

Using nature as a therapeutic resource: The effect of nature on mood and well-being of the bereaved

Project Summary:

**Mollie Taylor in collaboration with
Bournemouth University and Bournemouth,
Christchurch and Poole Council**



The benefits of nature and the outdoors on mental health is well-documented.

However, there is a gap in current knowledge exploring the benefits nature could have on those who are bereaved.

This study aimed to investigate the use of nature in the area of bereavement services and the benefits nature may provide to those suffering from a bereavement.

Project Aims:

1

To investigate the affect that a nature-focused activity has on the mood and well-being of the bereaved.

To create/outline resources which can be used as a free/low cost way of supporting those who are bereaved.

2

To share the findings and resources of the project with other parts of the council and other councils/bereavement services.

3


Project Method:




For the project, nature-based bereavement sessions were set-up at both North Cemetery and Hengistbury Head in Bournemouth.




To measure relative mood levels, participants' responses to open-ended questionnaires were collected before and after attendance.



A total of 12 participants took part in the sessions, providing answers to the questionnaires. The answers given, were then analysed for their “sentiment”; calculated using a lexicon from R (NRC), which gave scores between -4 and +4 for a library of words.



The words used within the answers were then given a score and totaled for the answer.



The scores for each answer were investigated to test whether there was a difference between average scores in the before questionnaire answers, and the after.

Project Results:

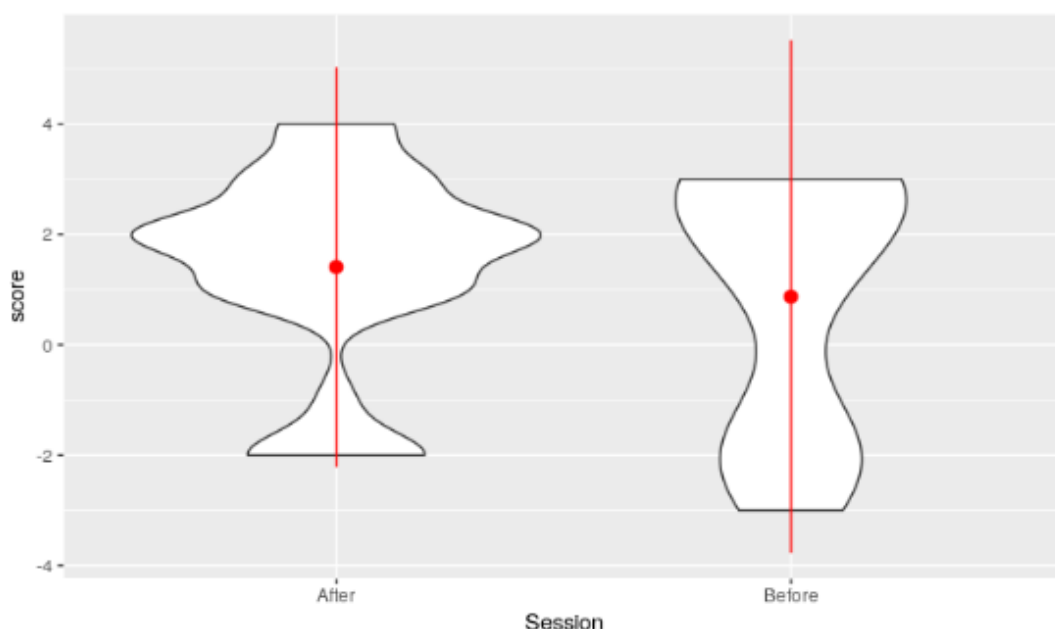


216 words were analysed in total.

The most commonly used word was “people” (8 occurrences) followed by “nature” (6), “meet” and “feel” (5) and “bereaved” and “bereavement”.

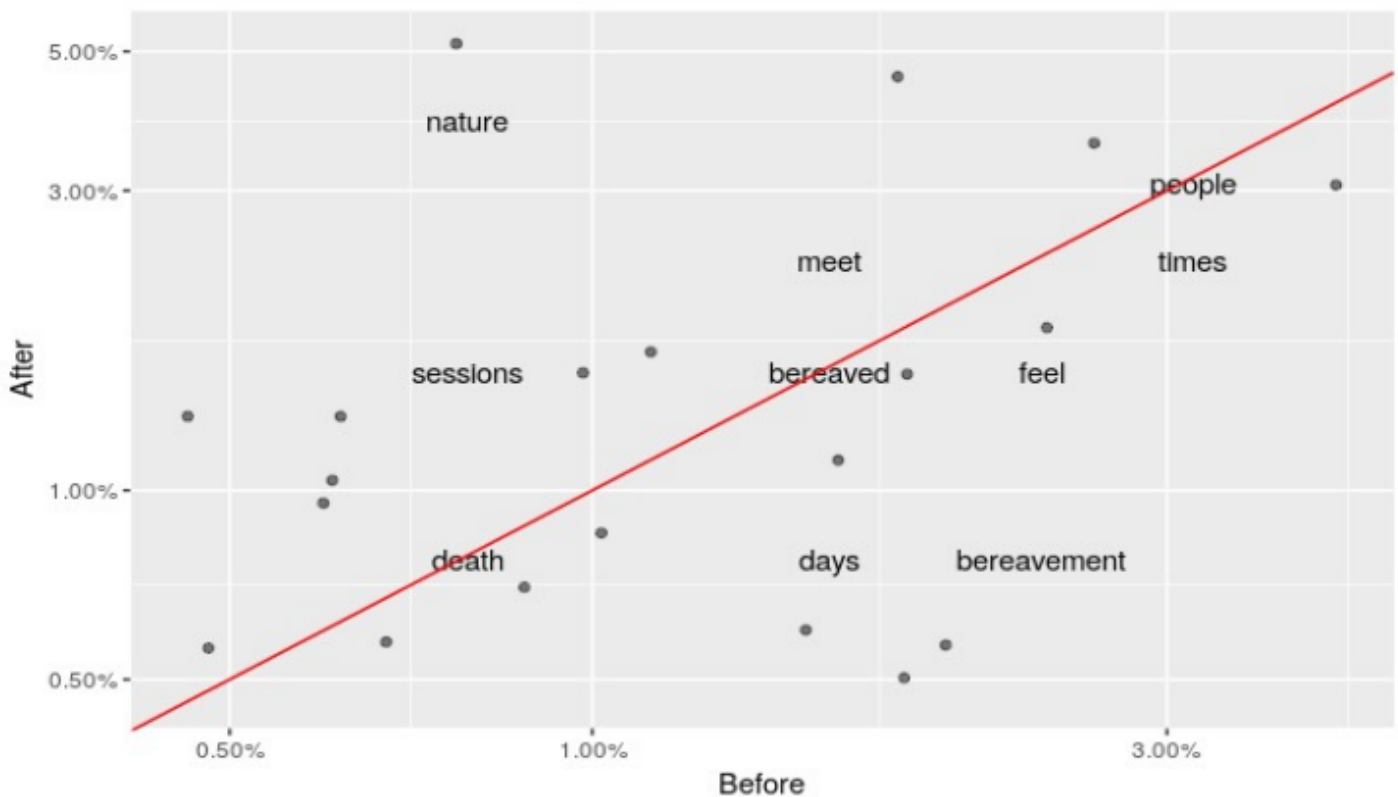
The highest sentiment scores were reported post session (+4) as opposed to prior (+3).

Average sentiment scores for the after sessions are higher (+1.5) than before sessions (+1).



This shows a slight sentiment change and mood increase between the sessions.

The sessions encouraged exploration of nature from the participants themselves, as seen in the transcripts of answers and more frequent use of the word “nature”, with a 4% increase compared to before answers.

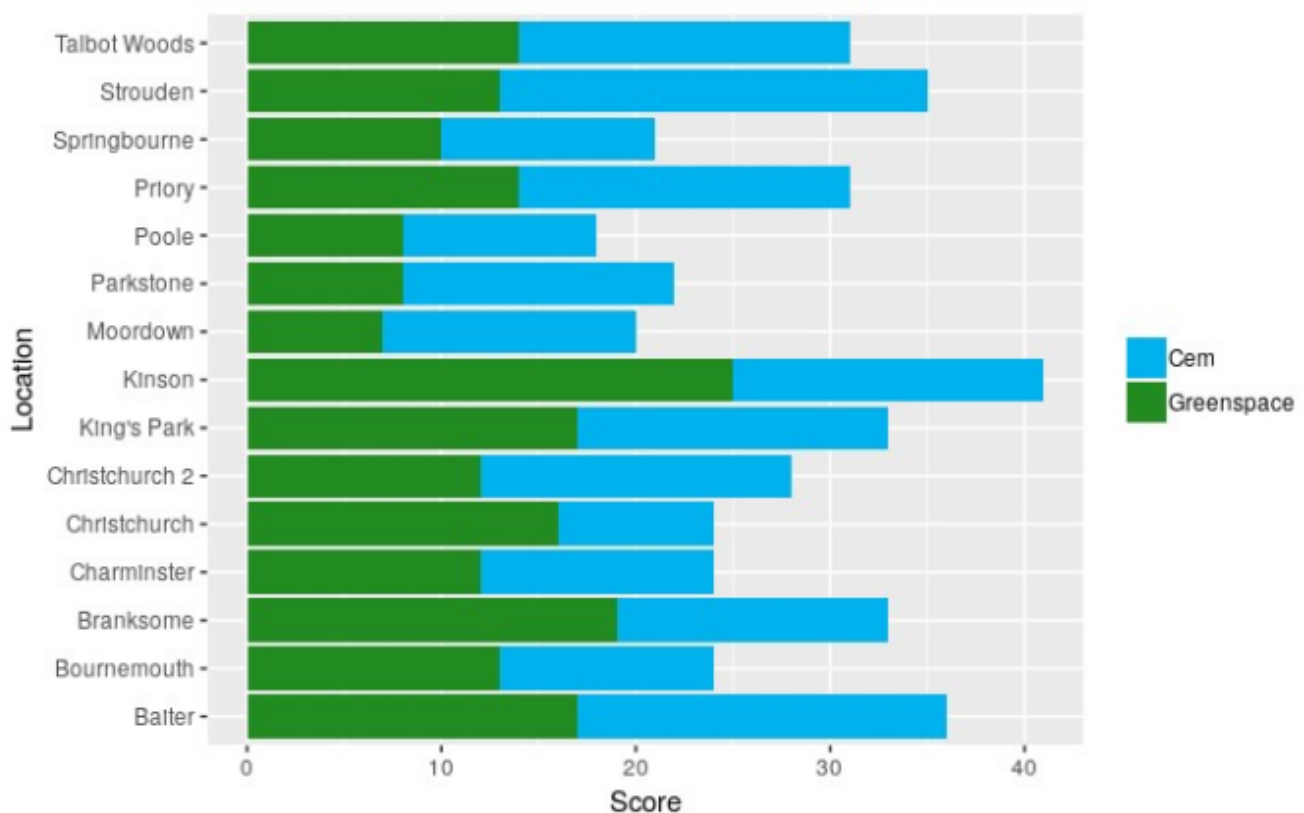


However, these results were likely affected by the COVID-19 restrictions leading to low participant numbers, and therefore further investigation into this topic is required to confirm the observed relationship.



Alongside this, relative “nature-levels” were calculated for sites situated in the Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) conurbation; an equal number of greenspaces and cemeteries, to compare characteristics of these sites.

On average, there were higher mean “nature scores” for cemetery sites (greenspace:13.67, cemetery:14.40).



The final element investigated public opinions on the relationship between nature and cemeteries.

Out of 65 participants, 35 strongly agreed and 27 agreed that cemeteries are important refuges for wildlife.

57 strongly agreed and 8 agreed that they found the presence of wildlife relaxing.



When asked what should be present in cemeteries, nature was one of the most commonly reported features, with “trees”, “flowers”, “graves” and “wildlife” the top four words used.

Answers for this survey were not affected by sex, age or country (p-value >0.001).

When given a choice between a list of photos with different levels of nature within cemeteries, the option with the most wildlife was the most popular (46 votes), with the third most natural second (16 votes).

There were no votes for the least natural option.

It is evident from the responses given, in the bereavement group questionnaires, that the participants found a benefit from the nature aspect of the groups.

It was also found that cemetery sites are, on average, more “natural” than other forms of greenspace.

This, along with public preference weighted towards a more natural setting for cemeteries, indicates that cemeteries could provide a therapeutic resource in the form of nature, to those suffering from bereavement.

“I felt the sessions were so much more helpful to me than anything else I had tried since my bereavement”.





The social aspects within the bereavement sessions were a major reason for participants attending groups; mentioned in 7/13 responses for the before questionnaire, and 6/6 in the after.

Social aspects were largely named in the public questionnaire also, when asking what should be in cemeteries: “benches”, “seating”, “gravestones” and “memorials” were common answers; all of these are features focused on social behaviours.

Therefore, combining the benefits of nature and sociality could be a highly effective way to positively impact on the support offered through bereavement services, in a relatively low-cost manner.

Future plans:

It is hoped this study will inform local councils and mental-health organisations, outlining the importance of nature and it's potential benefits for bereavement services.

The bereavement sessions are primed to continue following government guidelines, and aim to re-open once the threat of COVID has subsided.



Future projects aim to include a form of nature-focused bereavement support at Hengistbury Head.

**Dissemination of results include:
Institution of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM), BCP Council, Bournemouth University, and other local councils.**

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