

# Leaping into nature's cures

Eco-psychology recognises that ways of living that are good for the environment can also be good for us in body, mind and soul. In essence, it is simply ancient healing wisdom given a new name, writes Mandy Collins

**Y**OU have heard about the benefits of eco-tourism, and living an eco-friendly life. Now the eco-movement is branching out into the physical and mental health arena with eco-psychology, as more people seek to live in greater harmony with the natural world, and tap into its unique healing powers.

At heart of the eco-psychology movement is a leap into the healing treasures of nature, though in essence, it's really about ancient wisdom given a modern name, say its proponents.

Clinical psychologist Wendy Hay from Johannesburg's Bella Vida Therapy Centre runs seminars on eco-psychology. She says it's a relatively new concept in SA, but difficult to define, as it encompasses many aspects of human consciousness and life.

"It can be seen as an integration of all aspects of life, both in the microcosm and macrocosm," Hay says.

"The eco-psychologist is both curious about science and respectful of mysticism and our relationship with God," she says.

"Eco-psychology questions old paradigms and assumptions, yet is respectful of the wisdom accumulated through history."

It sees nature and the environment as natural teachers, and challenges the old attitude of domination at every level, says Hay.

"Eco-psychology recognises that healing starts at the level of nature and spirit," she says.

The reality is that most people only really start taking responsibility for their health when something happens that triggers an episode of ill-health, says Giulia Criscuolo, a pharmacist at OTC Pharma SA, who has trained in

alternative therapies.

"People have started looking to nature to find a space in which they can calm down and listen to their bodies," says Criscuolo.

"It often starts with something as simple as going for a walk in nature, and people find an affinity with their surroundings.

"They find a quietness of spirit that is difficult to find elsewhere," she says.

Hay says the recognition of the influence of stress and trauma on mental health has developed into a more critical look at other areas of human functioning and pathology.

There is also increasing recognition of the role of stress and its negative effects in all areas of functioning, and that physical illness is heavily influenced by the mind and lifestyle.

The global increase in environmental awareness makes eco-psychology more relevant today, Hay says. Respect and compassion are key features of understanding and healing, while pathology is seen as a break in natural order.

In eco-psychology, the healer is seen as facilitator rather than expert, says Hay, and patients are at the centre of their own healing.

In conventional medicine, the patient is a passive recipient of diagnosis and medication. Thus, in eco-psychology, healing becomes an active rather than a passive process; there are no quick fixes, she says, and change and insight are central to healing.

Clearly, the old ways are not working anymore, says Criscuolo: "People feel bombarded with information and input, and crave quietness. I see disease as that volume getting louder. There's too much noise."

This is why eco-psychology is so appealing: it allows "patients" to reconnect with their natural relationship with nature, says Hay.

The practice of eco-psychology is best done in nature, she says, because a natural environment reduces inhibitions and defences, and sets the tone for radical shifts in creative understanding.

While there are healing centres based on eco-psychology internationally, there currently aren't any in SA.

Yet this country is very well endowed with places of powerful, natural healing significance — in the bush, says Hay.

## A do-it-yourself plan for natural psychology

A practical example of the practice of eco-psychology is the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, says clinical psychologist Wendy Hay from Johannesburg's Bella Vida Therapy Centre.

"It is the conscious practice of self-awareness through self-reflection and meditation," Hay says.

"The eco-psychologist adds the element of nature to the mixture. Respect for nature as healer and teacher becomes part of living and decision making."

It is one way of off-setting the consequences of "short-sightedness and greed, as we head towards environmental crises", Hay says.

"I have noticed how worn-out executives gain new energy after a break in the bush," she says. "The bush never deceives; it is a great teacher, because Nature is the teacher, one that has survived for millennia."

Eco-psychology is helpful for anyone and everyone, but is most effective in groups, says Hay.

"We are primates and as such social creatures. We rely on each other for support and healing. Alienation and loneliness are symptoms of a greater social pathology, and so eco-psychology is particularly useful in corporate training and leadership courses."

A related spinoff of the eco-psychology movement is to be found in the link between food,



**INTELLECTUAL LEAP:** Time spent reconnecting with nature and the environment around you is an essential part of the eco-psychology movement, as it encompasses many aspects of human consciousness and life, at the macro and micro levels. Picture: THINKSTOCK

mood and health, and a move towards more natural, "eco-friendly" eating patterns.

Cape Town nutritionist Vanessa De Ascencao has developed what she calls an "eco-diet".

It is part of being eco-friendly, she says, because eating is also about the choices you make in relation to your body and your environment. In other words, you need to eat in a way that is natural, and to eat foods that you are naturally designed to assimilate and

digest. That means food free of man-made addictive substances.

Not surprisingly then, the eco-diet starts by identifying toxic chemicals present in the body, and in the foods you consume daily. It has unprocessed, organic wholefoods at its core.

"The holistic approach to food and eating is all about freedom and choice," says De Ascencao.

"There is no diet to get on and no diet to get off. No guilt, no shame; no right, no wrong. Just

simple food, education and awareness, because the cleaner the food you eat, the leaner and healthier you will be."

De Ascencao says there is scientific evidence that the food you eat alters your body, brain chemistry, mood and even addictions, especially these days where food is laced with chemicals, sugars and hormones.

"Our bodies are dynamic environments that are not only affected by external factors, but also

by internal dynamics," she says.

Toxic emotions (hate, resentment, negativity), toxic food, chemicals, hormones in food, pollution, all affect health and the body's internal environments.

"Processed food is loaded with chemicals, hormones, additives and multiple process methods that alter body chemistry, and sense of taste," says De Ascencao.

This leads to overeating and weight gain, she says.

Some products, like sugar, are highly addictive. These affect the endocrine system, brain and body chemistry and flood the body with excess chemicals.

"The craving for food, the pre-occupation with eating and the resultant loss of control over food intake, are natural consequence of the quality of the food we eat. It lacks nutrients and affects our brain chemistry, resulting in nutritional imbalances and food cravings."

The reality is that most people don't eat because they are hungry, says De Ascencao.

"People celebrate with food; they cry and comfort themselves with food," she says.

Foods like breads, chips, sugary foods, chocolate, biscuits, and cupcakes taste good, and make people feel good and often loved, and can mask stress or emotional discomfort. But they can also end up making people feel bad, guilty and listless, lacking in energy, she says. And they lead to weight gain because they are so calorie dense.

"The more natural, fresh, organic, and whole your food is, the better, not only for your waistline, but your overall health and wellness," she says.

De Ascencao cautions against "scientific" health claims on packaging. The healthiest food in your supermarket — fresh produce — makes no scientific claims at all.

When we eat wholefoods (in other words, food in its natural state) we automatically eat less as these foods are less calorie dense, she says.

"Think lean proteins, fruit, an abundance of vegetables, some whole grains and essential fats — you can't go wrong.

"Shop at the farmers' markets if you can. You will begin to eat foods in season, when they are at the peak of their nutritional value and flavour, and you will cook, because you won't find anything processed or microwavable.

"You will also be supporting farmers in your community."

And you will reduce your food "miles" along the way, and your carbon footprint.

So you can be healthy — and ecologically smug.

All it takes is a little self-awareness and the willingness to make simple changes.