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Elena Kopel (she/her) is a compassion focused, anti-oppression, nature-based therapist. She specializes in working with LGBTQIA2S+ children, teens, and adults, survivors of the "Troubled Teen Industry", and those with religious trauma. She graduated with her Masters in Nature Based Counseling in 2023 and has been working in private practice since. Her capstone research project, "Redefining the Future of Wilderness Therapy: Addressing Accessibility and Nature-Based Traumas," asked nature-based therapists to question their role in perpetuating harmful wilderness programs and offered alternative options for treatment. She has now turned her sights on creating safe, healing therapeutic spaces for those who have been harmed in the name of therapy in the past. Elena is currently enrolled in a year-long course to become a Certified Religious Trauma and Cult Abuse therapist. She is a proud member of the LGBTQIA2S+ community and has served as a leadership member of a queer summer camp for the last decade.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Alright, we have Elena Kopel here, and we're going to be talking about nature-based interventions. So.

Allison Puryear (she/her): First, Elena, will you kind of tell us what got you interested in... Nature-based work?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Absolutely. So...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I was... I was a camp counselor at the summer camp that I went to as a teenager, and at the time, I was an acting major. Shout out to all the former theater kids, and...

Allison Puryear (she/her): And I had known for a while that that.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): wasn't really jiving. It was what I had done my whole life, and then I go and I work at this summer camp, and

Elena Kopel (She/Her): if you talk to any summer camp person, they'll probably tell you, life-changing, best thing ever, all of those things were true for me, and I did what is now a very famous Google search in my, you know, my lore, which is how to be a camp counselor as a career.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I found nature-based therapy, and I was like, oh.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Okay, I could do that. And so, I end up going to graduate school for nature-based therapy, and

Elena Kopel (She/Her): really what kind of got me involved in this work was I experienced what I consider a trauma while backpacking on the Appalachian Trail. And I didn't realize it immediately, but I started to notice

Elena Kopel (She/Her): my relationship with nature changed, and my safety in nature changed. And that was really hard. That was very confusing for me, as someone who loved the outdoors, to feel that rupture. And so...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I just felt, kind of, like, from a selfish desire, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I can't be the only one who now has a challenging relationship with the outdoors, or feels like I can't access the space that was so dear to me. And that just... that kind of started all of this, so...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Amazing. And I think about when most people think about nature.

Allison Puryear (she/her): therapy, or any sort of, like, using nature at all in therapy. Most people imagine, well, you've got to be on a bunch of land, and you've got to have, like, the river right there, or...

Allison Puryear (she/her): You gotta be in the woods somewhere. Can we talk about ways that we can bring in and, like, incorporate nature-based interventions into

Allison Puryear (she/her): more typical... spaces.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Absolutely, and I'm glad we're touching on this right at the beginning, because I think this is something that is so important to everything we'll talk about today, which is, I remember the first day of my graduate school program in nature-based therapy, we did this exercise that essentially defined what nature is.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I remember sitting there, like, this is kind of limited, you know? It was... like you said, it was in the backcountry, an hour away from medical care, all of these factors, which I can understand.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): those certain aspects of, you know, a wilderness trip and things like that. However.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): that is not all that nature is. Right. And so I think something that I've really had to kind of

Elena Kopel (She/Her): build into my practice, and I'm excited to share and talk about, is that

Elena Kopel (She/Her): the definition of nature that so many of us carry is very, very limited. And so, when we talk about bringing nature-based therapy or nature-based techniques into any setting, it really is, I think, far more simple than people let

Elena Kopel (She/Her): ourselves think it is. So, for example.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): You know, there are studies that show, even if you have a picture of a forest in your office that has no windows, or you're playing, you know, your sound machine has, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): A rain shower. Or ocean noises.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): That has a benefit. That improves focus, that improves mood and concentration. That's all there. And so...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah, so that's one way, just kind of bringing in nature into your space. Potted plants. I have had just

Elena Kopel (She/Her): bins of soil before for kid clients to play in. Metaphor, oh my gosh, the nature metaphors write themselves, planting seeds, you know, gardening, all of that.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Hmm?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah, it's... it really is abundant, and I think the piece of just challenging, because a lot of people who live in a big city, or who maybe don't have a background in

Elena Kopel (She/Her): feeling outdoorsy, feel like, oh, well, no, I'm not a nature-y person, I can't access nature, and even just challenging that with, no, actually, just by being a person, you are outdoorsy, and we can access and build connection with nature.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): anywhere. So I think that challenging piece is... is big as well.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah, so you don't even necessarily have to be going to your local park, though you can. It can be in office.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yep.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah. Absolutely. And I'm thinking, too, I mean, to that end, then, it could be if you're doing virtual therapy, and your client... you and your client are both sitting outside somewhere, like, in different...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Absolutely. I've done that. You know, that's like, let's just get on the phone and let's sit outside. What do we see around us?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): what can we hear? You know, sometimes if you're on video, like, yeah, let's show each other what's around us. I have, you know, some card decks right here. I love my card decks. But things, like, that have... each of these is, like, an animal and a plant that has some theme that both that animal and plant represent. Those are ways you can.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Bring it into the office.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): So... There's so many ways.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah, I'm thinking... I was doing a phone session with a client once, and we would both take walks, and we were... she was in a different city, so we were taking walks, and all of a sudden, I hear this man being like, hey ma'am?

Allison Puryear (she/her): Ma'am, you might want to come up here! And I look over, and I am the width of a Honda Accord away from a brown bear, or a black bear.

Allison Puryear (she/her): It was literally, like, I was on the sidewalk, it was right on the other side, so I was like, gonna... I'm gonna have to let you go, and I'll call you right back. And then went on some stranger's porch until the bear ambled away. But that was some real nature therapy, I wasn't planning.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): There it is!

Allison Puryear (she/her): Exactly.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Sometimes it makes itself known whether we're planning it or not. Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Absolutely.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): So...

Allison Puryear (she/her): I think, too, about how, you mentioned, like, everybody's outdoorsy. Like, you're a human being, so you're outdoorsy.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And the importance of choice.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And how choice is so infused with being trauma-informed and...

Allison Puryear (she/her): letting our clients lead from a space of safety. How do you use trauma-informed principles, in nature-based work?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah, so I think, first and foremost.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): we have to, again, challenge our understanding of a human's relationship to nature. Something that... I've been a part of the, you know, outdoor industry for many years, through summer camps, being a nature-based counselor, rock climbing, and I've noticed this mentality

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Which is that, like, everyone loves nature. Nature's great for everybody, and everyone has access, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I, I do believe, I'm not saying that's not true, I do believe that

Elena Kopel (She/Her): by being a human being, we are inherently... we have a tie and a connection to the outdoors. I do think that's true. However, I think statements like that don't take into consideration all the ways that nature has been used to harm people.

Allison Puryear (she/her): That...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Has caused trauma, or even...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): or maybe we just had an accident. I almost had to get airlifted off a mountain once because I broke an ankle. You know, things happen in nature, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): those kinds of statements, I think, sometimes don't take into consideration that...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Nature can be scary, and has been used to harm. And so I think, first and foremost, when we're working with our clients, I ask in my intake.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): what's your relationship with nature? Do you have a relationship with nature? Let's talk about that, because I think

Elena Kopel (She/Her): we can't just assume that someone... like, if I were to just throw out, oh yeah, like, start going on walks, or, you know, try to get near a body of water, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I don't know a client's history with those things, and if I'm just throwing out nature-based suggestions, that actually could, one, not feel accessible at all, or could be touching on

Elena Kopel (She/Her): A generational trauma, or something that that client holds as

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Not being a safe and accessible means for them.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): So, I think just, first and foremost, talking to your clients about their relationship with nature as if it's

Elena Kopel (She/Her): another... it is a relationship in their life, just like we would gather information about, you know, relationship with parents or siblings. So I think that is a very important piece to this before we just jump in and assume, oh, this is great for everybody.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Right. I'm curious, do most of your clients find you because you're nature-based, or do they find you because of your niche, and nature-based is, like, a part of how you're working with them?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It's been a little all over the place, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I would say, for the most part, so I work with survivors of the troubled teen industry, which, you know, that part of that is, like, abusive wilderness therapy programs, and so it ends up kind of being this

Elena Kopel (She/Her): kind of sub-layer, but I would say that

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I can talk about nature with all of my clients, and they'll have something to say, because again, like, whether it's just like, oh yeah, I like doing XYZ, or no, I've never felt like I could step into those spaces.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): But, yeah, I think for the most part, people find me through that, and I'm excited to build more of this,

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I'd love to work with people who have had harmful experiences in nature, so I'm working on building that.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah, yeah. When I think about even just...

Allison Puryear (she/her): culturally in different areas, like, I'm in Asheville, North Carolina, lived in Seattle, like, there, you know, have friends in Denver, like, there are these areas that are very much, like, it's assumed that you've got a mountain bike somewhere, that you're hiking every weekend.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And for those people who are not feeling... like, they just don't consider themselves outdoorsy, there can be some kind of shame with being an indoor kid.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Absolutely.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Then that becomes an identity, and they don't have any real interest in exploring their relationship with nature.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Is that.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): That's a thing that...

Allison Puryear (she/her): you, like...

Allison Puryear (she/her): talk to people about, and how do you... I mean, maybe it's probably not a goal of yours, because we don't come into our relationships with clients with goals, but is that...

Allison Puryear (she/her): Is that on the back burner of any nature therapist's mind, of, like, how do we incorporate healthy experience with nature for everybody?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Absolutely. I think about that all the time. I live in Denver.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah, yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I moved to Boulder, I moved to Colorado in my mid-20s, never skied before. I was a backpacker, but, you know.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): that was my main outdoor thing, and I definitely noticed very quickly this

Elena Kopel (She/Her): almost like... I call it, like, outdoor elitism. The idea that there is...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I think that's changing. However, I think for a really long time, and we can get into how it's... this was a very intentional, you know, thing to happen, but for a long time, the idea of an outdoorsy person was a white.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Cisgendered, able-bodied man that has a lot of money.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And... I think most of us have, you know, been to the store and seen the outdoor magazines, and

Elena Kopel (She/Her): For a long time, none of us... not... excuse me... for a long time, a lot of us would not have looked at those magazines and seen ourselves reflected as someone who could step into those spaces.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And, oh my gosh, so, I'll just... yeah, I...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): My now-husband took me skiing for the first time as a date.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Oh my... it's a culture shock! I felt... I felt embarrassed that I was 25 and, you know, on the bunny slope, and with all the, like, 2-year-olds who are learning to ski in Colorado, and yeah, I felt a barrier, and again, like, I'm...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I'm someone who has felt like I could step into outdoor spaces, and so I'm constantly thinking about what are the barriers in place

Elena Kopel (She/Her): for people feeling like they can step into outdoor spaces. And again, I do believe that any of us can just have a relationship with nature, however.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Especially if you're trying to get into a certain activity, That can be a huge...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): access point, you know? The gear. You have to buy or rent all the gear. Getting to the location, that requires some kind of transportation. Lessons. And then also, there's the piece of, like, are there people who

Elena Kopel (She/Her): will be there to greet me, people that look like me, people who have similar experiences to me. All of these factors

Elena Kopel (She/Her): likely impact people's decisions when they ask themselves, can I do that thing? Can I step into that space?

Allison Puryear (she/her): So I think about that a lot, and I would hope that anyone who's a nature-based therapist or.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): wants to incorporate these techniques can start from a point of knowing, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): This is... this is something we should be willing to contend with and talk to our clients about, because just like so many systems in our world, there is a little bit of a...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): a perceived hierarchy of who can access these spaces, and I wanna...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I want to get rid of that.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah, absolutely.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah, it's a perceived hierarchy, but it's also, like, it is intimidating, like you said.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Anything?

Allison Puryear (she/her): And you don't want to

be the only person with a bunch of 2-year-olds, like, the only adult.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Right.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And, yeah, I mean, I imagine, like, I don't want to, like, I wouldn't want to be the only Black man in a space, or the only Asian woman. I wouldn't want to be the only of anything.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Absolutely.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And... If that's how the culture is currently set up.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Or has historically been set up.

Allison Puryear (she/her): you know, why put myself in yet another uncomfortable position if I'm not even sure it's gonna be worth it?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): 100%. Absolutely. I remember reading this article in grad school, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I just remember think... anyway, it was basically this...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): study about how they were tracking the demographics of people who attended national parks over a series of time, and it was this article saying, like, huh.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Weird! How come Black people aren't going to national parks?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Weird! Why is that happening? And I'm reading this in my graduate-level education, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Are we not gonna talk about...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): why that is. We're just gonna say, that's so weird. No, it's not. It was intentional.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Super quick TED talk-y. The first... the first park, first official park in the United States was actually Central Park.

Allison Puryear (she/her): In New York City.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And... it was located where Seneca Village was, which was a primarily Black neighborhood that gave particularly Black men

Elena Kopel (She/Her): an opportunity to buy land. It was one of the only areas in New York City where that was possible.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): They destroyed Seneca Village.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): to build Central Park, and relocated all of those people. And at that time, by removing the ownership of the homes for those

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Black men, they lost their right to vote.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And you had to own property at that time to vote. So, they take away their right to vote, they displace them to a different part of the city.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And really build Central Park as this, like, affluent white people recreation area.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): So, our park system... Is really... has this foundation of exclusion, of erasure.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And... It's my Roman Empire, I think about it all the time

Elena Kopel (She/Her): is that that history is there. And so when we see these stats of, oh, why aren't Black people or BIPOC folk visiting national parks, it's like, we...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): We did that. We have to... that's not just something that naturally happened.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And so what do we do to make it better? How do we make the...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Wow.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Outdoor spaces more inclusive.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): So, luckily, there's lots of ways, and I said earlier, I think I'm seeing a lot of change, and so, first and foremost, I want to shout out, there's so many amazing affinity groups for people. I'm thinking of Hike Clerb, Indigenous Women Hike.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Black Packers, there's so many amazing organizations and groups that are creating

Elena Kopel (She/Her): access spaces. So it just, again, it just removes those barriers of people saying on an individual level, I can't do that, I can't go to that park, I can't try that activity. And it just says, no, we'll provide the gear, come with us as a group, we'll do this together. And so I...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I love those groups and organizations, and I encourage anyone who's, you know, watching this, find the ones in your area. Find what organizations are doing amazing work already, and maybe partner with them. I think that's a huge thing, especially, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Partnering with local gear shops to

Elena Kopel (She/Her): provide... see if they want to, like, donate some gear, so that if you are a therapist that wants to start including nature-based work, so instead of saying, like, oh, I think it would be really cool if we did, you know, a rock climbing session together.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And putting that on the client to kind of figure out all those things. It's like, well, actually, I have a harness for you, I have shoe rentals for you, and I got us access to a gym for the day. So, just making sure that

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Again, asking yourself, what are the barriers for entry, and how can we, behind the scenes, be removing them.

Allison Puryear (she/her): As best we can.

Allison Puryear (she/her): It's funny, because as you give that example, I'm like, yeah, yeah, and then I'm like, and then how does our field hold us back from being able to do that in some ways, of like, well, if you've got this agreement, then they're gonna know you're with a client, and so there goes HIPAA out the door. I mean, it's just, like, it gets complicated in ways.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Sure.

Allison Puryear (she/her): like... sometimes can stymie our creativity in figuring things out. Like, it just takes more creativity.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It does! It absolutely does, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I... I found that to be, like, an exciting challenge. I find it to be like, okay, well, let me see how I can do that. And... and I have come up against that before. I used to do rock climbing therapy more regularly, and yeah, like, what do you say, to your client? What do you say to the people at the gym?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): that's actually a really excellent point when doing nature-based work is, you know, I always talk to my clients about, like, if we're going on a trail, or if we're going to a park.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Let's have a conversation about, you know, we're not in an office with a sound machine, so how are we going to make sure that the client feels as safe and held as possible?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): in those spaces, and I really just try to return it to the client as much as I can.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And giving them that autonomy. And that comes with

Elena Kopel (She/Her): like you said, like, challenge by choice, and what feels safe? What doesn't feel safe? What do you want to be able to access in the first place? Oh, you don't have a desire to, like, climb a 14er? Okay, but you want to feel comfortable, like, birdwatching in your park? Okay, let's talk about that.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): While also, of course, always addressing

Elena Kopel (She/Her): The harm that has been caused, And...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): where we have been, because that's real. We have, like, again, so much of the outdoor industry is based in

Elena Kopel (She/Her): appropriation and exclusion. I work in the summer camp world. Basically, American summer camps are...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): founded on this idea of Indigenous appropriation, and so...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I think a big part of being a nature-based clinician is also coming to terms with, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): We have to recognize the harm that's been caused.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And that, I think, for many clients, is crucial to be able to even move into those spaces in a semblance of a safe way.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah, absolutely.

Allison Puryear (she/her): So... we've talked about summer camp. Like, I'm a summer camp mom.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Love it. And...

Allison Puryear (she/her): it's amazing what summer camp does for my kids, especially my older daughter, who comes back so much more independent, which is something she struggles with during the year. And then, it's like she... she matures an extra year, somehow, during the summer, when she's been...

Allison Puryear (she/her): more independent. Maybe because of some overprotective parenting on my part, I don't know, I really try not to be a helicopter or a snowplow parent.

Allison Puryear (she/her): But... I do wonder, like, the impact of... My generation's way of parenting.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And...

Allison Puryear (she/her): just thinking about how I grew up, like, running through the neighborhoods, and like, you know, there's this weird bog that we used to hang out at. We called it the creek. There was not really a creek, it was just this weird bog that...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): I don't know, and we, like, stole tools and, like, made a tree house. You know, like, we were, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Just a little.

Allison Puryear (she/her): feral children.

Allison Puryear (she/her): living this feral children 1980s life. It was great. And, like, my kids don't get that. They're allowed to walk to the park near our house, but they, you know...

Allison Puryear (she/her): Sit there... obediently.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): You know, they're not... ransacking somebody's parents' garage, you know? They don't have that...

Allison Puryear (she/her): Creative spark to make this.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Mmm.

Allison Puryear (she/her): this wild outdoor space more of their own. Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): So, yeah, I'm just curious, like, how do you, as...

Allison Puryear (she/her): a therapist who works in this space, working with teenagers, and also working with adults who maybe didn't have that feral childhood. Just talk to me about all of that.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah, whew, I mean...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): again, another thing I think about a lot, my mom and my aunt have such amazing stories of growing up in rural Pennsylvania, just befriending, like, their favorite boulder, or this tree that they would go and visit, and

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I think for a variety of reasons, we've seen a decline in

Elena Kopel (She/Her): kids feeling... or maybe even parents feeling like kids can do that in a safe way. And understandable reasons, right? I mean, we know a lot more than we once did, and we want to keep our kiddos safe, and

Elena Kopel (She/Her): So... And I think there has to be this balance, and... So, something that...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): We've seen, kind of, again, in the outdoor industry world, is

Elena Kopel (She/Her): there has been a decrease in kids feeling like they can interact with the environment. And I'm forgetting all the details, but I think it had to do with, like, a study related to Leave No Trace, and teaching kids Leave No Trace principles.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And actually seeing kids, like, oh.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): wait, I can cause harm, I could hurt the environment if I do this, maybe I just shouldn't do it.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And again, I'm not dissing Leave No Trace.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Absolutely leave it better than we found it. And...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And, whoa, we don't... we don't want that. We don't want kids feeling so afraid that they're gonna hurt the world around them, you know, kids with their big, compassionate hearts, like...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Of course!

Elena Kopel (She/Her): we... they don't want to harm the environment. But we can't equate building relationship and interacting with the world around us with

Elena Kopel (She/Her): oh, I'm, I'm gonna cause it harm. Because it's...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I speak a lot to...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): our relationship with nature is a relationship. That is something that is

Elena Kopel (She/Her): huge to my practice, but it's also not an original concept. You know, I...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I really... I turned to Indigenous teachers a lot, and... about how... how did people used to, or and still do, build relationship, beautiful, symbiotic relationship with the world around them? And it is. It is a relationship.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And... So, how... I think the question becomes, how do we give our kids the tools

Elena Kopel (She/Her): To say, okay, yeah, I... if I'm holding this huge stick.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): yeah, and I'm willy-nilly just running around with it, maybe I'm gonna knock into my sister, or maybe I'm gonna fall over. That's true. And instead of saying, I'm big on, like, just shifting our language. I used to work at a nature-based preschool, so I got to practice this a lot.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Instead of saying, like, no, be careful, you can't run with that big stick.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Instead, I can say, oh, hey, I see you have that big stick. Big sticks need big space. Let's find a space.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Mmm.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): You can use that.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Or... again, I go a lot to the be careful.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Instead of, be careful.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Do you have a plan for that? I see you're climbing on those rocks, do you feel stable?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Giving kids the tools to check in with their... themselves, check in with their body to say, do I feel okay right now? Does this feel like a fun and safe interaction with the world around me?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I think what's most crucial, and again, that

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I've seen a shift of, just in my lifetime, and in my studies of the last few decades, is

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I think a big increase in electronics has, you know, is... Part of this...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): But like I said, I listen to my mom talk, and she talks about this favorite boulder she had. And, like, from childhood through high school, she would go to this same boulder and sit, and read and journal. And, like, this boulder became her friend. And...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): One of my favorite memories from the nature-based preschool is one of our rowdy little kids is getting really worked up, having a lot of big feelings.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I watched him just kind of, like, get frustrated, and he went, and he sat by a tree.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And he just, like... Was working through his emotions, like, with his tree buddy.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And that was so...

Allison Puryear (she/her): Powerful to see, because a 3-year-old can get it.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): We all can get it.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And, yeah, so I'm a little all over the place, but I think...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): One of the biggest things parents these days can do

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Is, one, challenge their own, you know, fears.

Allison Puryear (she/her): What... because that's important, like, why do I feel nervous about this? What...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): what is coming up for me that I want to protect my child from?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And then bring in this... this relationship, and how can I incorporate nature into my kid's life in a way that is going to be a lasting, sustainable relationship?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And give them the tools to interact in a way that, yeah, that is healthy.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Give them the tools to... I think modeling consent in nature is a huge thing. So, yeah, like, tell them how to interact. Okay, you want to use some leaves for a craft? Okay, let's see if we can find some leaves that have already fallen on the ground, instead of going and picking them off the tree.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): These are all ways that we can, instead of saying, no, don't do that.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Right.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Here's how to do it.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Well, I think about, too, like.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Parental concern, like, the be careful...

Allison Puryear (she/her): urge, which I totally have, and...

Allison Puryear (she/her): The need for risk-taking in kids in order to build confidence, in order to, like, learn limits.

Allison Puryear (she/her): It's... they're at odds with each other.

Allison Puryear (she/her): In such a striking way, that...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): I... Yeah, when you were talking about the alternatives to be careful, I was like.

Allison Puryear (she/her): I didn't know that. I had a lot of be careful as my kids were... I mean, they're still fairly young, I don't say it as much now, but when they were smaller.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And I do see how, as a 9-year-old and a 12-year-old, they are more cautious than they need to be. They can trust their bodies more. They can trust that tree. Like, when we had Hurricane Helene and, like...

Allison Puryear (she/her): I mean, we had more tree than road on our street. It was, like, I think we had over 100 trees come down in our... on our street.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Wow.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Watching the kids get out and play. This was not safe, right? Like, we kept them away from the ones with wires in them and stuff like that.

Allison Puryear (she/her): But, like, these trees weren't super stable, but I think all the parents were so, like...

Allison Puryear (she/her): just exhausted, that we didn't have our normal level of, like, over-functioning.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Sure.

Allison Puryear (she/her): going on. We're like, well, yeah, you can play on that one while we chainsaw this one, you know? In a way that I really think was

Allison Puryear (she/her): good for them. Like, they were...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): exploring,

like, I saw my childhood in all these neighborhood kids teetering on this

Allison Puryear (she/her): trunk that could have just fallen over and squished them, you know? And I think that's the most free I've seen these kids.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Nice.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And it's because we were all just so exhausted and grieving and freaked out that we couldn't over-parent.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I think that just so beautifully speaks to... The spirit of children.

Allison Puryear (she/her): I think, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): In so many ways, we know that children are more in tune with themselves, and

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Kids are authentically themselves before they're taught all this societal Yes!

Elena Kopel (She/Her): about how they should be, and how they should show up, and I just think that's such

Elena Kopel (She/Her): A beautiful example of, like, when we just let kids

Elena Kopel (She/Her): be kids, they have this innate curiosity, and this wonder, and this connection to the world around them.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): that... and I think that's something that is very much taught, is this idea that humans are here and nature is this other thing.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And we're not a part of it.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And kids don't feel that way. Kids know they're a part of nature. They want to jump in the mud puddles, they want to climb the trees, they want to pull the worms out of the ground. They just...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): they feel it, and so I often think about, okay, how as adults in their life can we foster that and give them the tools to hopefully not lose that? I... I had to reteach myself a lot, and it's a work in progress, but that natural childlike wonder

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Of just, like, oh, like, I just feel like I want to, like, run right now, or, like, I'm just gonna sit by this flower for a bit. These are things that I think a lot of us adults lose, and I think that's something I love to work with my adult clients on, is...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): okay, we never had to lose this, and a lot of us maybe got lost along the way. Let's find that spark again, because it is a relationship, and it is a connection that can bring so much meaning.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): to everybody!

Allison Puryear (she/her): What... what do you think makes us lose it? What happens?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I think a lot of reasons. One is that I think a lot of us

Elena Kopel (She/Her): want to be very cautious and careful. A lot of us build that messaging in of.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I want to be safe, I don't...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Want to step outside of what can keep me safe and contained.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I do think a lot of it is this piece of...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I'm not a part of nature.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Especially as we get swept up in working and going to school, and all these things that...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): a big part of our culture. We don't... Continue that tie, which...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): there are ways that nature and being... having a close relationship with the world around us can just carry us through everything in our life, but I think

Elena Kopel (She/Her): it's just not fostered. I mean, I think schools are getting better, but I remember in elementary school, like, how often we would say, can we have class outside? Can we have class outside? Like, kids, we want it!

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And it's just not something, I think, right now, that is a big part of our culture, is... Building...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Relationship with nature, just into the everyday life.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And so I think...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): that's a big piece of that. And again, going back to decolonization and all of these things from the very...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Foundation of our country is this separation, this us versus them.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And nature has become this other thing.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I think the more that we remind ourselves it's not this other thing, it's actually something that we all have this innate connection to, that we can just say, I want to foster this.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And foster it just like you would any other relationship.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It has the potential to, again, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): carry us through so many challenging times in our lives, and I do think a disconnection to the world around us is a big part of a lot of what we're seeing happening around the world right now.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): I think about COVID, and how outdoors became the safe space to, you know, be in community.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yep.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And how, like, my kid's school went back...

Allison Puryear (she/her): in August of 2020, which was.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Wow.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah, pretty early. It was surprising.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah, it's a private.

Allison Puryear (she/her): at school, and they have... they're on... the campus has a lot of land. So they did a lot of classes outdoors, every lunch was outdoors. If it was raining, okay?

Allison Puryear (she/her): You know, like, it was very, like, this is how we're gonna do education for the time being, in a way that... I mean, I don't know that my kids had ever spent that much time outside as they did that year.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And... Yes.

Allison Puryear (she/her): I kind of am sad that they... that that decreased instead of stayed the same or increased.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I think... I think lockdowns are such... A potent example of...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): that we still have that tie to the world around us. I think even those of us who would consider ourselves, like, inside people, or, you know.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It's like, when that was taken away. When it was like, no, stay inside.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I think a lot of us were, like...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): No. Obviously, there was so much happening for all of us.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): But we saw a huge increase in people going outside, going to trails, visiting parks. It actually created this huge, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Infrastructure challenge, where trails weren't being maintained, and, like, facilities, because there was such a huge influx of people wanting to be outside.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And... What a testament to... Again, that just, like, innate...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): drive we have. It's like, no, I...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I need to go. I... I...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I went and backpacked on the Appalachian Trail for a couple months in 2020, so I.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I did it too.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And... I think that's something that I wish...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Was more of a... a lep.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It's hard to say, you know, anything we want to be a lasting from the pandemic, but...

Allison Puryear (she/her): Right.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): it's right there. Like, yeah, kids were spending more out time.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): excuse me, kids were spending more time outside.

Allison Puryear (she/her): All of us were, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah, I... I would be so curious to, like... I think we're gonna be, you know.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): learning so much for many decades to come about that time and the lasting impact, but I would love to see some studies in a decade of

Elena Kopel (She/Her): The connection between

Elena Kopel (She/Her): those who spent more time outside, and, like, what did that have to do for their mental health, their... their physical health, all of that. I'm... I'm curious to see how that...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): That pans out.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah. I think, too, about the pool, like, I'm sure that...

Allison Puryear (she/her): Colorado got it also, but here in Asheville, because we have so many beautiful trails, and, you know, it's...

Allison Puryear (she/her): It's a gorgeous area to be outdoors.

Allison Puryear (she/her): we had so many people from cities moving here, they were able to work remotely, and it's like, there was this innate sense of, like, well, if I can live anywhere, I want to live somewhere where I can be outside and it's beautiful.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And I think, you know, while that did make our real estate market very interesting, it, like, you know, I love that people were able to then fulfill their needs.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Hmm.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And I'm glad they brought their jobs with them, because there aren't any here. You've got to bring your own job to Asheville.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yep. Yep.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I... and again, I think about the people also, like, I... my... so the summer camp I've worked at forever.

Allison Puryear (she/her): They... we were obviously closed in 2020, and a group of friends just, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): rented it. They were like, we don't want to live in the city, so we're just gonna go and rent a summer camp, and again, it just shows that

Elena Kopel (She/Her): people want this, and it also makes me think about the people who, like, couldn't relocate, people who are maybe in big cities, and what was that like, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I also think... so I think a lot about, again, like, what... What historic or...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): things that have happened in our culture and very, like, different societies that have created that barrier to the outdoors, and I wonder, I imagine there must be people who

Elena Kopel (She/Her): didn't think the outdoors were a haven during that time, because outdoors, that's where... that's where COVID is, right? I have to go to the grocery store, I have to go on the subway, and so there's that piece, too, of, I wonder how many people now

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Feel that, like, wait, actually, the outdoors is where the danger is.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And what do we do with that? And again, there's just that...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I think this is just such a big part of it. There's gonna be people who know they can go and find those outdoor spaces, and that is a haven, and, you know, that's wonderful in one way. And then also, how do we think of the people who didn't have that experience? And now, maybe.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Have a very opposite feeling about the outdoors.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): It's interesting, yeah, just all the different cultural factors that come together and move apart, and come together, like, it's just...

Allison Puryear (she/her): it's very interesting how... I just said, I don't know that I've ever really considered... like, I have a relationship with nature until this conversation.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah. I do. And it's complex. Like you said, you know, like, it's not just, like, nature's good.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Like, I like nature under these circumstances. That's when I feel safe. This is when I feel comfortable. This is when I feel challenged in a good way.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Absolutely, and... that's something that, I will say, I brought...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): it was a frustration point for me when I was in graduate school, is...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I love my cohort, you know, I...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I have a lot of, like, very traditionally outdoorsy people in my life, and I think

Elena Kopel (She/Her): something I saw was this mentality around, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): we can conquer nature. It's like, well, no!

Elena Kopel (She/Her): No!

Allison Puryear (she/her): That's kind of not the point.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Not the point. One, not the point. Two, Mother Nature is in control here.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I... yeah, I remember there was this time in my grad school where there was a huge blizzard, and because we were a nature-based cohort.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): No one wanted to be on Zoom. We're like, let's get to class in person.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It's like, what?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): there's a snow... there's a blizzard happening! Why do... why are we, the nature-based therapists in training, saying, oh.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): let's just risk our safety. Like, someone tried to get to class and slid down a hill, and to me, it just... like, that's not worth it. That goes against what at least I'm trying to instill in my clients. This is... nature is not something to be conquered, it is not something that

Elena Kopel (She/Her): for us to, you know, push through, because that's when the harmful experiences happen. I have a friend who

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It might seem small, but I have a friend who religiously carries a water bottle with them everywhere they go, because they went on a hike, like, 4 years ago, and ran out of water.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It was scary. They... Felt very uncomfortable in their body, and now.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Almost to an obsessive point, carry a water bottle with them everywhere they go, because, yeah, running out of water on a long hike

Elena Kopel (She/Her): That can be scary. That has been harmful to people before. So...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah, and it is a relationship, just like...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Just like all the others, and this was a big point of my capstone research, is if

Elena Kopel (She/Her): A big part of nature-based therapy is the understanding that we can build a relationship to nature. And if that is true.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Then, just like any other relationship, there can be rupture and repair.

Allison Puryear (she/her): It's not...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): We can't excuse our relationship from nature from having conflict, from having moments of, oh, maybe I need to step back and reevaluate this relationship.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): So that's something I really try to talk about with other clinicians or just people in the outdoor world, is that, yeah, like, nature can be scary. Nature can be amazing and beautiful and

Elena Kopel (She/Her): like, life-changing, and it can be scary and harmful. So how do we balance those things and know that that's a part of... that's a part of the relationship?

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): It's interesting, I just... you're talking about the water bottle made me realize I'm so annoying.

Allison Puryear (she/her): about any new trail I go on, I'm like, well, is it out and back?

Allison Puryear (she/her): Because I once got lost for 7 hours on a hike without any water, because it was going to be a quick before-dinner, like, 20-30 minutes, that I thought was just gonna take me right back to where I needed to be, but wasn't out and back that led to me, like, needing to hitchhike back to town, like, to do all sorts of things to get back home, and I was so dehydrated and.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It's kind of...

Allison Puryear (she/her): You can't keep anything down for days.

Allison Puryear (she/her): That, like... I realize now, like, I'm... that's always the first question I ask, not...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): is there, like, are we summiting something? Is there a beautiful view? It's always like, is it an out and back? I just need to know, on the front end.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Well, that's so understandable!

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Because how do we keep ourselves safe in these environments?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It's... We have to think about those things.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And... Huh.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It makes me sad when I hear people just kind of diminishing.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): relationship with nature, that it is just this, like, thing we can just jump into, and... it's like, but let's... let's...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): be aware that, yeah, running out of water. I broke an ankle hiking once.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Or just people...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I have a friend who's a rock climber and was on a trip where someone died. It's... these things happen.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And we have to... you know, I'm not trying to be all doom and gloom when working with clients, and I want to equip my clients with the tools to feel safe

Elena Kopel (She/Her): in these situations. And I think that base level of safety.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): builds the confidence to then explore that relationship with nature. Going back to the example with kids, if you give kids the tools to check in and say, oh, I'm actually, like, kind of wobbly on this rock I'm jumping on.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): They will then feel more confident to

Elena Kopel (She/Her): to go across the creek, because they know, oh, I can check in with myself, I have the tools.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): To know, oh, can I keep going? Should I go back? Should I find an alternate route?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Because without that base understanding of autonomy and

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Checking in with yourself, that's where that disconnect is fostered.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And that's where we see accidents happen, that's where we see harm happen.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Ow.

Allison Puryear (she/her): So, we've talked a lot about, like, just the relationship of human beings and nature.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Let's bring this to therapy specifically.

Allison Puryear (she/her): How do we maybe adapt nature-based approaches to...

Allison Puryear (she/her): Meet the needs of children or adults with

Allison Puryear (she/her): Maybe some psych concerns, like, who is this good for? Who is this not good for? Is there a line at all? How do we use nature to truly help our clients?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I'm biased, so I think

Elena Kopel (She/Her): that nature-based therapy can be for everyone, because again, human beings are nature. We have that connection.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I think what sets nature-based techniques apart from maybe, like, an art therapy or music therapy, which is, again, all beautiful and amazing techniques. Connection to nature, I don't think, is something that any of us have to learn. It's just something we have.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): So then the question for me becomes, what is going to be meaningful and helpful for my client? What are they working on that incorporating relationship to nature or bringing that into sessions, how is that going to benefit them?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And really, just, again, giving them as much autonomy. I try to do that always with my clients, but giving them as much choice as possible. What's gonna feel good? What's gonna add to your life?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And also just talking about, like, you know, there's so many ways that when you... once you start thinking about it, it's everywhere. Or maybe that's just, again, my Roman Empire kind of thing.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): But, like, things like bilateral stimulation.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Started in a park. Started by, you know.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Someone going on a walk in a park and noticing, like, oh.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Interesting. And so, there already are so many techniques that we can just kind of, like, oop, let's do this, like, yes, this is great, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): We can also go for a walk outside and build that connection. I think of another quick example.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): But going back to, like, working with children and letting them lead.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I think, especially with young kids or teenagers, that connection is already there. My first year working at

Elena Kopel (She/Her): this... my summer camp, it was the evening campfire, and the camper was taking fistfuls of pebbles and chucking them into the campfire. And many counselors, like, went over and, like, tried to redirect him, say, no, we can't do that, that's disruptive. Kept doing it. He kept throwing the handfuls of rocks.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I'll never forget this, like, this landed with me, and then one other counselor just goes and sits next to him.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And then just picks up one pebble, and just kind of gently tosses it.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And the kid followed suit.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And was able to just, like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Okay, yeah, we can do this. Less disruptive.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Got his need met.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And that creativity of, okay, This kid is not acting out, or...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): You know, just to do it. It's not...

Allison Puryear (she/her): Right.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): very rarely are kids just like, I want to be disruptive, to be disruptive. There's something... there's a need that needs to be met, and I think that was just such a potent example of, okay, how can I meet this kid?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): With this... whether it's a tactile experience, or, you know, just needing, like, a fidget of some kind, and that counselor just was so beautifully able to meet them.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And I try to bring that into my work.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Of, what are you craving? What are you... what are you wanting? Something I'll do is... again, I always will talk to my clients about, what's your relationship to nature? Do you have... do you feel like you have one? Is that something you're wanting?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): So I will always have, like... like I mentioned, in the past, I've had just, like, bins of soil.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I've had potted plants, I have windows in my office, and I will just make sure I'm incorporating my therapy-based techniques in a way that ties in something having to do with nature, with, with using the plants.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I just have found that it's a very seamless integration of building in nature-based techniques, and

Elena Kopel (She/Her): They're highly adaptable.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): again, I think often people will be like, well, I can't do that thing, or I don't have the body to do that thing, or no one, like, no one in my family does that. It's like, well, do you want to do that? What about that feels enticing to you? What...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): What feels good about that, and how can we slowly Build to get there.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah, I think that...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): there's so many different ways to adapt nature-based techniques when, again, going back to what I said before of just, like, checking our own expectations of, oh, is that nature-based therapy? I've heard people say, like, oh, having a plant in your office, that's not nature-based therapy. Why?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Why can't that be? If I have a client who

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I had a young client who got excited every week to come and, like, spritz my plants.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): In the office, and, like, see... and, like, that was not someone that came in wanting nature-based therapy. It was just something that we started doing.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And it was exciting for them to come back, like, oh, look at this new root!

Elena Kopel (She/Her): that's growing, and I think when you offer clients opportunity for these things, you'll just see where they naturally gravitate towards, and say, okay, let's go more into that, let's build on that.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): It's fun to think about how...

Allison Puryear (she/her): It doesn't have to be a whole production, clinically.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): No. No.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It doesn't, and there's just so many ways you can pull from, I...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I just had an amazing, few sessions with a client where we were using herbalism

Elena Kopel (She/Her): To help her understand her heritage.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I... I'm a quarter Puerto Rican, I got to go to Puerto Rico for the first time earlier this summer, and I... while I was there, I was able to buy

Elena Kopel (She/Her): like, a book of traditional Puerto Rican herbalism recipes, and how Indigenous Puerto Ricans.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Use plants in nature, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I think that's a really beautiful piece of, okay, that's a link we can do. Or, I work with a lot of queer clients.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Oh my gosh!

Elena Kopel (She/Her): So, I'm working with a teenager that's like, oh, I'm the only non-binary person at my school, I'm so, you know, I'm weird, I... okay, well, let's go ahead and pull in all of these fungi, plants, animals that are queer in some way.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): using nature to just find what our clients are working on, and say, okay, well, look how this shows up in the world around us. This is not just some

Elena Kopel (She/Her): human anomaly.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Oh, this is... this is everywhere, and there are ties.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And again, I think about these things a lot, but I have yet to find

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Something that a client's working on that couldn't be connected to nature, the world around them.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Finding a metaphor in some way, it's always there if we look for it.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): I'm thinking, too, about how,

Allison Puryear (she/her): Just observing nature is, like, immediate mindfulness.

Allison Puryear (she/her): just, like, I've got this huge window out in front of me right now, and how, on days when it snows... because it... I'm from the South, like, and I lived in Seattle, so I'm like, I'm from places that don't... it doesn't snow often, and when it does, like, everything shuts down. So, I'm still in awe, like a child, every time it snows.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And it's really hard for me to work. It's not snowing now.

Allison Puryear (she/her): September 2nd. But it's not snow... but it's hard for me to work when it's snowing, because I'm just like.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Like, I just want to watch it fall, because it's so special.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And that just reminds me of, like, I'm from upstate New York, and I remember every year.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): that first snow, it does snow a lot in upstate New York, and yet that first snow, I remember all of us would run to the windows, like, there it is, and I think...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I would take a guess that all of us have something, either that still, as adults, or when we were children, just captivated us. For whatever reason, it just, like, gripped us. I'm... I am an autumnal lady. I am the most basic, like, autumn person.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And... I... I will look at autumnal foliage, and I'm just like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): What! I've seen it for, you know, 29 falls, and yet, every time, I'm like.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): how? How is this possible? And I think all of us have something like that, whether it's this first snowfall or, you know, a favorite plant or animal that we've observed that, for whatever reason, we felt a connection to, or an excitement about.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): that is because we're a part of it. That is ancestral connection to the world around us, and I think that is such

Elena Kopel (She/Her): beautiful place to start if people feel like they don't have a strong connection to the outdoors. Like, well, what's that thing? What's that memory you have from childhood where, yeah, you just, like, were sitting in a

Elena Kopel (She/Her): a creek for hours catching crawdads, or... there's something, there is something. And can we... okay, what was amazing about that? Why did that captivate you? How did you feel in that moment? And we can build from there. But, yeah, there's... we all have something like that.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah, and probably multiple things, and I love

Allison Puryear (she/her): You mentioned, like, plants and animals, because I'm... I'm guessing there's some people who just gravitate a little bit more towards, like, weather versus plants versus animals, like, they just have a pull. Like, we have bunnies that are always in our yard.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Alright.

Allison Puryear (she/her): All year except the winter, we've got a bunny in the yard in the mornings, and watching them, like, just nibble on our little grass, and we all just will, like, watch... we're just.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yep.

Allison Puryear (she/her): eating our breakfast and watching through the window, and it's, like, they're just our buddies that come all the time.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yep.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And...

Allison Puryear (she/her): And then we were, like, when the hurricane came, we were like, oh, I bet all those bunnies underground are drowned, like, they're gone.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Hmm.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Apparently, they weren't, so that's good.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yay!

Allison Puryear (she/her): Because they're smart, and they know to get up, I guess. I don't know.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And living in an area that has a lot of bear, and a lot of deer, and a lot of turkey. Like, I get so excited.

Allison Puryear (she/her): About turkeys, for some reason.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I'm... I'm that way of deer. Again, from the Northeast, we have a lot of deer, a lot.

Allison Puryear (she/her): I'm thinking.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): They're, like, pests. I love deer, and... I...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): you're right, I think we all have these things that, in wherever we grew up, whatever

Elena Kopel (She/Her): You know, whatever our life situations were, there's something that excites us and ties us to the world around us, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Those relationships should not be diminished. I think of, you know.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): The book that's coming to mind right now is, oh, what's it called?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Oh yeah, "Where the Crawdads Sing."

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I just think of... How so many people will shun relationships with

Elena Kopel (She/Her): other non-human beings, and obviously I'm doing this because

Elena Kopel (She/Her): that is a made-up concept, that we are other, and... but yeah, building connections with animals. I took a... one of the courses I took in graduate school was equine-assisted therapy, so working with horses, while

Elena Kopel (She/Her): That is not...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): power to the people who do equine therapy.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): But it was amazing to learn about, and just how the limbic systems of horses and humans are actually very similar, and so people who build a strong connection with horses, many people will feel like they can connect with a horse or another animal more so than other humans.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): How... we should be normalizing that. That is not something that makes you weird or, like, antisocial. No, it...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): There is science that shows, like, no, we do have these connections with these other beings.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I hope that that is something that we can continue to move away from, is this idea that those connections are less than

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Connections with other people.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Well, and I... like, I've worked with a number of people who are equestrians, who would say, oh, well, I'm training this new horse, so I really have to, like, get regulated before I...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Like, get out of the car.

Allison Puryear (she/her): and go to the barn. And these are folks, some of them are folks who, like, really had a very hard time with regulation in other areas of their life, so we're able to bring in, like, okay, how do you do that? How can you bring that into that conversation with your partner, or your kid.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Or your body.

Allison Puryear (she/her): boss.

Allison Puryear (she/her): How do you, like, use this tool you already have been practicing for a long time?

Allison Puryear (she/her): And... and it's interesting, because I never thought of equine therapy as, nature-based, but of course it is. Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah, it's very cool.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It's so cool, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yeah, just so much of it. Again, like, I remember taking a horticulture therapy class with gardening therapy, and just, like, I'm like, this is all right there. Like, it is...

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): right there for us. The metaphors, the comparisons, the ways that we can, you know, yeah, like, how can you do this

Elena Kopel (She/Her): in life outside of this session, or, you know, this garden. And...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I used to think that was just, like, a coincidence, like, oh, ha ha ha! But it's not. I think it's right there.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Because it is a very obvious connection. Yeah. I mean, yes, of course we're gonna feel some semblance of connection to the earth, to our plants that we grow in our garden, to...

Allison Puryear (she/her): Hmm.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): The neighborhood animals, because

Elena Kopel (She/Her): this is a little woo-woo, but I believe that even, you know, all these generations later, I... we have this... this connection that, as much as people have tried to, like, separate from, I... I don't think that's something we can ever, like, fully stamp out.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And so it's just a matter of, like, okay, what are you feeling called to? What feels exciting and meaningful when we think about relating to the world around us? And how can we use that

Elena Kopel (She/Her): To... to add to your life.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I... one of my... I have it right over here. One of my all-time favorite books is Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And she talks about... the symbiotic relationships. There are so many plant species, animals, that

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Benefit from interaction with human beings when done in a respectful.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): sustainable way. And going back to our conversation about, like, kids and interacting with the world around them, if we interact with the world around us in those safe, respectful, loving ways, we all flourish.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): So, it really is, it's an environmental issue, it's a mental health issue, there's so many things that can be improved upon if we just remove those barriers to

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Building lasting relationship with the world around us.

Allison Puryear (she/her): It's interesting, too, thinking about horticulture therapy, and just, like, how as...

Allison Puryear (she/her): I've gotten older, I've gone from saying, like, oh, I have a brown thumb, I've got a black thumb, everything dies. Everything I touch dies.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And it's because I was at a place where I was not able to keep track of, like, when did I water this? Oh, it's been a while, so I'm gonna overwater it. And now I've kept plant, like, indoor plants alive for, like, 5 years, and I'm like, oh, I can't say that I have a black thumb anymore.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yes!

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah, true! And just even letting go of that identity that I formed sometime in my 20s when I was, you know, proud, I had other shit to do. Like...

Allison Puryear (she/her): now I'm like, oh, well, what do I want my outdoor garden to look like? Like, how do I learn what I need to learn to be able to create? And of course, my husband's like, just throw some seeds, do some fun stuff, play with it. I'm like, no, it has to be right, so there's still the personality differences that can get in there and stymie me, right? Of like, oh, but I don't want to mess it up.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): So, like, seeing how perfectionism that I have squashed in healthy ways in other areas of my life can pop up with a new...

Allison Puryear (she/her): a new thing. Like, it's just ripe, right? It's super ripe.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yes!

Allison Puryear (she/her): For some therapy right there, for some nature-based therapy.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Yes, absolutely.

Allison Puryear (she/her): I do like to throw some wildflowers, just throw them and see what happens. Yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And that's the exciting part about it, is once we kind of, like, check all those, like, expectations and these limiting beliefs, these societal, made-up things about who can access, once we get rid of those, it's just fun and exciting.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And there are gonna be differences. My husband's the plant dad. He...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Oh my gosh.

Allison Puryear (she/her): They've all got names, they, you know, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I have ADHD, I can't... I can't keep track of all of that, but that's what feels amazing to him. It adds so much to his life to care for his houseplants. For me, I... I love, you know.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): taking the dog for a walk, and identifying the different plants in the neighborhood, and I love herbalism, and, you know, making different things in my kitchen, and we each get to

Elena Kopel (She/Her): build our own relationship. And it's gonna look different, whether that's, you know, just the... what the seemingly obvious differences of, like, I'm a winter sport person, and I'm a summer sport person, whatever it is.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): But again, it goes right back down to, well, yeah, I live in a big city, and I'm gonna go for a walk, and I'm going to purposely try and find all the examples of resilience I see in nature. You know, the weed going through the sidewalk.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Or I'm going to...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): you know, print off pictures of some of my favorite places I've visited in nature, and I'm gonna have them in my office. These are all ways

Elena Kopel (She/Her): That we can build that connection, and...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): If there's one thing people take away from this, is that no one gets to define that for you.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I think so often, it's like, oh, you've never snowboarded, or, like, how... you've never done a 14er, or it's like...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Okay, well... Maybe that's not my way of being in nature.

Allison Puryear (she/her): And...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): If me sitting in my yard

Elena Kopel (She/Her): that can't be different. And that was a big thing. I was very vocal in my graduate school program, is

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Me doing Zoom nature-based therapy with a potted plant and looking out the window has to be the same.

Allison Puryear (she/her): nature therapy as the people who are doing week-long backpacking trips. Because if we...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): make that different. What are we saying about the people who are doing those activities?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Right. What does that make?

Allison Puryear (she/her): Who has access to what, you know?

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Exactly.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Probably can't easily backpack if you're a wheelchair user. Are there ways? Possibly, but...

Allison Puryear (she/her): I don't know if that's really the goal.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): So, this has changed since I was in grad school, but when I, at the time, it was a requirement that every

Elena Kopel (She/Her): cohort of nature-based therapists, every person. I believe it was needed to...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Be able to hike 10 miles through a canyon with a 60-pound backpack.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): You had to.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And someone ended up leaving my cohort, because that was not something their body was able to do.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And I felt so much sadness.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): about that, because that person, like, I wanted that person in the world of nature-based therapy. And the fact that we, the nature-based therapists in training, even, were given this parameter of, this is something your body... this, like, very hard thing.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): you know, that's not, like, walking a mile. Like, 10 miles with a 60-pound pack?

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): A lot!

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): And... Again, so if we are putting those limitations on the people.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): who can offer these things, like, then what are we saying about who can do this? Right. Who can participate? And so, I'm happy to see a lot of those things changing, but that was...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): That was 5 years ago.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): It's... there's still a lot of movement.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): to be done.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Yeah.

Allison Puryear (she/her): Amazing. Well, thank you so much for your time today. I feel like...

Allison Puryear (she/her): This is giving people an opportunity to think about the fact that they have a relationship with nature, the fact that each of their clients does.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Hmm.

Allison Puryear (she/her): how might it be helpful to bring some nature-based therapy into your... into your therapy? See what happens. Maybe do a little on yourself first, like, do some analyzing, some deep thinking, some mindfulness, some just being outdoors, and see what happens.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): See what happens, absolutely. Yeah, it's... if...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): I hope people can view this as, like, a way to experiment and get creative! It's... it's right there. It really is. Even if you are in...

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Manhattan, or wherever, like, it's there. So, just gotta... We've just gotta look around.

Elena Kopel (She/Her): Thank you so much!

Allison Puryear (she/her): Thank you!

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