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Organising a Nature Group for Asylum Seekers



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Why organise a Nature Group or take part in your local Nature Group?

Nature heals, rehabilitates and empowers the body as well as the mind. We are more physical active while in nature. Especially being in the forest reduces stress hormone levels and calms our state of alertness. Walking in nature has numerous positive health effects. It is also a safe, easy and free way to practice physical exercise.

The life of an asylum seeker often includes numerous stress causing factors: difficult (traumatic) experiences, an unsure and burdensome situation and an everyday environment that has not been chosen by oneself. Long-lasting or excessive stress has numerous negative side effects:

- **Physical:** pain, illness, trouble sleeping etc.
- **Psychological:** mood drop, difficulties concentrating, memory problems, excessive substance use etc.
- **Social:** isolation, aggressive behaviour, difficulties with social relations etc.

These effects may be long-lasting and can continue even after the cause of stress has passed. The symptoms can be eased, and the long-term effects reduced by practicing relaxation. The asylum application process is often long. Many people suffer from the lack of meaningful activities. Whilst indoors, the mind is often oriented to problems. One way to reduce stress and relax is by going outside and being in nature.

The purpose of the Nature Group

- To increase participants' well-being and reduce stress by providing an opportunity to walk outside in nature together with others
- To increase agency and knowledge of the surrounding area. To many asylum seekers the forest or nature next to the reception centre may seem a strange and potentially dangerous place. Everyman's rights and responsibilities may not be familiar concepts. Additionally, the four seasons in Finland, with their different aspects, are something asylum seekers are often not familiar with. In the Nature Group, participants get to know the local natural environment in a safe way. This also encourages participants to enjoy nature independently in the future.
- To provide an opportunity to be present in the here and now. Many asylum seekers dwell on past experiences and losses or future worries. In nature, it is

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easier to be in the moment as our senses are activated with a cascade of diverse stimulants.

- To meet other people and increase a sense of community and peer support among asylum seekers.

Participants

The group can be of any size. In a smaller group, it is easier for the guides to engage with all the participants whereas in a bigger group, more people get the benefits of taking part in the group. The staff at the reception centre can be asked to invite people in advance to take part in the group. If the group meets regularly, invitations are not necessary each time. The group can include people of all ages, but we recommend for children to be accompanied by their own adult for safety reasons. The group can also be multilingual.



Guides

We recommend that the group includes at least two guides/leaders. Having two guides allows for more interaction with the participants and a better ability to react in case of unforeseen circumstances. The guides do not need to have any special skills or knowledge regarding nature. The most important attribute for a guide is the willingness to meet people and to be present in the moment. Guides can be volunteers, reception centre staff, students, or professionals from outside the reception centre, for example. If the guides are non-professionals, it is good to have a professional coordinator to assist the volunteers in case they need support.

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What is needed to organise the Nature Group?

We recommend that the Nature Group takes place in the immediate vicinity of the reception centre. This way transportation isn't a problem, and the participants can go for a walk on the familiar route independently in the future. Nearly every Finnish reception centre has a forest within a reasonable walking distance. Consider organising the Nature Group during the luminous hours of the day. This adds a sense of safety to the experience. For some the forest may be a strange and unfamiliar place.

The Nature Group also includes a joint coffee break outdoors. Eating together increases a sense of togetherness and acceptance. For the coffee break you will need: thermos bottles for tea and coffee, milk, juice for children, biscuits etc., spoons, sugar, a rubbish bag, and a backpack for carrying all of the above. You may also take along foldable seat mats for the group.

What goes on during the Nature Group?

Getting started

Ideally the Nature Group meets for 1,5-2 hours and meets regardless of the weather. This way, it is possible to demonstrate and experience first-hand that nature is accessible even when the weather isn't optimal. Often, after the Nature Group the participants feel good even if the weather wasn't the best possible. If the weather is terrible, it is possible to do a shorter route than usual and drink coffee at the end in a weatherproof area. The guides should have a few routes in mind out of which they can pick the one that best takes into consideration the weather and the needs of the group (for example, if someone has a pram).

At the beginning of a Nature Group, the leaders introduce themselves and ask the participants to share their names. It is good to repeat the names to build a relationship with each participant. Using Finnish, English, other common languages, or body language, the guides communicate what happens during the group and how long the activity will last: "We'll take a walk outside, drink some coffee and walk back. We'll be back here at around ____". It is important that the participants are aware of what will happen.

Before setting off, the guides decide together which route to take. The other guide walks in front and leads the group while the other walks at the back and makes sure nobody gets left behind. The speed of walking can be adjusted according to the needs of the group. Sometimes a brisk speed may be refreshing! However, the Nature Group is not

meant to be a sports club and participants should be able to participate regardless of their level of fitness.

The here and now

The idea in the Nature Group is to be present in the here and now, in the current moment. Returning from one's own thoughts to the present happens through our senses. Through our senses we are connected to the surrounding world. While we are indoors it is often difficult to direct our attention away from worries, things causing us stress and unpleasant memories. Outside in nature, this is significantly easier as our attention is focused on all the little things happening around us. Practicing acceptance and mindfulness often reduces anxiety, depression, and the symptoms of traumatic stress disorder.

The point of the Nature Group is not to practice any specific methods of mindfulness. It is simply enough for the guides to engage in the present moment, use all their senses and in this way act as an example to the participants. In practice, this is done in the following manner: As soon as the guide finds a point of interest, the guide shares this with the group through action, speech, or body language. Almost automatically humans mimic what another person does. The guide doesn't necessarily have to say anything, just do a gesture and the participants will usually follow. If a person walking in front touches a leaf – while not even necessarily looking back towards the group – about half of the group will also touch the leaf.

In the Nature Group, the guide walking in front has an important role in showing an example of being present in the moment with all one's senses. In the beginning, this can be hard and requires a lot of intentional focus and effort. Slowly focusing on the surrounding world with all your senses becomes easier for the guide who is then able to give a better example to the participants.



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Below are some examples of things that we may pay attention to with our different senses while in nature.

Sight: Sight is the easiest of the senses to evoke in nature. Remembering that things don't necessarily have to be beautiful, there will always be something to observe. In the group, you can bring attention to, for example, trees, cones, insects, birds, fauna, the changing of seasons and all the various colours present in nature. Different things may also be named in different languages: "this is a blueberry, what's it called in your language?".

Sound: When a guide hears a bird chirping, they may engage the group to participate in the act of listening. Similarly, a guide may do this with the sound of wind, flowing water or even the sound of silence.

Smell: What does the air smell like? Where does a particular scent come from? Trees, flowers as well as the earth all produce different scents. Is the scent enjoyable or not? Mild or strong? While exploring the sense of smell, the guide may also add breathing to the experience by showing an example of deep breathing and enjoying the fresh air.

Touch: Nature offers a variety of different surfaces to touch. What does tree bark feel like? What about snow? A leaf? A tuft of hay? Can your hands reach around this tree? What does the wind feel like on your face? Or the earth beneath your feet?

Taste: Finland's nature is full of things to eat and explore with your sense of taste. It is easy to bring attention to the sensation of taste in your mouth, especially if the taste is bitter or sour. Edible things in the spring include the roots of plants, sprouts, sap and spruce buds. During the summer, the forests are filled with berries. In the autumn, there are mushrooms and during the winter one may nibble on lichen or pine needles. The taste doesn't have to be good to work as a way to arouse your senses, but the guide should be aware that encouraging others to eat particularly bitter or bad tasting things may not earn them new friends.

Many people are interested in hunting, fishing, berry picking, gathering mushrooms or growing fruits and vegetables. A common topic of discussion is which berries and mushrooms are edible and which are poisonous. It is literally vital that guides remember to tell that there are also poisonous plants, berries, and mushrooms in the Finnish nature.



Pick only the ones you can identify without doubt. If there is no common language, tasting can be omitted to avoid misunderstandings.

The coffee break

The guides can choose a suitable place for the coffee break by the trail. The coffee break may add to motivation: we walk for a while and then have coffee together. Walking as a group is a collective activity and reduces the feeling of loneliness. Sharing coffee together adds to this sense of belonging while also being safe for those who have a hard time being in a group with others. While having coffee outside, it is easy for a participant to place themselves according to their personal need for space: they can be exactly how close or how far they want to and talk as much or as little as they want to.

Important reminders

What to talk about in a group

Many asylum seekers have experienced shocking and traumatic events and losses in their past. Many have families and people close to them who are still in dangerous situations in their home country. Because of this, usual topics and questions such as "where are you from?" or "do you have a wife/children/siblings etc." may arouse difficult feelings. It is therefore better to direct the conversation in the present moment and in things currently taking place, for instance, what certain things found in nature are called in different languages.

Naturally people do talk about themselves and their experiences, but it is best for the guide not to enquire on sensitive subjects. It can also be wise for guides to consider beforehand what they want to reveal of themselves to the participants because they too will receive questions. Curiosity is natural and a good way to get to know new people. Good topics of conversation are ones which arouse feelings of joy and power, such as food and hobbies. Within the confines of the Nature Group, talking about the weather isn't just small talk as to an asylum seeker Finland's weather, how to dress for it and the changing of the seasons may all give new information.

Trauma survivor stories

Every now and then, one of the participants may want to tell the guides about their traumatic experiences. However, the Nature Group is not the right place for this. In the Nature Group, the guides must take all participants into account equally and sharing traumatic experiences may affect both the guides and the other participants. Also for the

participant, it is better to go through such traumatic experiences in a more flexible timeframe and possibly with a professional.

Trauma and other emotional stories may be sensitively evaded by saying something such as: "Sounds horrible but you made it" and/or "I'm glad that you're here now and you're safe". In most cases, this directs the person back to the current moment. If the sharing continues, the guide can clearly say something such as: "This is an important matter and I'm glad you want to share it. However, now we are in the Nature Group and it's not the place for this particular discussion. Have you talked to someone else about this? Would you like us to find out who you could talk to this about?". The guide can also contact staff at the reception centre or the Nature Group coordinator and ask them about how to proceed.

Everyman's rights and responsibilities

With their own behaviour, the guides act as role models in terms of many things, such as how to dress for certain weather conditions and codes of conduct in the forest. The participants are often eager to learn behaviour required in their new country but naturally are not aware of everything that is required of them. Guides should let the group know without delay if they witness everyman's rights being broken. As an example: A person who has lived their entire life in a city may throw their trash or cigarette stump into the forest, but when they are respectfully remarked on this and the trash is picked up, the same usually doesn't happen again. When the participants see the guide respecting nature, they will be inclined to follow the guide's example. Sometimes we have made it a habit to pick up rubbish from the forest while walking.

It is good to talk about everyman's rights and responsibilities with the participants if language skills allow for it. As an example, the freedom to access a forest without a landowner's permission is a new concept for many non-Finnish people. The list of everyman's rights and responsibilities is located at the bottom of this document.



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Nature heals

Not everyone enjoys walking, being in a group or using their senses as shown by the guides. In these cases, it is important for a guide to remember and trust that the Nature Group in itself benefits asylum seekers. Nature and walking have healing and rehabilitating effects, even if the person doing the walk isn't particularly enjoying it. Research shows that, for example, a 15-minute walk in the forest reduces stress hormone levels by over 10%¹. Done regularly this has a very positive effect on the health of both body and mind.

¹ Miyazaki et al. (2010). The physiological effects of Shinrin-yoku (taking in the forest atmosphere or forest bathing): evidence from field experiments in 24 forests across Japan. *Environmental Health and Preventive Medicine*, 15 (1), 18–26.

Everyman's right

(<https://www.nationalparks.fi/everymansright>)

Everyone is allowed to...

- walk, ski, cycle, or horseback ride freely (except very near homes and other private buildings or through farm fields and nursery plantations which could easily be damaged)
- camp out temporarily a reasonable distance from homes
- pick wild berries, mushrooms and flowers, as long as they are not protected species
- fish with a simple rod and line
- use boats, swim or bathe in inland waters and the sea
- walk, ski, or drive a motor vehicle or fish on frozen lakes, rivers, and the sea
- **all the above can be restricted or forbidden in national parks and other nature reserves** during certain seasons or year-round to protect sensitive areas and threatened species of plants or animals. Please pay close attention to any restrictions.

It's NOT allowed to...

- disturb people or damage property
- disturb reindeer, game, breeding birds, their nests or young
- cut down or damage trees
- collect moss, lichen, or fallen trees from other people's property
- light open campfires without permission, except in an emergency
- disturb people's privacy by camping too near them or making too much noise
- leave litter
- drive motor vehicles off road without the landowner's permission
- hunt without the relevant permits
- fish with nets, traps, or a reel and lure without the relevant permits
- dogs may not be unleashed on fitness trails, on other people's land or in urban areas
- dogs must be kept away from public beaches, children's playgrounds, sports fields and maintained ski tracks
- unleash dogs during the period of 1.3.-19.8.

More information

- [Everyman's right in Finland \(Pdf file, 405 kb, ymparisto.fi\)](#)
- <https://www.nationalparks.fi/everymansright>