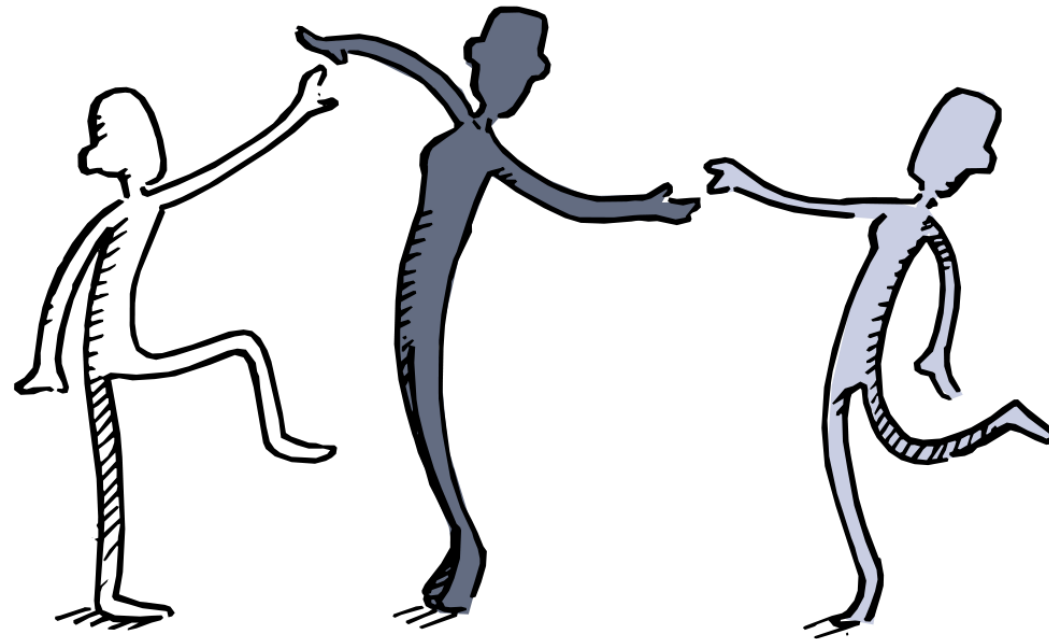


The benefits of taking coaching conversations outdoors – what the research says



Insights into the benefits of outdoor coaching

This report summarises the findings from an MSc dissertation research project that looked into the coachee's experience of coaching conversations that take place outdoors*. As it was a qualitative research project, the number of participants was small (9), but the analysis provided some very interesting insight into the benefits of taking coaching conversations outdoors. The findings have been broken down into 7 key themes.

This report aims to share these insights, link the findings to research in other fields and share some practical hints and tips about being an outdoor coach or coachee.

Outdoor coaching is currently a very under-researched area of coaching, but anecdotal feedback from practicing coaches and coachees, along with the small amount of research¹ that has been done, clearly shows that it is a great way to unlock cognitive capabilities and new ways of thinking. This study supports this feedback and provides insights into why this might be.

I really encourage you to give outdoor coaching a try, why not take your next coaching conversation outside?



Side-by-side

- A unique element of outdoor coaching is walking or sitting side-by-side, rather than sitting opposite each other
- Described as *liberating, non-judgemental, less scrutinised, relaxing, a familiar connection walking alongside someone*
- It removes the sense of being *looked at* or having too much eye contact - coachees felt they had more confidence to talk about things that were more challenging because they did not have to meet their coaches' eye
- Took away the intensity of sitting opposite someone making it easier to deal with more challenging questions. Walking alongside the coach enabled the coachee to experience silence without feeling uncomfortable or awkward, because there are things around them, in nature, to look at and focus on whilst thinking about the question or challenge
- Having no-one in front of them, also allowed coachees to experience the openness and expanse of the natural environment in front and around them - enabling them to move away from the conversation, think differently and articulate themselves better
- Coachees also experienced a literal, as well as metaphorical, journey with their coach when walking outdoors helping to build rapport and trust, and share a more personal and insightful experience

Other areas of research

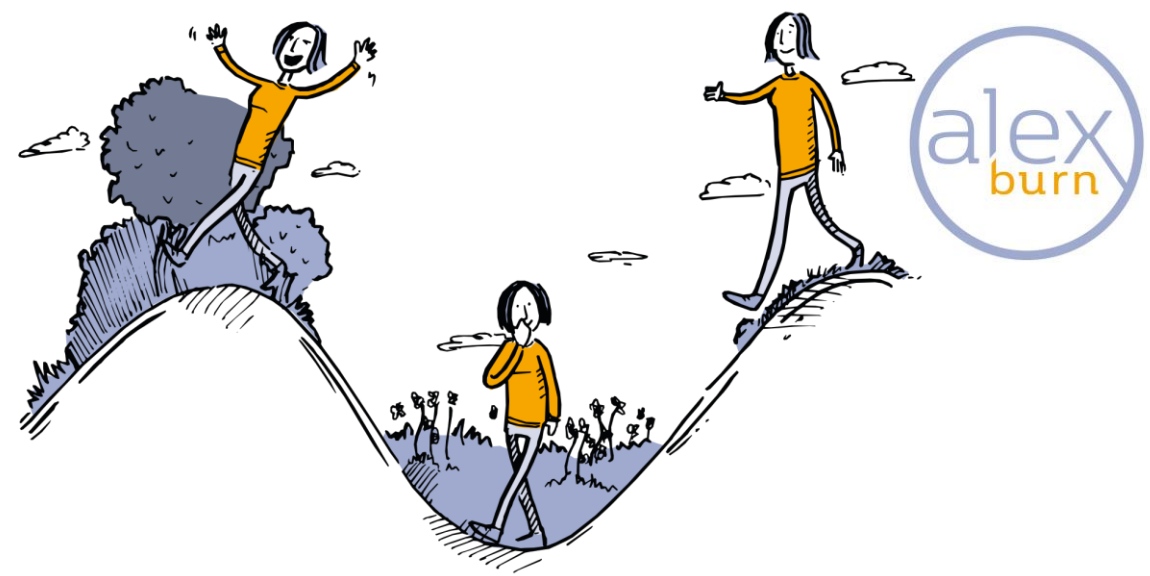
Nessler & Gilliland (2009) looked at *unintentional, interpersonal synchronisation* of stepping and found that it occurred when people walked side-by-side. They also found that sensory information between partners may influence the strength of the unintentional synchronisation. This may be due to the activity of mirror neurons in the brain - the act of observing movement in your partner triggers similar neurons in your brain when you move yourself, leading to synchronicity. They also found that if a pair walking side-by-side had a large difference in leg length, and gait, this could affect synchronisation.

Why is this important? Synchronisation is associated with the reward processing areas of the brain increasing co-operation, rapport, bonding, affiliation and cohesion (Koban et al, 2017). Physically walking alongside each other when coaching could enhance the relationship between the coach and coachee.



Movement and pace

- The ability to be able to move during an outdoor coaching session, and the pace of the movement, are key aspects of the coachees' experience*. Outdoor coaching allows freedom of movement and use of pace
- Movement was often a factor in a coachee's decision to choose outdoor coaching – providing a double benefit of coaching and *exercise*
- The use of pace varies, often directly mimicking or reflecting how the coachee is feeling. It enables them to express their emotions
- Slower pace often reflects exploration, deep thinking, dealing with challenging questions or thoughts, sometimes even coming to a complete stop to be able to figure something out before moving on – *internally digesting*
- Quicker pace often reflects agitation, wanting to get away from difficult thoughts, dealing with frustration
- A meandering pace enables the coachee to be more present in their thoughts, because it is not something they are consciously thinking about
- Going uphill reflected the pace and development of the conversation and thought processes – languidly climbing up, then making more sense of things as more scenery was revealed nearer the top. With a sense of achievement when reaching the top – both the physical and the mental work out
- Movement and pace are described as mechanisms for giving the brain time to think and to express emotions - for example, the act of *stomping* enables physical expression of frustration or anger



Other areas of research

Attention Restoration Theory (ART) (Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Berman, 2010) proposes that natural environments provides the brain with the opportunity to restore *Directed Attention* and increase cognitive capacity and capability. It does so in 4 ways – through fascination, compatibility, extent and being away. Movement and pace are likely examples of *compatibility* and *extent*. An environment highly *compatible* with the coachees' intention for that environment would be highly restorative. So if they wanted both coaching and exercise, this would be compatible. If they wanted to be able to physically express their emotions through their movement, this would be compatible. Being able to move and vary pace is made possible due to *extent* – the sheer space and size of the outdoor environment allows for as much, or as little, movement as the coachee wants.

Why is this important? Directed Attention is very important when needing to think strategically, creatively and effectively. It is a very important brain function for coachees to be able to use to work through their challenges and develop solutions. It is, however depleted easily. Introducing aspects of coaching that can help to restore this functionality *during* the coaching session itself can be highly beneficial - giving the coachee the opportunity to restore their cognitive capacity, and then use this boosted resource during the conversation.

* Outdoor coaching does not, however, have to involve movement – this is just one aspect of the research

Outdoor vs Indoor

- Being outdoors adds to the value and power of the coaching conversation – incorporating aspects of the natural environment that it is very hard to replicate indoors
- Being able to breathe fresh air is described as a key benefit of outdoor coaching and a point of difference with indoor coaching – it is described as *invigorating, mentally stimulating, grounding, refreshing*
- Being outdoors helps conversation and thoughts to flow - *you hear different things, see different things and feel different things*
- Indoors is described as *confined, constrained, trapped, awkward, small, four-walled, plain*
- In contrast, the outdoors is described as *free, open, comfortable, calm, relaxed, energised, exhilarating, limitless*
- The natural environment is constantly changing and providing metaphor and mimicry in a way that the indoors does not
- There are often opportunities to experience awe in outdoor coaching – such as a rainbow suddenly appearing on the horizon, or the expanse of a valley coming into view when cresting the top of a hill - which provides unique experiences for the coachee, and the coach
- Being outdoors also enables coachees to deal with emotions. Being outside is describe as less intense, because the coachee is able to move away from the emotions if needed. Whereas indoors the room can become *charged* with the emotion, becoming very intense
 - Having an affinity to the outdoors can increase the coachee’s experience of outdoor coaching – childhood memories and emotions attached to outdoor activities often added to coaching conversations and helped unlock positive feelings



Other areas of research

According to ART, the outdoor environment provides a great deal of soft *fascination*. The sights and sounds of nature are easy and effortless to focus on, giving the brain time to recover from cognitive fatigue and restore directed attention.

Suttie (2019) links the experience of *awe* to improved mental health and positive emotion. Finding awe can be experienced even without needing extraordinary experiences, such as marvelling at a sunset.

Why is this important? Coachees can ponder and mull over questions, almost subconsciously, whilst effortlessly focusing on and enjoying the view or listening to the sounds of nature around them. They can reflect and think more openly with a more open field of vision, which may be lacking in an indoor coaching conversation or whilst sat opposite their coach. They can benefit from the positive emotions associated with experiencing awe. All of these things elements free up the parts of the brain that are needed to process information, think creatively and come up with new ways of thinking and doing.

Different experiences and ways of thinking



Other areas of research

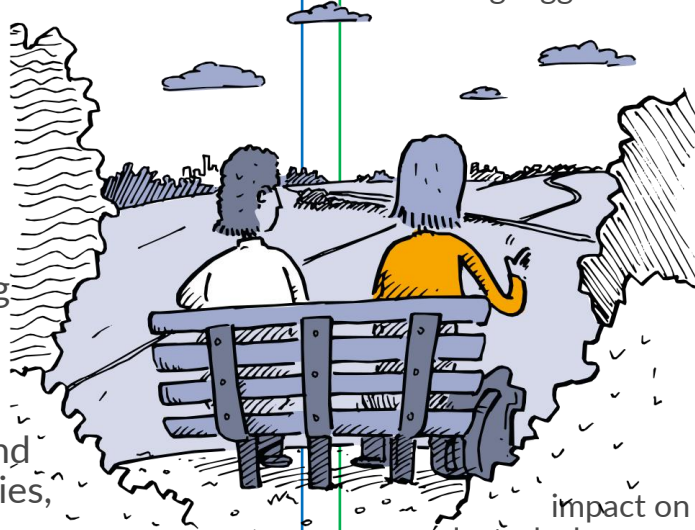
According to ART, *Being Away* is an aspect of natural environments that offers the opportunity for new experiences and new ways of thinking. This is because the *Being Away* is so different from the *normal*. Being out of the office, being outside rather than inside, being surrounded by nature rather than walls, being able to see natural light rather than synthetic lighting, being surrounded by animals rather than people... the list goes on.

Why is this important? Helping coachees to think differently is a key component of successful coaching. Introducing them to an environment that can enhance this is enormously beneficial.

- Being outdoors enables coachees to do things differently – experience different things, perceive things differently, gain different perspective, process information differently and, ultimately, think differently... at a deeper level
- The natural environment sparks the imagination – *the solutions come out of nowhere*
- The conscious mind is thinking about walking, not tripping, the sights and sounds of the natural environment around them, which frees up the unconscious mind to think more deeply - *because its coaching in a different environment it forced me to think differently*
- Being outdoors brings *clarity of thought* – enabling the coachee to concentrate and focus in a different way, zooming in and out from focusing on the external environment to get a meta-perspective, then zooming in and reflecting internally to get a micro-perspective
- The outdoors provides opportunity to find analogy, metaphor and mimicry – such as the changing weather, the dark and light sides of a tree, a delicate flower appearing through fallen leaves
- Analogy, metaphor and mimicry provide opportunities to think and experience in very different ways – giving new perspective, untapping creativity and new ways of thinking, and accessing different emotions
- Many explained that they specifically chose outdoor coaching because it got them away from their desks and their indoor life, so they could experience something new and different

Openness, space and expanse

- The openness, space and expanse of the outdoors leads to a sense of freedom of thought
- Openness and space has an impact on the way coaches feel and the way they make sense of the challenges they are facing
- Openness is about removing boundaries and being able to see the sky, the natural light, the view stretched out in front – described as *timeless and limitless*
- Even in a canopy of trees or an urban park coaches experience the benefits of this openness, not just wide open spaces
- The expanse of nature provides *space to think* – which is described as *just a fantastic feeling*
- In contrast to the indoors which is described as physically and mentally confining and constraining
- The unique openness, space and expanse of the leads to feelings of freedom, relief and release – which lead to positive emotions a sense of being able to find solutions and new ways of thinking and working. Removing physical borders and boundaries, also helps to remove mental ones
- It is important to note that outdoor coaching does not have to involve movement or long walks / hikes up mountains – the benefits can be experienced by sitting, standing or walking, from 45 minute sessions, to day long or even weekend long wilderness coaching... it is a fully inclusive form of coaching



Other areas of research

As previously described, ART suggests that *Being Away* and *Extent* are 2 key factors in the benefits of natural environments in restoring cognitive capacity. This is linked to the openness, space and expanse that natural environments offer. *Extent* helps to restore directed attention and reduce mental fatigue by providing an awareness of expanse and generating the feeling of connection with something bigger.

The Japanese have extolled the virtues and benefits of “Shinrin-Yoku”, or Forest Bathing, for centuries (Williams, 2017; Clifford, 2018). This practice uses the openness and space of forests to help induce calmness by activating the vagus nerve in the brain (Arvay, 2018), leading to greater capacity for self reflection.

In addition, *natural light* has been found to have a beneficial impact on mood (Selhub & Logan, 2011), with indoor lighting having a different, negative impact on mood depending on gender (Knez, 2001). Natural light can only, truly, be experienced outdoors, out in the open.

Why is this important? *Extent*, in the form of openness and freedom, enables us to make sense of challenges we face by giving us *space*, and sense of time, to think and reflect. Reflection being a key aspect of great coaching. Openness and space also removes boundaries and blockages to thinking.

Nature connectedness



- The natural environment has a direct impact on the coachee's experience of their outdoor coaching sessions and the connection they feel to the natural environment they encounter
- The weather often plays a critical part, reflecting the emotion and experience of the coachee – for example the wind and rain mimicking challenging emotions, then realisation, relief and understanding coming as the sun breaks through the cloud
- Connection with particular animals, especially if linked to memories, can elicit strong emotions and bring things to the surface that may otherwise be suppressed
- Hearing bird song or other animal sounds can, for some, enhance positive emotions
- Engaging physically with nature, such as touching a rough tree bark, feeling the different types of terrain underfoot or using sticks to draw in the soil, enables coachees to creatively engage with nature through the use of metaphor and analogy
- Coachees also used the nature around them to distract themselves if the coaching conversation became too difficult at any given time, giving them the opportunity to subconsciously deal with the challenging thoughts whilst consciously engaging with nature – providing a mental buffer
- Coachees with a strong affinity to the outdoors, for example through childhood experiences of spending a lot of time outdoors, were able to draw on memories and experiences to help them resolve challenges they faced as adults



Other areas of research

Stress Recovery Theory (SRT) (Ulrich et al, 1991) found people recovered more quickly from stressful events when they experienced natural environments. Supported by Berto (2014) who found natural environments had a greater calming effect than urban, reduced negative mood and enhanced positive emotion. More specifically, research into birdsong (Ratcliffe et al, 2013) found it was the type of natural sound most commonly associated with stress recovery when out in nature.

Blue space and green space are highly restorative natural environments (Barton & Pretty, 2010; Gladwell et al, 2013). With blue coastal environments, followed by green fields and woodland, found to be the most restorative, and urban environments the least – although still providing restorative effects compared to indoors (White et al, 2013).

Louv (2005) introduced the theory of Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD) to describe the negative outcomes on our health and wellbeing that results from depriving ourselves of contact with nature, especially at a young age.

The Happiness Project (Keltner et al, 2017) found nature increased feelings of joy, awe and contentedness, reduced anger, tiredness and stress.

Biophilia (Wilson, 1984; Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Arvay, 2018) describes human beings' innate desire to connect with nature.

Psychogeography (Marshalls, 2018) looks at the effects of the geographical environment on emotions and behaviour.

Why is this important? Work related stress is a major concern for employers and the employees who experience it. The use of natural environments for coaching sessions could enhance the stress management impact of coaching and improve mental wellbeing. Resulting in the coachee being able to think and feel more positively, better able to cope with stress, and think differently to solve their challenges

Senses, feelings and emotions

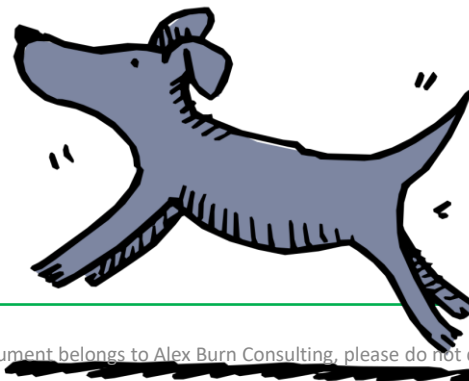


- Outdoor coaching enables the use of all the senses, and these senses often elicit strong emotions
- Specific and vivid memories are often linked to particular sights, sounds, smells, tastes or touches on the skin
- These senses are uniquely experienced because the coachee is in an outdoor setting – often contrasted with *not* being able to fully experience them in indoor coaching settings
- Often described as creating a *connection* between the coachee and the natural environment around them – described as *mindful, present, in the moment*
- Using the senses and physically experiencing the natural environment helps coachees with sense making – helping to process their thoughts and feelings
- The emotional response to connecting with the natural environment leads to feelings of being *grounded* and *anchored*
- Leading to being better able to reflect and creating a sense of calmness
- The indoor environment can *dull* the senses, but the outdoor, natural environment *invigorates* and *heightens* the senses and the experiences of the coachees

Other areas of research

Being able to use all the senses whilst outdoor coaching is linked to the ART benefits of *Fascination* and *Compatibility*. Using all 5 senses, even taste, provides plenty of opportunity for effortless, soft fascination and Directed Attention restoration. In addition, the *Compatibility* of these environments, especially for people with a strong affinity to the outdoors, can provide restorative and stress reducing (SRT) benefits through reflection on the memories and emotions associated with the 5 senses.

Franco et al (2017) found non-visual sensory pathways in natural environments also provide benefits, not just the visual ones.



Why is this important? Reflection is a key component of successful coaching, so it is a benefit to the coachee to be able to make better sense of the world around them and the emotions they are experiencing, so they can truly reflect at a deep emotional level. It is also beneficial to provide opportunities for coachees to tap into the full extent of their senses, which may be dulled by predominantly indoor lifestyles.

Other themes and findings

Logistics and location

Planning the route before hand and ensuring the coachee knows what to expect in terms of duration and terrain etc, as well as what clothing to wear, are key to successful outdoor coaching sessions

The role of the coach

To plan, prepare and contract effectively so that the coachee feels that all the logistics are being taken care of, and they do not need to think about any of the practicalities. This level of trust is very important and ensures the coachee is comfortable and able to focus on the coaching conversation

Bad experiences

Although outdoor coaching won't be for everyone, no bad experiences had been experienced by the coachees. I highly recommend giving it a try and seeing for yourself

The weather

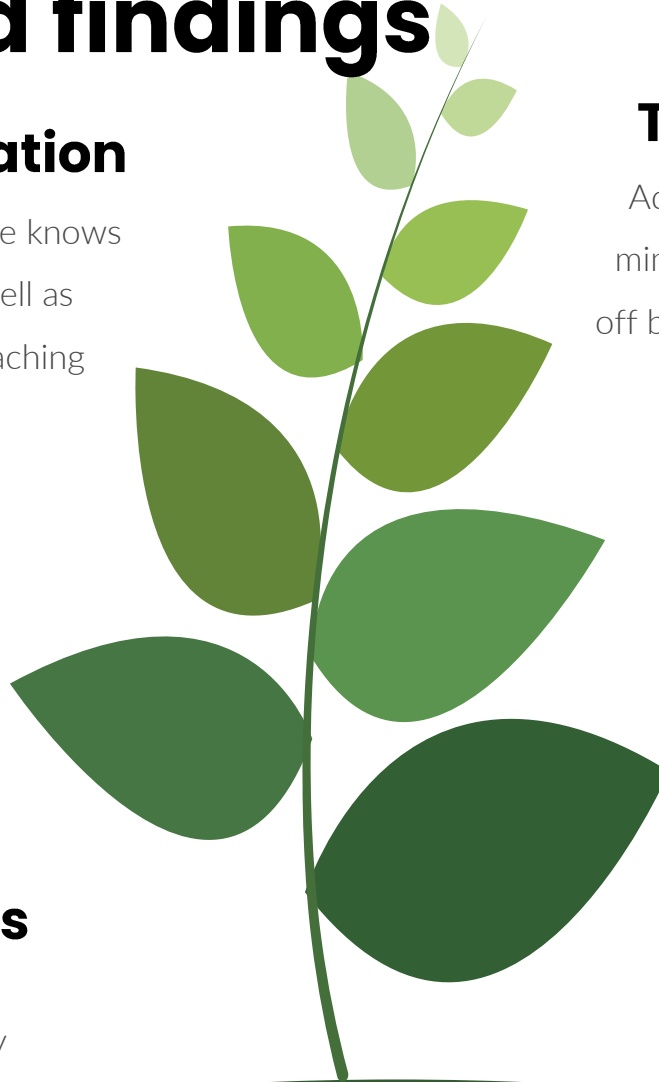
Adverse weather is often seen as beneficial in outdoor coaching, mimicking feelings and emotions. None of the coachees were put off by the weather. The key is to wear the right clothing – “There’s no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong clothing” (Billy Connolly)

Confidentiality

Despite often taking place in locations where you may cross paths with other people, it is often for a fleeting second and it is unlikely that they will overhear the conversation. This is more likely to happen in urban parks than the countryside

Summary

There’s a unique richness to it, more intimate, being immersed in the outdoor space. Feel more alive, positive and organic



Coach Practicalities

1

Planning

Walk the route before hand to risk assess and ensure you know the terrain and duration of the walk – is it a there and back or a circular route, are there hills or is it all flat, is there likely to be mud? Ensure you know the route and whether the coachee is capable of the walk



2

Logistics

Remind the coachee the day before of the type of clothing appropriate for the walk, the duration, likely terrain and a weather forecast. Ensure someone knows what route you will be taking and your start and end times



3

Being an outdoor coach

Coachee-led coaching is as important outdoors as indoors. The coachee may determine the pace, or look to you to set it. It is important to be able to sense when they may need to stop and take a break and sit in silence. Or walk on ahead of you



4

Contracting

Contracting is a very important part of all coaching. It is recommended when meeting a new coachee outdoors, for the first time do so in a more public location to put your coachee at ease. Find out if they have any aversions – such as large farm animals, deep water, high mountains – so you can avoid those when planning your walks. A stationary outdoor coaching session may also be more appropriate



1

Is it for me?

I strongly encourage anyone to try outdoor coaching.

People with a strong affinity to natural environments and being outdoors really enjoy and benefit from outdoor coaching.

Others, who did not think they enjoyed being outdoors, have surprised themselves by the positive experience they have had being coached outdoors



2

Types of outdoor coaching

There are many ways to experience outdoor coaching – urban parks, canal walks, around lochs, along sea fronts, in forests, across fields, up hills and mountains. There is a location for everyone. Sitting, standing, walking – it is a fully inclusive type of coaching



Coachee Tips

3

Where do I start?

If you are interested in trying outdoor coaching, search for outdoor coaches on LinkedIn or Google – there are a growing number of us all over the UK
Contact me – I could suggest an outdoor coach in your area



4

Contracting

Let your coach know your likes and dislikes and they will build the outdoor coaching experience to suit you. If you are not happy hiking up a hill or mountain, or you are scared of cows, or you do not like walking alongside canals.....just let your coach know



Suggested useful resources

The Nature Fix – Florence Williams

Your brain on nature – Eva Selhub
& Alan Logan

In Praise of Walking – Shane O'Mara



The Biophilia Effect – Clemens Arvay

Step outdoors: Taking coaching into nature – podcast series*

The Coaches Handbook – Jonathan Passmore**

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Contact



Website

www.alexburnconsulting.com

Email

enquiries@alexburnconsulting.com

LinkedIn

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/alexandraburn/>

