

**DON'T FORGET
R U OK? DAY**

Check in with friends this Thursday, September 14. It could make all the difference to their mental health. Visit ruok.org.au

Therapy goes WILD

Not all problems are best examined within four walls. Penny Carroll explores the latest trend of therapies that focus on getting patients off the couch

Psychologist Maz Miller used to prescribe fresh air and exercise to her patients all the time, until one day she got tired of talking about it. Frustrated with the limitations of her office, she got up mid-session and took her client out for a walk. "I could tell there was something different," she says. "The client seemed to open up a lot more; the whole session was flowing."

The results were so good, Miller decided to ditch her clinic and work outdoors instead. She now offers walk and talk therapy, and is one of a growing number of therapists taking a fresh approach to mental health treatment.

"People are looking for a more natural setting than the traditional office-based treatment," she says.

Given that one in five Aussies experience mental illness each year, and 54 per cent of those don't access treatment for their condition, Miller has a point.

"Clinic settings can be quite confronting, particularly for those who are very withdrawn or find

expressing themselves difficult," psychologist Dr Samantha Clarke, of wellbeing business Mind Body Resilience, says. "Offering different types of therapy can mean more people are able to access assistance."

A unique therapy environment can help break down barriers and address emotional issues, but still make you feel safe, she adds.

Here are some of the wild therapies on offer in Australia.

WALK & TALK THERAPY

The concept is as simple as it sounds: Instead of seeing your psychologist or counsellor in a clinic, you go for a walk with them. The pace is set to suit the client and the route sticks to quiet, open spaces to ensure privacy. "It just looks like two friends going for a walk," Miller says.

Multiple studies have linked exercise to mental health gains,

so fusing walking with traditional therapy has plenty of positives.

"It reduces anxiety and improves depression, boosts energy and it's good for sleep," Miller says, adding that movement also seems to inspire another, unexpected effect: It helps people open up and get 'unstuck'.

Miller says the casual walk and talk approach is particularly good for those suffering anxiety or phobias, since they're not confined to a room.

"Overall, we've noticed that people get better quicker," she adds. "We've also noticed that our cancellations are a lot lower. People are more motivated to do this style of therapy."

How much: About \$140 for an hour-long session, and Medicare rebates may be available.

Try it: Miller's practice, Walk Different (walkdifferent.com.au), operates in southern Sydney and the Illawarra. If you're already working with a therapist, ask if they'd try a walking session, or search for walk and talk therapy in your area.



EQUINE-ASSISTED PSYCHOTHERAPY

If dogs are man's best friend, horses are our best teacher. In equine-assisted psychotherapy, clients work with a mental health professional to build self-awareness and improve relationships through interaction with horses.

The role horses play in client change is complex, according to Meg Kirby, founder of the Equine Psychotherapy Institute.

"They're a big, beautiful model of living in the present moment," she says, adding that they also have a uniquely calming presence and a heightened sensitivity that can help people identify and express their feelings.

"If a person approaches a horse with a particular feeling or way of relating that feels unappealing or

uncomfortable, the horse will respond," she says.

"That gives the client and practitioner immediate feedback." Repressed grief or anger, for example, is quickly revealed.

Because of the diverse exercises that horses can participate in – a session can involve anything from observation to mounted experiences – this kind of therapy is useful for a wide variety of people.

"It's really great for clients who've had a trauma with humans," Kirby says, but adds that she's worked with children, veterans, people with addictions and even corporate groups.

How much: \$240 for an hour-long session.

Try it: Find a practitioner at equinepsychotherapy.net.au



ART THERAPY

If you struggle to articulate your feelings, try drawing them. Art therapy is about expressing emotion without words. Instead you explore your inner world through sculpture, painting, drawing or collage.

You don't have to be artistic to benefit. "With artists, the end product is important, but with art therapy it's the process that's important," Dr Jo Kelly, president of the Australian and New Zealand Arts Therapy Association, says.

The creative process engages different parts of the brain than those we use in talking and

cognition, so it can bring a new perspective to your problems.

In a session a client will work one-on-one with a therapist in an art studio setting to create an artwork. Towards the end of the session, rather than 'interpreting' the work, the therapist will invite the client to explore what the image means to them.

It's a holistic therapy that improves problem-solving and encourages self-reflection, Kelly says. "It also allows emotions like anger to be expressed in different ways. It's a safe forum to do that."

How much: About \$100 for an hour-long session.

Try it: Visit anzata.org for a list of Masters-level graduates from approved courses and universities.



BUSH ADVENTURE THERAPY

It turns out the typical Aussie camping adventure can be an opportunity for personal growth. This unique therapy involves small groups led by a team of specially trained counsellors or social workers heading into the bush to learn about life.

Experiences can range from day trips to overnight expeditions, and might involve bushwalking, canoeing or abseiling.

"Bushwalking is used a lot," Anita Pryor, a bush adventure practitioner at Adventure Works, says. "The route can be used to draw out lessons and provide a 'peak moment' for people. And canoeing is a great one for metaphors around the river of life."

The connection with nature and physical movement bring their own benefits, but Pryor

says the greatest impact is this therapy's effect on self-esteem.

"A typical bush adventure therapy experience has people feeling they're worthwhile," she explains. "The light-bulb moment is often, 'Oh, I'm OK' and 'I can do stuff.' It sounds simple but it's so foundational."

The therapy is commonly used to help young people transition into adulthood, but research

shows it's also effective for a range of age groups.

How much: Prices vary depending on the number of participants and what activities are included, but expect to pay a little more than a tourist version of the same activity.

Try it: Head to aabat.org.au to find qualified practitioners and programs in your area.

