Biophilic Recovery: A Phenomenological Study of Plant-Based Rehabilitation Efficacy at HappyNest Rehabilitation Nook

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ABSTRACT

Biophilic recovery has emerged as a transformative therapeutic framework in drug rehabilitation, centering on plant-based therapies, herbal detoxification, and ecological rituals. The study examined the lived experiences of individuals undergoing plant-based rehabilitation at HappyNest Rehabilitation Nook in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Anchored on a phenomenological case study design, fifteen (15) participants were conveniently and purposively sampled. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Eight (8) broad themes were laid bare: 1) Biophilia leads to natural restoration. 2) Horticultural therapy fosters mindfulness, emotional regulation, and identity reconstruction. 3) Herbal detoxification and plant intelligence were perceived by participants to promote neurochemical balance and withdrawal symptom relief. 4) Plant-based rehabilitation promotes economic self-reliance, community empowerment, and alignment with Sustainable Development Goals. 5) Phytonutrient and flesh-free diets were associated by participants with emotional regulation and physical recovery. 6) Plant-based rehabilitation reduces stigma to addiction rehabilitation and facilitates spiritual healing. 7) Agrarian routines promote income-generating projects, budgeting skills, and vocational skills post-rehab. 8) Plant-based therapies align with indigenous healing practices and cultural epistemologies. The findings suggest that participants experienced biophilic recovery as a holistic and culturally resonant pathway for rehabilitation, offering a low-cost and non-invasive complement to pharmacological treatments. The research recommends the formal adoption of the Green Recovery Model framework in rehabilitation centers for holistic rehabilitation**.** However, further clinical and longitudinal studies are required to evaluate the biomedical efficacy and long-term scalability of the model.

Keywords: Biophilia, Plant-based therapy, Herbal detox protocols, Horticultural therapy, Ecological rituals, Phytonutrient diet, Green Recovery Model.

INTRODUCTION

Addiction is a major health problem that imposes huge burdens all over the world. In recent decades, the shortcomings of pharmacological approaches for addictions and mental illness have been recognized, ranging from side effects, cost efficiency, and relapse (Gomez-Escolar et al., 2024). While pharmacological interventions remain important for symptom management, they frequently do not fully address the physio-psycho-spiritual dimensions of healing. These limitations have prompted renewed interest in complementary and plant-based therapeutic approaches. Richie (2024) aptly posited that Biophilic Recovery emerges as a transformative therapeutic framework that leverages humanity's intrinsic connection to nature. It fosters addiction rehabilitation, physical and mental health healing through plant-based therapies, herbal detoxification, and ecological rituals. Burke et al. (2025) further postulate that biophilic recovery offers a reimagining of addiction recovery that is ecologically sustainable, socially inclusive, and spiritually resonant. The study is additionally informed by ecopsychology and the biopsychosocial model of addiction, which emphasizes the interconnected influence of environmental, psychological, social, and behavioural factors in recovery processes.

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Plant-based detoxification has been associated with emotional regulation, identity reconstruction, and individual overall well-being (Holt & Nashville, 2024). Phytonutrient diets have also been explored in relation to stress regulation, neurophysiological functioning, and restoration of overall wellness within holistic rehabilitation contexts (Haque, 2024). Eliminating meat and dairy products from the diet and replacing them with fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains has been linked in some studies to improved digestion, increased energy, and feelings of internal refreshment (Suresh, 2025). Mucuna pruriens has been discussed in existing literature for its potential relationship with dopamine regulation, motivation, and pleasure processing. Ashwagandha has similarly been associated with stress reduction, anxiety management, and resilience enhancement (Kuśmierska et al., 2024). Furthermore, Withania somnifera and Hypericum perforatum have been explored for their perceived mood-stabilizing properties within herbal and alternative medicine literature (Emerald, 2024). These plant-based approaches are increasingly discussed within complementary rehabilitation literature for their perceived contribution to emotional and psychological well-being among individuals recovering from addiction. Fertig (2022) postulated that such interventions may also promote stabilized mood and mental clarity, thereby aiding therapeutic engagement and recovery processes. Phytonutrient-based diets have additionally been associated with grounding and embodiment, which may benefit individuals experiencing dissociation related to substance use by supporting mind-body integration.

To tackle further, horticultural therapy involves the use of gardening and plant cultivation as a structured therapeutic activity (Devrani and Tiwari, 2024). It improves mindfulness and emotional regulation through repetitive and calming activities such as planting and watering (Lentoor, 2024). Horticultural therapy also promotes recovery, a sense of purpose, and structured routines that assist in rebuilding identity post-addiction (Costello, 2024). Agrarian routines and exposure to natural light cycles have been associated in some studies with improved emotional stability and overall well-being (Farag et al., 2024). Activities such as farming, animal care, and harvesting may also contribute to physical stamina and vocational skill development among recovering individuals. These activities reintroduce discipline, accountability, and productivity, which are often disrupted during addiction (Kemp et al., 2025). Agrarian routines may further foster vocational competence and self-esteem, which are considered important elements in sustainable recovery. Söderlund and Söderlund (2019) postulated that patients may come to identify themselves as individuals connected to nature rather than patients, reflecting an important shift in identity reconstruction. This multi-system restoration offers a holistic approach that extends beyond symptom management toward embodied healing experiences.

Certain plants possess reactive and adaptive properties that are believed to interact with human physiology and emotional responses, a phenomenon commonly referred to as plant intelligence (Vinitha et al., 2025). Biophilic recovery employs herbal detox protocols that involve the use of herbal remedies believed to support the body's natural wellness and recovery processes. Adaptogenic plants such as Ashwagandha and Rhodiola have been explored in relation to stress regulation and mood stabilization (Hall & Bay, 2017). Nervine tonic herbs such as chamomile, valerian, and skullcap are also traditionally used to relieve withdrawal-related experiences such as anxiety, insomnia, and restlessness (Mars and Fiedler, 2024). Other herbs including rosemary, lavender, hops, passionflower ("maypop"), lemon balm, and valerian have similarly been associated with the alleviation of mild anxiety, depression, and stress (Predescu et al., 2025). Predescu et al. (2025) further posited that patients increasingly prefer herbal products because they are often perceived to produce fewer side effects than some conventional drug treatments. Rather than establishing biomedical efficacy, these perspectives highlight the growing interest in complementary and culturally grounded approaches to addiction rehabilitation. Biophilic recovery has also been described as a non-invasive approach perceived to support overall well-being and holistic recovery. Furthermore, biophilic recovery facilitates whole-person healing by leveraging the gut-brain axis and circadian rhythm through plant-based, flesh-free nutrition (Loizaga-Velder & Pazzi, 2024).

Walker et al. (2025) postulated that plant-based recovery programs are inexpensive, especially when built on community gardens, local herbalists, and decentralized care networks. Unlike pharmaceutical treatments, which require continuous supplementation and specialized monitoring, biophilic interventions can be cultivated and sustained within communities (Siwakoti, 2022). Biophilic recovery promotes community ownership, lowers overhead costs, increases self-reliance, and has been associated with reduced relapse experiences among some recovering individuals. Trevisam and Oliveira (2024) consider biophilic recovery to be in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It directly supports SDG 3 for good health and

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well-being by promoting mental and emotional wellness through natural and culturally attuned methods. In addition, biophilic recovery supports SDG 15 (Life on Land) through the conservation and cultivation of medicinal plants, biodiversity promotion, and agrarian practices. Fong and Chiu (2024) highlighted that biophilic recovery also supports SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by integrating traditional knowledge systems into public health policies and encouraging collaboration between healers, ecologists, researchers, and communities.

Biophilic recovery represents a decolonial shift in the science of addiction by centering indigenous ecological knowledge, promoting local plant pharmacopoeias, and valuing spiritual wellness (Siwakoti, 2022). It aligns with indigenous healing practices, particularly in African contexts where medicinal plants have historically formed part of holistic wellness systems (Nayak, 2025). Qadir and Raja (2021) postulated that approximately 80% of the world's population still relies on traditional plant remedies for primary healthcare. Rodriguez (2024) further posits that biophilic recovery intersects powerfully with African ethnomedicine and ancestral knowledge systems. These practices recognize addiction not merely as a biological condition but also as a disturbance in spiritual, relational, and environmental harmony (Costello, 2024). By emphasizing these approaches, biophilic recovery affirms African cultural epistemologies while restoring agency and relevance within local healing frameworks

Objectives:

1. To analyze how participants attribute meaning to plant-based therapies.
2. To explore the perceived influence of flesh-free nutrition on cravings, emotional regulation, and identity reconstruction.
3. To develop a "Green Recovery Model" showcasing HappyNest's unique algorithm for funders/investors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences with plant-based rehabilitation therapies. Qualitative research was considered appropriate because it enables the exploration of individuals' subjective meanings, emotions, and perceptions within their natural contexts (Lloyd and Gifford, 2024). Mataruse et al. (2022) further posit that qualitative inquiry facilitates a deeper understanding of phenomena as experienced by participants. The approach was therefore suitable for generating rich, detailed accounts of participants' rehabilitation experiences while allowing the researchers to explore the emotional, psychological, and behavioural dimensions of recovery. To enhance methodological rigour, reflexive journals were maintained throughout the study to minimise researcher bias and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives.

Research Design

Research design refers to the systematic framework that guides the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data in relation to the study objectives (Khoa et al., 2023). The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of individuals undergoing plant-based rehabilitation therapies. The phenomenological design was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand how participants perceived, interpreted, and made meaning of their recovery experiences within the rehabilitation setting. Tiwari et al. (2025) posit that phenomenological research focuses on understanding individuals' subjective experiences and interpretations of a particular phenomenon. This design enabled the researchers to capture rich and detailed narratives concerning emotional healing, behavioral transformation, and personal recovery associated with biophilic therapies (Owsley et al., 2025). To address methodological concerns regarding analytic clarity, the phenomenological design further guided the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to identify recurring meanings and experiential patterns across participants' accounts.

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Population and Sampling

The study targeted individuals who had experienced plant-based (biophilic) rehabilitation at Happy Nest Rehabilitation Nook in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit information-rich participants with direct lived experience of the phenomenon, ensuring relevance to the study objectives. The final sample comprised fifteen (15) participants, including nine (9) males and six (6) females, selected based on their ability to provide detailed and meaningful accounts of their rehabilitation experiences. Convenience sampling was used only as a logistical means of accessing eligible participants, rather than as the primary sampling strategy. Although the sample remains relatively small, it is appropriate within a phenomenological framework, where emphasis is placed on depth of lived experience rather than statistical generalisability, and data collection continued until sufficient experiential saturation and thematic convergence were achieved.

Data Collection Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the management of Happy Nest Rehabilitation Nook, and participants were recruited through the Personnel Management in accordance with ethical research procedures. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Data were collected using in-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences with plant-based rehabilitation. The interview guide was kept flexible to allow probing and clarification of responses, while focus group methods were excluded to maintain alignment with the phenomenological focus on individual lived experience. Interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy and meaning. To enhance rigour and address researcher subjectivity, reflective field notes were maintained during and after interviews to capture contextual details and support interpretive consistency, ensuring that the collected data accurately reflected participants' rehabilitation experiences.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically analyse the qualitative data and identify patterns of meaning within participants' narratives. Following Mataruse et al. (2023), thematic analysis involves a structured yet iterative process of organising qualitative data into meaningful patterns for interpretation. In this study, analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants' accounts without imposing pre-determined categories. The process involved familiarisation with verbatim transcripts, initial line-by-line coding of significant statements, grouping related codes into categories, and refining these into overarching themes that reflected shared meanings and lived experiences of plant-based rehabilitation. To enhance methodological rigour and address concerns of analytic transparency, all coding was conducted manually and continuously reviewed to ensure consistency and coherence across the dataset. Emerging themes were repeatedly compared against the original transcripts to confirm that they accurately reflected participants' voices, while reflective memoing was used throughout the analysis to support interpretive depth and reduce researcher bias. This approach ensured that the final themes were grounded in participants' lived experiences of biophilic rehabilitation, particularly their emotional, behavioural, and psychological transformations (Hunter et al., 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biophilia, Natural Restoration, and Perceived Holistic Healing

The results substantiated the study's theoretical orientation by revealing participants' subjective experiences and perceptions regarding the role of biophilic recovery in emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Findings indicated that participants associated plant-based therapies and horticultural activities with mindfulness, emotional regulation, and personal transformation. Rather than establishing clinical efficacy, the findings highlight how participants perceived biophilic recovery as a holistic and meaningful pathway within

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their rehabilitation experiences. Participants also described the restorative potential of nature and expressed willingness to advocate for plant-based rehabilitation approaches within their communities.

The subsequent quotations illustrate:

"…natural remedies facilitate whole-person healing, strengthen mental health and physical health without side effects…" (P.3)

"…gardening care and maintenance are therapeutic, they enable me to channel my negative emotions positively, to be mindful, and meditate upon my life…" (P.5)

"…Plant-based therapies facilitate full recovery, I wish to share the experiences I have learnt with others, telling them how it can also improve them to counter drug addiction…" (P.7)

The findings revealed participants' strong belief in the healing potential of nature-based rehabilitation practices. The narratives suggest that horticultural engagement may contribute to mindfulness, emotional regulation, and identity reconstruction through repetitive and calming activities associated with plant care. These findings are consistent with Richie (2024), who posited that Biophilic Recovery leverages humanity's intrinsic connection with nature to support rehabilitation and well-being through ecological rituals and plant-based therapies. The findings also align with Lentoor (2024), who argued that horticultural therapy promotes mindfulness and emotional regulation through repetitive and calming activities such as planting and watering. In addition, Hall and Bay (2017) suggested that adaptogenic plants have been explored in relation to stress regulation and mood stabilization.

Horticultural Therapy, Mindfulness, and Identity Reconstruction

Research findings further demonstrated that participants associated natural remedies with reduced cravings, improved sleep patterns, reduced anxiety, and restoration of personal identity during recovery. These accounts reflect participants' subjective interpretations of the perceived benefits of plant-based therapies rather than clinically verified biomedical outcomes. Participants frequently contrasted plant-based approaches with synthetic pharmacological interventions, describing natural remedies as more compatible with their personal recovery experiences and overall well-being.

Participants remarked:

"…natural supplements reduce cravings for the drugs, and they have no side effects to individual health as with the drugs…" (P.6)

"…nowadays I can actually find sleep easily, and I am experiencing less anxiety because I have regained my identity…" (P.10)

"…Plant-based therapies help to neutralize toxins in the body…" (P.13)

"… Flesh-free nutrition provides for a strong state of mind, it facilitates physical health restoration and good eyesight…" (P.14)

"…vegetarian diet enhances blood circulation and recovery of damaged brain cells…" (P.15)

Perceived Benefits of Plant-Based Therapies and Herbal Detoxification

The findings illustrate how participants perceived plant-based therapies as extending beyond symptom management toward broader emotional, psychological, and behavioral restoration. While some participants attributed detoxifying and restorative properties to plant-based therapies, these claims are interpreted within this study as personal beliefs and lived experiences rather than empirically established biomedical evidence**.** Existing literature by Kusmierska et al. (2024) and Emerald (2024) similarly discusses herbal remedies in relation to mood stabilization and emotional well-being within complementary rehabilitation contexts. Suresh (2025) further suggested that phytonutrient-based diets may contribute to overall wellness and energy regulation. Participants also linked plant-tending activities with meditation, focus, discipline, and personal

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growth, reinforcing Eco psychological perspectives that emphasize the therapeutic significance of human–nature connectedness in recovery processes. Similarly, Mars and Fiedler (2024) suggested that nervine tonic herbs are traditionally used to relieve experiences associated with anxiety, insomnia, and restlessness. The findings additionally align with Costello (2024), who postulated that horticultural therapy promotes recovery, provides a sense of purpose, and contributes to identity reconstruction following addiction.

Economic Empowerment and Indigenous Healing Perspectives

The study also revealed participants' perceptions regarding the economic and practical benefits associated with plant-based rehabilitation. Findings indicated that participants associated biophilic recovery with income-generating opportunities, self-reliance, budgeting skills, and stress reduction through gardening and horticultural activities. Participants further perceived plant-based rehabilitation as culturally resonant and aligned with indigenous healing traditions. However, the findings also revealed mixed perceptions regarding the extent to which plant-based rehabilitation reduces stigma, with some participants emphasizing the importance of individualized rehabilitation approaches.

Respondents opined:

"… Plant-based therapy promotes money-making schemes and income-generating opportunities through gardening and horticultural projects…" (P.5)

"…natural supplements reduce health care dependence by teaching self-production of horticultural products, self-reliance, and budgeting…" (P.4)

"…plant-based rehabilitation aligns with indigenous healing traditions and limits diseases through exercises in crop production, and reduces stress levels by sublimation, different to western practices…" (P.2)

"…Yes, plant-based rehabilitation can facilitate the body's return to natural balance by using natural supplements to recovery …" (P.1)

"…Plant-based therapies can help to reduce stigma, but I think a greater understanding of each patient is needed to promote full recovery…" (P.3)

Participants acknowledged the perceived economic and social value of biophilic recovery within rehabilitation contexts. These findings correspond with Walker et al. (2025) and Trevisam and Oliveira (2024), who emphasized the relevance of community-based and low-cost healing ecosystems aligned with Sustainable Development Goals such as SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). The findings also align with Kemp et al. (2025), who posited that agrarian routines involving farming, animal care, and harvesting may contribute to vocational skill development and post-rehabilitation adjustment. Furthermore, the findings support Siwakoti's (2022) argument that biophilic recovery represents a decolonial approach that values indigenous ecological knowledge, local plant pharmacopoeias, and spiritual wellness within addiction recovery frameworks.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, this research study suggests that participants at Happy Nest Rehabilitation Nook experienced biophilic recovery as a meaningful, culturally grounded, and holistic pathway within addiction rehabilitation. Participants associated herbal detoxification, horticultural therapy, and flesh-free nutrition with reduced cravings, improved sleep, emotional balance, and identity reconstruction. The phenomenological approach further revealed how participants attributed healing significance to plants and integrated gardening practices into mindfulness, reflection, and personal recovery experiences. Beyond individual experiences, participants also perceived biophilic recovery as contributing to economic empowerment, community engagement, and alignment with indigenous knowledge systems and global sustainability goals. Rather than establishing clinical efficacy, the findings highlight participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations of plant-based rehabilitation practices. The study therefore suggests that biophilic recovery may offer a culturally relevant and low-cost complementary approach to addiction rehabilitation alongside conventional interventions. However,

further interdisciplinary, clinical, and longitudinal research is necessary to evaluate its long-term therapeutic outcomes and potential integration into mainstream rehabilitation systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made

- Rehabilitation centers should adopt and formalize biophilic recovery frameworks, integrating herbal detox, phytonutrient diets, and horticultural routines as structured components of treatment complementary to conventional treatment.

- Policymakers and funders are encouraged to support plant-based rehabilitation models through community gardens, training programs, and partnerships with medical practitioners.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The Green Recovery Model

The model is premised on the central theme that biophilic engagement offers a restorative framework for addiction rehabilitation. The Green Recovery Model integrates herbal detoxification, plant-based nutrition, and horticultural therapy to promote neurobiological regulation, reduce cravings, enhance sleep quality, and improve emotional stability. Beyond Individual holistic healing, the model fosters identity reconstruction, economic self-reliance, mindfulness, and community empowerment by rooting recovery in sustainable practices. The model constitutes a viable, low-cost, and culturally grounded alternative to conventional approaches, warranting further elaboration and formalization in subsequent research. The prospective study demonstrates the wider psychosocial and culturally relevant nature-based recovery pathways. Its protocols, implementation framework, and evaluation plan will be fully elaborated in further research.

Future Studies

Future studies should adopt a phased research approach that begins with small pilot studies to test the feasibility, safety, and acceptability of the Green Recovery Model. Longitudinal and comparative studies should be conducted to evaluate the efficacy of biophilic recovery and the Green Recovery Model on relapse prevention, cravings, emotional regulation, neurochemical outcomes, and its scalability. Mechanistic sub-studies should explore pathways such as nutrition, gut-brain axis, and psychosocial changes, while implementation research should assess cost-effectiveness, scalability, and cultural adaptability across diverse rehabilitation settings.

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