

Benefits of eco-therapy



Michael Somers
Forestry Development
Officer.



Eco and forest therapies are practices that support every aspect of our wellbeing. The health benefits attributed to forest therapy include boosted immune function, improved cardiovascular and respiratory health, and reduced stress.

However, farmers have demanding jobs and face challenges compounded by economic uncertainty, vulnerability to weather events and rural isolation.

As a result, farming has significantly changed over the past decade. While many farmers may not think forests or nature can provide this type of service, an important project is currently being run in Castlecomer in north Kilkenny.

The Mid-Leinster Farmer Wellbeing Project is funded by the EIP European Innovation Project. Teagasc and Kilkenny Leadership Partnership, Castlecomer Discovery Park, Trinity College Dublin, South East Technological University (SETU) and Mental Health Ireland are involved in this unique project.

In addition, the operational group is well represented by national farming

organisations and local development groups.

The principal reason for people to participate in this programme is engagement, or the ability to become comfortable with others through soft skills and learning in a forest and natural environment.

The programme falls under four themes;

Traditional skills

• **Development (eco activities incorporating talk therapy)** – provides participants with the opportunity to learn new skills and provides a platform for social engagement and an outlet for creativity.

• **Health, safety and wellbeing (forest therapy)** – will feature facilitated talks on wellbeing. This involves using expertise from the project's operational group membership and existing programmes - it will focus on participants seeing the benefits of resilience-building and identifying potential stressors.

Farm visits

• **Diversification/innovation and peer-to-peer supports** – this part of the programme seeks to introduce farmers to nature therapy, associated with talk therapy, as a means of gaining wellbeing and associated health

benefits. It will also train farmers in new skills and forms of exercise.

• **Adventure therapy (Castlecomer Discovery Park)** – peer-to-peer support provides participants with a stimulating new recreational outlet while also providing mental health benefits.

Recently, the pilot programme took place. One of the critical aspects of the pilot phase included The Five Ways to Wellbeing workshop.

This workshop focused on different actions that can be taken for wellbeing and was delivered as part of the Mid Leinster Farmer wellbeing programme. The workshop set out to provide participants with:

- A brief introduction to the concepts of positive health and wellbeing.
- An improved understanding of how we can look after our wellbeing in the natural environment.
- An understanding of incorporating the Five Ways to Wellbeing as a healthy coping strategy into our lives.

The pilot for this project has been completed and a programme is now in place.

Farmers are welcome to attend and anyone interested in participating in this project can call Conor Cleere, Kilkenny LEADER Partnership, on 056-775 2111 or Michael Somers, Teagasc, Nenagh, on 067 31821.