

Activity: Nature **Goal: Psychological/Emotional** **Populations: Other Specialized Populations**

TH Activity Plan – Expanding a Sense of Safety – Trauma & Trafficking Survivors

Text by Lesley Fleming, HTR, Heather Kelejian & Zuzana Poláčková
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ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will engage in outdoor garden and nature activities at a public garden to expand their sense of safety in a public space.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Integrate sense of safety into intellectual (mind-body) realization; increase self-efficacy

Physical: Utilize grounding activities (meditation, mindfulness) for coping, relaxing & calming self

Psychological/Emotional: Increase self-resiliency by practicing visits to a public space; expand personal sense of safety

Sensory: Connect with nature using all senses

Social: Practice being in public spaces as part of a healing process; engage with staff & other participants during the session

Materials

Access to public garden or green space

Materials for specific activities (aloe vera plants for dividing, soil, mandala materials etc.)

Gloves, wipes



STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Arrange with partner organization for session(s), number of participants, type of activities, & materials.
2. Facilitator begins session by welcoming participants to the garden making statements related to making them feel safe in the space. This could include using an enclosed space, some degree of privacy from other garden visitors, visible exit paths, & using a location that deters people from surprising them from behind.
3. Begin with a passive activity. This could include breathing, meditation, relaxation, or mindfulness exercises to ground & calm.
4. Moving onto an active plant or nature activity, participants plant a flower, make an arrangement, pot or harvest herbs, divide aloe vera, [create nature mandalas](#) – each session would use one of these activities, or others with a plant/nature connection.
5. Discussion with participants on what they found useful during the session—calming, easing fears about being in public space—allows them to share their fears, experiences & recognize others who have similar feelings. Discussing anger and negative emotions, and how to deal with these is often the pre-cursor to creating a safe space.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: This activity is based on a program called “Building a Personal Connection with Nature” developed “through a collaborative partnership with A Safe Place (ASP), North Carolina Master Gardeners, and the Therapeutic Horticulture Agent of New Hanover County Cooperative Extension... offered to female survivors of human trafficking... delivered at the [NHC Arboretum](#) (North Carolina)” (Poláčková et al.,

2023). Two key goals are integrated into the TH eight-week program—helping women feel safe in a public space and fostering a sense of resiliency using nature-based hands-on activities. Expanding their self-resiliency by practicing and beginning to regain a sense of safety in public spaces, in this case, a public garden, contributes to a greater sense of independence.

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

Facilitator in conjunction with agency staff should be aware of mental health or other challenges that could trigger, agitate or scare participants. In the above-mentioned program, staff from the non-profit *A Safe Place* accompanied participants and were responsible for addressing issues related to the individual's treatment plan that might arise during the TH sessions (Poláčková et al., 2023). Specific triggers that could affect this population include loud noises, items related to drug use, cotton balls or small baggies. Triggers are individualized based on each person's experience. Facilitators should constantly be aware of a participant's anxiety level and any item causing distress should be removed from the participant immediately.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Connecting with nature can be an effective and powerful strategy, technique and activity for a range of populations and individuals who have experienced adversity, trauma, grief or other emotionally difficult situations or circumstances. These can provide support for improving mental health and preventing distress using multiple pathways—senses, beauty, emotion, meaning and compassion for this nature connection (Mental Health Foundation, 2023). Being in green spaces can be serene, defined as places of calm and silence, according to research by van den Bosch et al. (2015). But it should also be noted that green spaces can be a trigger for some. Enclosed spaces may trigger panic attacks in victims of trafficking if they experienced confinement or isolation, this potentially leading to a heightened sense of anxiety. The feeling of being trapped or unable to escape can exacerbate their trauma and anxiety symptoms (Brady et al., 2021). Vast spaces may confuse if they had been subjected to disorienting or isolating conditions making it difficult for them to navigate or feel grounded in open spaces. The lack of clear boundaries or familiar landmarks can lead to feelings of disorientation and disconnection (Marburger & Pickover, 2020; Mak et al., 2023).

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