



# *Wilderness Therapy*

Rites of Passage

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# *Signs You May be Seeing in your Teen or Young Adult.*

Despite the best efforts of parents, today's adolescents frequently drink, experiment with drugs and are sexually active. It's common to become frustrated because as a parent, you may feel as you are having the same conversations with your teen or young adult on a regular basis and nothing is changing. Frequent concerns that parents see in their son or daughter may include some of what is listed below. If you see similar trends with your son or daughter, continue reading on to learn about how wilderness therapy helps heal those with some of these conditions.

## Drug and Alcohol Use

The following are the most common behaviors that indicate an individual is having a problem with substance abuse:

- Getting high on drugs or getting intoxicated on a regular basis.
- Lying, especially about how much they are using or drinking.
- Avoiding friends and family members.
- Giving up activities they used to enjoy, such as sports or spending time with family.
- Increased levels of anger and defiance.
- Believing they need to use or drink in order to have fun.
- Getting in trouble at school (suspension/expulsion) or with the law.
- Taking risks and exercising poor judgment.
- Showing poor work performance and/or a drop in grades.
- Missing school or work due to substance use.
- Feeling depressed, hopeless, or suicidal.

## Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)

A pattern of negativistic, hostile, and defiant behavior lasting at least 6 months, during which four (or more) of the following are present:

- Regularly loses temper.

- Often argues with adults.
- At times actively defies or refuses to comply with adults' requests or rules.
- Deliberately annoys people.
- Blames others for his or her mistakes or misbehavior.
- Is often touchy or easily annoyed by others.
- Often angry and resentful.
- Can be spiteful or vindictive.

## Anxiety

The symptoms of anxiety fall into two categories: emotional and physical.

### Emotional Symptoms

- A persistent state of apprehension or fear.
- Feelings of dread without valid cause.
- Concentration problems.
- Inner tension and nervousness.
- Catastrophic thinking.
- Irritability or edginess.
- Restlessness and sleeping problems.
- Hyper-vigilance towards signs of danger.
- Absentmindedness and mind blanks.
- Intense/sudden feelings of panic or doom.
- Fear of losing control or going crazy.
- Feelings of detachment and unreality.

### Physical Symptoms

- Heart pounding/rapid heartbeat.
- Excessive sweating.
- Choking sensation.
- Stomach cramps and pains.
- Dizziness and vertigo.
- Frequent urination or diarrhea.
- Hyperventilation
- Lightheadedness
- Tremors and twitches.
- Tension

- Insomnia
- Nausea
- Headaches

## Depression

### Signs and Symptoms

- Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood.
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism.
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being “slowed down”.
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or decision making.
- Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping.
- Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain.
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide ideation and/or attempts.
- Lack of direction and motivation.
- Avoidance of social interaction

## ADHD

Professionals recognize three subtypes of ADHD:

**Predominantly Hyperactive-Impulsive Type:** When symptoms of hyperactivity-impulsivity, but not symptoms of inattention, have been shown for at least six months to an extent that is disruptive and inappropriate for the individual’s developmental level.

**Predominantly Inattentive Type:** When symptoms of inattention, but not symptoms of hyperactivity-impulsivity, have been shown for at least six months to an extent that is disruptive and inappropriate for the individual’s developmental level.

**Combined Type:** When symptoms of both inattention and hyperactivity-impulsivity have been shown for at least six months to an extent that is disruptive and inappropriate for the individual’s developmental level.

Indicators of hyperactivity-impulsivity:

- Feeling restless, fidgeting with hands or feet, and squirming while seated.

-Running, climbing, or leaving a seat in situations where sitting or quiet behavior is expected.

-Blurting out answers before hearing the whole question.

-Interrupting or intruding on others.

-Having difficulty waiting in line or taking turns or enjoying leisure activities quietly.

-Feeling very restless, as if driven by a motor, and talking excessively.

Indicators of inattention type:

-Not paying close attention to details or making careless mistakes in schoolwork or play activities.

-Becoming easily distracted by irrelevant sights and sounds.

-Failing to pay attention to instructions and making careless mistakes, not finishing work, chores or duties.

-Losing or forgetting things like toys, pencils, books, assignments and tools needed for a task.

-Having trouble organizing activities, often skipping from one uncompleted activity to another.

-Not appearing to listen when spoken to directly.

-Avoiding or disliking things that take a lot of mental effort for a long period of time.

Combined Type of ADHD

Children exhibiting hyperactivity, impulsivity and inattention are considered to have the combined type of ADHD, which combines all of the above symptoms.

# *What is Wilderness Therapy?*

There is more than one definition that answers the question: what is wilderness therapy (WT)? Scholars have used the following definitions:

- Wilderness therapy contains a group process, a series of challenges, employs therapeutic techniques such as reflection and journal writing, individual counseling, and self-disclosure, and a varied length.
- WT involves: the careful selection of potential candidates based on a clinical assessment, the creation of an individual treatment plan for each student involvement in outdoor adventure pursuits under the direction of skilled leaders, activities aimed at creating changes in targeted behaviors, provision of group psychotherapy by qualified professionals, with an evaluation of individuals' progress.
- Adventure Therapy (another term used for WT) is the prescriptive use of adventure experiences provided by mental health professionals, often conducted in natural settings that kinesthetically engage clients on cognitive, effective, and behavioral levels

These are only 3 among several definitions in a field that is still defining itself; it is a work in progress.

# *Why Consider Wilderness Therapy?*

For adolescents and young adults who may be facing behavioral or emotional disturbance, substance use or abuse issues and/or struggling at home, wilderness therapy (WT) can provide a healthy alternative to traditional mental health or substance abuse treatment. Numerous experts argue that WT is a treatment of choice for adolescents and can serve as a positive alternative to psychiatric hospitalization or chemical dependency treatment. They suggest that in WT, adolescents spend less time talking about “war stories” and focus more on clinical issues that contribute to lasting behavioral change. At Rites of Passage, we have witnessed many factors that contribute to a student’s progress, success and outcome from the program. Several differences in programming between wilderness programs and traditional, clinical programs will be mentioned below in order to support the idea that wilderness therapy can be an effective treatment method for many kinds of issues that adolescents face:

**Adaptation:** Becoming comfortable living in the outdoors.

Before starting ROP, many students have spent very little time in the outdoors. Sleeping in a tent, being outside in the wilderness at night, wearing the same clothes day in and out, going to the bathroom outside, bathing in ocean, rivers and lakes, living in a group environment, being away from home, facing change, facing fears, learning to live with less, eating simple healthy whole foods and spending every moment outdoors. The ability to adapt varies from person to person but it is an essential life skill. When students gain the skills necessary to be successful within this environment, it builds confidence, self-worth and empowerment. At Rites of Passage, we have watched the sense of calm come over the students once they have adapted to their new lifestyle. We have seen the positive impact on their behavior after spending large amounts of time in the wilderness.

**Relationship Building:** The distinction between Wilderness Staff and Staff



in traditional settings.

Because of the nature of wilderness programming, students interact with staff in a different way than they may in a more traditional or clinical atmosphere. Within “a day in the life” of a WT program, many things can happen. It could rain for 1 week straight, the tide could be too high to keep on hiking, a student could refuse to hike and hold up the group for hours or a bear sighting could divert the group to an alternative route. The conditions are unpredictable, thus demanding each person’s true character to be revealed. Students are interacting and existing with staff in a manner that is not always possible in other settings. The very nature of this reality can be a therapeutic asset for students doing WT. Of particular importance is the relationship developed between therapist and student. In more traditional settings, it is rare for a student to get to know their provider beyond what is revealed within a 1 hour session. Wilderness therapists; however, spend time with the groups camping, eating and hiking; this has an inevitable impact on the relationship that is built. It enables clients to form therapeutic rapport more quickly with therapists. Clients may also get a chance to observe the therapists in real-life situations and challenges, making therapists more approachable than in traditional settings.

### Wilderness as Healer

At Rites of Passage NW, we have had the gift and opportunity to watch the healing powers of nature profoundly impact our students. There is a change that can be seen over the course of their stay. If they come in highly anxious or angry, this dissolves over time while they are on trail. Upon graduation, the student is confident, happy and calm. Our 5 senses come alive when in nature enabling our students to awaken in a way that is not possible in the urban world. The combination of doing profound self-improvement work in a natural setting allows for deep and intense growth in our students.

# *Why choose Rites of Passage?*

Our mission:

Rites of Passage wilderness therapy program provides unique therapeutic adventures for teenagers and young adults struggling with mental health, addiction and behavioral issues. Run by professional outdoor educators, participants experience the healing power of nature while developing personal responsibility, positive decision making, greater self-esteem and essential life skills in order to lead a healthy and balanced lifestyle. Our desire is to empower individuals to embrace life with a renewed sense of direction and passion.

To put it simply, the instructors and therapists at ROP are providing the landscape and opportunities that weave growth, behavior changes and emotional progress for our students. At ROP a student realizes that he/she can hike all day without “passing out”, that they can sleep outside and overcome the fear it brings and that they can build a fire and cook with it. When they use these experiences as metaphors for difficult situations in their life at home, it can help teach them how strong they can be and how possible it is to make changes in their lives.

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# *Testimonials*

"Yesterday we attended our grandson's "graduation" from the ROP NW wilderness therapy program. I was so impressed with what a caring group of people he spent the last two months surrounded by. He went from trying to run away - repeatedly - to immediately taking the food we brought him back to his friends to share it with them. (As a typical teen-aged boy, food is paramount in his mind!) They talked about the changes they had seen in him and what a delightful person he was - words he'd not heard in a very long time. The people at ROP were instrumental in those changes. Nature was important, of course, because he saw some incredible things; the set up of the program was important because it taught him to take responsibility for himself and others; but in my opinion, it was the consistent, caring, positive atmosphere that they provided that made the biggest difference. From the bottom of this grandmother's heart, thank you Emma, Nate, Kris, Greg, Doug, Alyssa, Robbie, Stewart and Kayleigh." ~ROP 2014 Grandparent

"As a parent of a recent graduate of Rites of Passage NW I am 100% confident I made the right choice sending my 15 year old daughter to ROP. I was extremely nervous with my decision of sending her across the country alone and into the hands of complete strangers. I was anxious at the thought of having to leave her at the airport safety checkpoint and hoping she'd find her way to the right gate. I had her text me as soon as she was at her gate, as soon as they announced it was time to board the plane and again, as soon as she landed. I knew her cell phone was going to be taken from her as soon as she made contact with the staff of ROP and I wasn't sure how long it would be before they let me know they found her so I made sure she let me know she landed and was on her way to meet up at the agreed upon location. I received a call from Emma within a few minutes saying she was with ROP staff and reminding me to check Facebook weekly for photos.

The first week was hard, not knowing if my daughter was mad about my

decision, was she okay? All my fears, anxieties and worry went out the window when I received my first letter from her. She wasn't the happiest about not having the conveniences of home but she was not mad and understood why she was there and was willing to work on her issues. With her weekly letters and from seeing her photo's on Facebook I could clearly tell the spark of life was coming back. She was really working hard physically and mentally. My weekly phone calls with her therapist made me feel excited and optimistic knowing she was really alright. Those weekly phone calls helped me to focus on what I needed to do as a parent to help support my daughters continued progress. It also helped me to see that I needed to re-evaluate some of my belief systems where parenting is concerned. Now I feel I can communicate with my teenager and I feel confident as a parent. There have been no "downsides" or regrets with my decision to send my daughter to ROP." ~ROP parent 2014

"I wanted to thank you guys for having me out and being able to open my eyes up and see what's really important to me. I wouldn't have been able to come close to realizing what I really had at home. It has been a tough and really eye opening experience for me to have gone through. All this time away from all the distractions I had back home have done wonders to how my perspective of things are. I'm not who I used to be before I came here.

I've changed and there is a lot more to come as soon as I get home. You all have been with me every step of the way and for that and sticking with me the whole time. I know I must have been difficult because I know I'm not always the best kid to be around. I want you guys to know I appreciated all the hard work. From now on whenever I get in to a struggle in life I'm just going to look back on this experience to use what I was taught and to make good decisions to better my life and my future. I will always have the wilderness. From here on forth I promise to stay on the right path and actually make something of my life and not just do whatever is the easy path. If something takes more effort then I am going to take control and do it without a second thought. The path I was going on at the end of it was going to end badly with shame and disappointment. I am more than grateful for you guys for saving me. I owe it to you for opening up my eyes and showing me new paths.

Another promise I can definitely make is to take the time to actually strengthen the relationship with my parents and siblings to be a lot stronger and a role model.

I also want to thank my parents. Which I will as soon as I see them for giving me the chance to find myself. Not a lot of people have the chance to find themselves and I can honestly say that I don't have my head in the clouds anymore. I know which direction I want my life to go and I know it is not going to be easy and there are a lot of challenges to get there. But hey, everything takes time and hard work. I can smile and say that I am making it. I can see that I am to blame for my decisions and it is up to me to make my dreams come true. I want you to know that you completely changed and turned around my whole life. For that I am always going to owe you for helping me out. Thank you and be expecting to hear from me soon.

PS Can I come back to the wilderness and work for you guys next summer? "~2012 Student