

Activity: Plant Care **Goal: Psychological** **Populations: All but dementia, young children**

TH Activity Plan – Bent Out of Shape

Text by Lesley Fleming, HTR

Photo by L. Fleming, Wikipedia, Atlas Obscura, Graham's Island.com, P. Littleton



ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will find or observe plants with unusual structures, exploring plant growth habits & horticultural techniques while pruning plants.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Expand understanding of human development using plant knowledge & plant development; develop flexible thinking skills

Physical: Develop physical outlets to shift mood; practice self-regulation with appropriate emotional responses

Psychological/Emotional: Assess conditions or circumstances that cause mood or emotional disruptions; plan coping strategies

Sensory: Increase tolerance for non-preferred activities involving sensory inputs; self-select sensory breaks

Social: Recognize tolerance of different plants & people; practice nurturing skills

Materials

Photos of bent plants/trees

Plants, pruners, watering can, labels

Gloves, wipes

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Gather materials.
2. Facilitator begins session by placing photos of “bent” plants/trees at participant’s seats so when they arrive, they see examples. Once group has assembled, facilitator introduces theme of “Bent out of Shape” plants with applications for people. Group passes the photos around table, working cooperatively.
3. Question: What causes plants to be bent out of shape? Facilitator begins discussion, providing some horticultural info, or letting participants suggest reasons (heredity, pruning, storms). Extending this to include remedies, improvements to plants to support growth can provide the circumstance & strategies to move forward that will be applied to human behavior next.
4. Option: Walk through a garden or forest looking for misshapen, damaged or bent out of shape trees.
5. Question to group: Have you ever been bent out of shape? Discussion on what this means, how it was expressed & why anger or anxiety caused this extreme reaction. What strategies can be effective for responding more appropriately, for identifying situations where reactions may occur, & consequences of extreme reactions?
6. Hands-on activity of pruning a plant to shape it is undertaken, with tips on shaping, reference to bonsai pruning, & quiet work time for participants to ponder/reflect on previous discussion. Option: Pruning shrubs in an outdoor garden.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: Being bent out of shape is a term people use to refer to mood disruptions, anxiety, anger, or behavioral responses to unfortunate or difficult situations. Basing a TH session on this phrase

and concept, and using plant examples, can allow participants to remove themselves from a situation while exploring causes, responses and coping strategies. Viewing photos or live plants that have had their growth bent out of shape through unintentional or intentional factors like pruning, storm damage or disease can be the starting point for cognitive/intellectual understanding of plant and human development. Through discussion and actual pruning of plants, participants can better understand some growth is hereditary, other imposed, and some accidental (like accidents resulting in amputations for example).

Psychological goals can be integrated into sessions where assessing causes, responses and outcomes for both plants and people in circumstances where growth patterns or psychological responses have been disrupted. What do plants do when limbs have been removed? What do people do when limbs are amputated? What coping mechanisms might be used to navigate changes to physical abilities? Can this include developing physical and emotional outlets for such changes? Resiliency, self-care, emotional support networks can be discussed as possible mechanisms for moving beyond being “bent out of shape” and onto more positive functioning.

Some populations may be more prone to “being bent out of shape” or having emotional, unregulated behavioral responses to situations or circumstances not to their liking. These might include people with addictions, mental health challenges, incarceration, physical disabilities or undergoing physical rehabilitation, trauma injuries both physical and emotional, or other medical conditions. Most populations can benefit from discussing and practice recognizing inappropriate responses to situations, modulating behavior and finding coping mechanisms.

Excessive or intense anger, perhaps referred to as being “bent out of shape”, [may impact health](#) in a number of ways including cardiovascular disease, physiological stress responses, increased cortisol levels, decreased serotonin levels, and increased blood glucose (Women’s Brain Health Initiative, 2025).

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts.

Ensure gardens or forests have safe paths for outdoor walk, preferably accessible by all. Identify poison ivy or poison oak in these areas. Use of sharp pruners may not be appropriate for some populations. Blunt tipped scissors may be an alternative.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Various types of pruning can be explored for groups interested in horticultural techniques, career exploration, or educational focus. Pruning is often discussed as a specific way to shape, maintain or improve the health of plants. [Pruning techniques](#) of thinning, crown reduction, pollarding and fruit pruning are used for specific structural reasons. [Bonsai](#), a technique and practice that creates miniature but realistic forms of trees found in nature, are typically planted and thrive in containers, and may deepen this TH session depending on participants and their needs.



REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

American Bonsai Society. (2025). [American Bonsai Society learning seminars 2025](#). American Bonsai Society.org.

Bonsai Empire. (n.d.). [What is bonsai?](#)

Fair, B. (2020). [General pruning techniques](#). NC State Extension.

Women’s Brain Health Initiative. (2025). [Bent out of shape](#). Women’s Brain Health Initiative.org.

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2025.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2024.