

Why learning to surf can be great for your mental health, according to a psychologist

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Credit: Ferne Millen/Ocean Minds, Author provided

Nothing clears the mind like going for a surf. With the escapism and simplicity of riding waves, it's no secret that surfing feels good.

Now our [preliminary study](#) in children and adolescents adds to growing evidence that [surfing](#) really is good for your mental health.

But you don't have to have a [mental illness](#) to get the benefits. Here's

how you can use what we're learning from our research to boost your own mental health.

How surfing is good for you

Evidence showing the [mental health benefits](#) of surfing ranges from [improving self-esteem](#) and [reducing social isolation](#) to treating depression [and other mental disorders](#).

Such evidence mainly comes from specific [surf therapy programs](#). These combine supportive surfing instruction with one-to-one or group activities that promote psychosocial well-being.

At their core, most of these programs provide participants with the challenge of learning to surf in an [emotionally safe environment](#).

[Any benefits](#) to mental health are thought to arise through:

- an increased sense of social connection
- a sense of accomplishment that people can transfer to other activities
- respite from the day-to-day stressors due to the all-encompassing focus required when surfing
- the [physiological response](#) when surfing, including the reduction of stress hormones and the release of mood-elevating neurotransmitters
- exercising in a [natural environment](#), in particular "[blue spaces](#)" (on or near water).

What we did

Our [pilot study](#) aimed to see whether the [Ocean Mind](#) surf therapy program improved child and adolescent mental health.

We also wanted to see whether participants accepted surfing as a way to address their mental health concerns.

The study involved 36 young people, 8–18 years old, who were seeking help for a mental health concern, such as anxiety, or a neurodevelopmental disorder ([attention deficit hyperactivity disorder](#) or autism spectrum disorder). They were referred by their mental health provider, GP or school counselor.

Participants were allocated at random to the Ocean Mind surf therapy program or were placed on a waitlist for it. Those allocated to surf therapy continued with their usual care, which included case management from a mental health provider. Those on the waitlist (the control group) also continued with their usual care.

The surf therapy program ran for two hours every weekend for six weeks. Young people were partnered one-to-one with a [community mentor](#) who received training in mental health literacy and surf instruction.

Each session included supportive surf instruction and group mental health support, all conducted at the beach. Sessions were run by the program coordinator who was also trained in mental health and surf instruction.

What we found

By the end of the six-week program, those receiving surf therapy had

reductions in depression, anxiety, hyperactivity and inattention symptoms, as well as fewer emotional and peer problems. This was compared with those in the [control group](#), who had increases in these symptoms.

However, any improvements were not sustained six weeks after the program finished.

Those receiving surf therapy also saw it as a suitable, youth-friendly way to manage symptoms of mental ill-health. This was further supported by the high completion rates (87%), particularly when compared with other methods of mental health treatment. For instance, psychotherapy (talk therapy) has been reported to have a [28–75% drop-out rate](#) for children and adolescents.

It's early days

These early findings are promising. But given this was a [pilot study](#), more research is needed with larger numbers of participants to confirm these outcomes and see if they generalize to broader populations.

We'd like to identify the best dose of surf therapy in terms of session frequency, duration, and program length.

We also need to understand the factors that maintain these initial positive changes in mental health, so any benefits can be sustained after the program finishes.

The recognition of surfing as a potentially effective and acceptable mental health treatment among [young people](#) is also promising. But this finding does not preclude the more conventional clinical treatments, such as talk therapy and medication, which may work better for certain people.

Rather, surf [therapy](#) may be seen as an additional form of support alongside these approaches or an alternative for those who do not benefit from more traditional methods.

Tempted to try surfing?

If you think surfing might be for you, remember:

- surfing requires complete focus due to the ever-changing conditions of the ocean, making it a great way to step away from day-to-day life and wipe out the effects of stress
- for some people, surfing may reduce barriers to seeking mental [health](#) care
- surfing may not be for everyone, nor can it guarantee to reduce your symptoms. Even the best surfers can suffer from depression and may require external support
- don't worry if you cannot access the ocean or a surfboard. Other [nature-based activities](#), such as hiking and gardening, can also benefit your [mental health](#).

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