

Disability Campaign.org

Surfing: A New Kind of Therapy and its Benefits



From equine therapy to meditation to acupuncture, there are a variety of therapies that can be beneficial to the physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing of people with disabilities and chronic illness. But have you ever considered surfing as a form of therapy? Ripping the waves can not only be fun and provide good exercise, but it can also help those living with mental illness, autism, cystic fibrosis ... there's even adaptive surfing for people with spinal cord injuries! Below are just a few ways in which surfing therapy has proven to be beneficial to people with disabling health conditions.

Depression, Anxiety, and Mood

Surfers are known for having care-free, mellow attitudes ... but is there evidence that surfing actually helps improve one's mood? In 2010, a study by the Britain's National Health



Services asked participants living with mental issues ranging from schizophrenia to psychosis to engage in a multi-week surfing course to analyze their mood while surfing. The study found that with only 30 minutes of catching waves, surfers with mental illness experienced a decrease in negative feelings and an increase in positive feelings. In another study, published in 2011 by the Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology, surfers reported significantly fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety than the general population. So it goes to show that indeed surfing can be beneficial for those who struggle with negative emotions or thoughts.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Veterans

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can develop in people who have undergone traumatic experiences in life; for this reason, war veterans are particularly at risk of developing PTSD. Signs of the disorder may include nightmares, frightening thoughts or flashbacks. Research shows that war veterans with PTSD experience poorer mental and physical health, and an

increased risk of suicide, than veterans without the disorder. Because surfing has been shown to improve mental health, it can be incredibly beneficial to war vets.



In a 2014 UK study, a group of UK veterans who were surfers were interviewed and observed to identify the benefits of surfing on wellbeing. The findings suggested that surfing allowed surfers to experience a sense of respite from the

suffering associated with PTSD. Participants reported feeling a sense of pleasure and relief — a sort of escape from pain — even if it was only for the few hours while they were in the water. In addition to relieving the negative feelings associated with PTSD, surfing generated positive emotions: an increase in smiles, longer feelings of joy, and a boost of confidence. What's more, regular engagement with surfing also helped the participants stay focused on present experiences, rather than dwelling on the traumatic memories of their past.

Autism

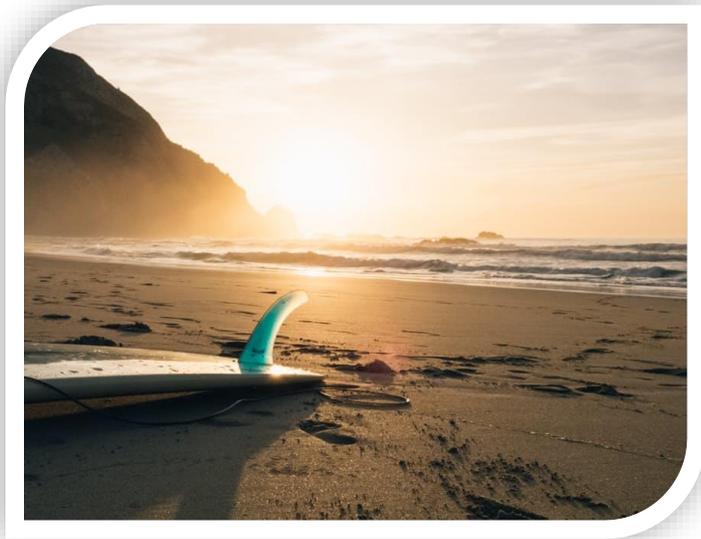
Since 1983, Israel “Izzy” Paskowitz has been competing as a professional surfer. But when his son, Isaiah, was diagnosed with autism at the age of three, surfing became more than a career. Like many other children with autism, Isaiah struggled with meltdowns and sensory overloads, but what most helped calm him down was riding the waves with his father.

It’s why in 1996, Izzy Paskowitz and his wife founded the Surfers Healing organization to help “enrich the lives of people with autism by exposing them to the unique experience

of surfing.” But the outreach did not stop there; today, there are many organizations, nonprofits, camps, and occupational/physical therapy programs that offer surfing as therapy for children with autism. Children in these surf



programs have the opportunity to exercise, interact with volunteers and other children, and learn a new sport in a safe and fun environment. What’s more, families and caregivers express seeing changes in their children: from increased confidence to better social interaction, as well as a sense of calm in their children when in or near water.



Cystic Fibrosis

Cystic Fibrosis (CF) is a progressive, genetic disorder that causes a thick buildup of mucus in the lungs, pancreas, and other organs. People with this disorder suffer from persistent lung infections

and experience difficulty breathing. Physicians in Australia have noted that patients with CF who surfed had significantly healthier lungs than non-surfing patients. As the person inhales, the saltwater mist hydrates the lining of his or her lungs, assisting in the elimination of the thick mucus. Though at-home saline therapy is available, surfing provides adults and children with cystic fibrosis the opportunity to do something fun and exercise — all while improving their physical health.

Adapted Surfing for People with Spinal Cord Injuries

When you think of surfing, you probably imagine someone standing on a board, riding the waves ... or perhaps someone paddling in the ocean. Both actions require the use of one's legs or arms, but that doesn't mean people with spinal cord injuries can't also participate in surfing. Take Jesse

Photo: liferollson.org



Billauer, the first ever World Champion of Adaptive Surfing. In 1996, Jesse was within the top 100 junior surfers in the world. That same year, Jesse suffered an accident which left him unable to stand, yet Jesse's passion for surfing stayed strong. He pioneered adaptive surfing gear and created Life Rolls On, a nonprofit dedicated to providing paraplegics and quadriplegics the opportunity to surf.

What's more, in 2015, Jesse won gold for Team USA, becoming the first ever World Champion of Adaptive Swimming.



Additional Benefits of Surfing

- **Build core and back strength:** If you suffer from back pain, your doctor may have encouraged you to start with some core strength training. Surfing is a great way to work at strengthening your core.
- **Better balance:** You don't need to be a pro-surfer to learn how to balance yourself on a surfboard. What's more, you can take some of the balancing exercises you learn from surfing and do them in the comfort of your home.

- Gain more flexibility: Flexibility is essential to the sport of surfing. To be able to surf, you need to have flexible, well-stretched muscles, so just preparing for surfing can already be of help to you.
- Lose weight and Improve cardiovascular health: Doing cardio exercise isn't all about running. By arm paddling or kick paddling, you'll elevate your heart rate and burn calories, which can help you lose excess fat and keep a healthy heart.

Helpful Websites:

<http://surfershealing.org/>

<https://www.cff.org/What-is-CF/About-Cystic-Fibrosis/>

<http://liferollson.org/>

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>

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Elkins, M. R., Robinson, M., Rose, B. R., Harbour, C., Moriarty, C. P., Marks, G. B., ... & Bye, P. T. (2006). A controlled trial of long-term inhaled hypertonic saline in patients with cystic fibrosis. *New England Journal of Medicine, 354*(3), 229-240.

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