of that, but that's the hardest thing, I think, of having to say I'm not a therapist 100 per cent of the time, or I am, but I'm not doing therapy 100 per cent of the time. So it's a bit trial and error. It's a great way, I think, of showing something about how you work. So I find that when I do work with people, the fit is very good and if it doesn't work for them, and people aren't interested, then they'll find someone else. So in some ways, it creates a self-selecting way, really. It has been a source for client referrals, but I very rarely have availability now, and with word of mouth, it means now it's much more. These are some of my ideas, but it's not likely that if we know each other through social media, we'll be working together. I just really like it for the photography. I think people take different approaches with social media. Particularly on Instagram. I'm all for a more gentle, this is me, as a therapist, enjoying the things I do. I'm not a fan of the advice and guidance posts with five tips for anxiety. It's just not how I like to work. I like to work with people one to one and to find out about their stuff. So it's a bit of a hybrid thing, my social media.

Yes. Talking of the broader reach, that's obviously, I'm thinking, the inspiration behind your book, which is truly beautiful and shows a lot of your incredible photography. It's called 'Grounded'. So can you tell me what you hope readers will take away from this book?

Yes. I think it's really changed over time. I think, in the beginning, I thought, I don't think there's anything altruistic about buying a book. Anyone that says that there is, is lying. It's great to have somebody saying, 'We like your ideas. Do you want to put them in a book?' Now I've seen it out in the world, and I'm seeing how people are responding to it, what I hope now, is for more of the same that I'm getting, that it will be a gentle, affirming, encouraging friend. It's not my way to be loud and instructional and advice-giving. I live my life in my way, and I enjoy sharing something of that and I hope it encourages people to live life their way, rather than my way. So if the book's a companion to getting outside and making a relationship with nature, then I'm happy with that. I like the idea of it being reassuring, with the name 'Grounding', I really like the idea, when people say, 'Oh, it's on my bedside table', or, 'I'm reading a chapter in the morning with my cup of tea', I love that. I think there's a real trust and intimacy that feels very touching to me, in the book you choose to be that close. Not all books can become a friend, or an encourager. I feel like that's a really special, honoured, place to occupy, and I would not have predicted that I would feel that aspect of it, but I love it when people say, 'I just take it with me and it's in my bag', or, 'It's at my bedside.' In a world where relationships feel so fraught and transactional, at times, in the fast-paced world of social media, I think, to have be a friend, to have a book that's a friend, feels, to me, very valuable. So I guess, I hope the book's that, in the way that nature has been my friend and has been valuable and a reassuring presence to me. So something about passing that on, and passing that around, and I think now, it's coming out at a time, obviously, when, well, we hope the world's opening up a bit, but we don't know and it feels really fraught at the moment, doesn't it? It's a year anniversary today. We need to be compassionate to ourselves, and others, and gentle, and taking our time and I hope that the book is a companion to that, as well. That it encourages. Take your time with this. It's okay. There's not a rush. So yes, I hope it provides something in the very here and now, with the lives we're living, as we're trying to find a way back into the world without scaring ourselves.

Absolutely. How wonderful. I think there is something lovely about that. It's just there, and you can read a couple of pages in the morning, or when you feel like you need a bit of reassurance and just immerse yourself in those wonderful pictures and have your reassuring words alongside them. Great combination. So thank you so much for talking to us today, Ruth. It's been really inspirational. I immediately just want to go out now and be somewhere green.

My work here is done.

We will watch this space with all your future endeavours.

Thank you.

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**