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Addressing Mental Health Through Community Based Surf Therapy Groups

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Capstone Project

Addressing Mental Health Through Community Based Surf Therapy Groups

Surf therapy is becoming a popular form of rehabilitation, especially for individuals experiencing mental health challenges. Surf therapy combines therapeutic elements of the ocean with the adventure of surfing to positively impact participants' overall well-being. Components of surf therapy include the experience of being outside on the beach and in the water, movement, exercise, cognition, multi-sensory input, cold immersion, community support, companionship, and experiential education. It inherently requires the individual to be present, incorporating mindfulness and self-reflection. There is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates that surf therapy is effective in improving comparable mental health outcomes across different populations in a wide range of contexts (Benninger et al, 2020). These outcomes include increases in self-concept, improved emotional regulation, reduced levels of anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms, and improvement in pain management.

The use of surfing as an occupation allows individuals to stay focused on the present as opposed to dwelling on the past. It also provides a safe space for connection and support that aligns with a trauma-informed approach creating a positive community network to support mental wellness (Burtscher & Britton, 2022). Occupational therapy (OT) practitioners' training in physical and mental health wellness, activity analysis, and individual and group processing provides a valuable role to the surf therapy team. They can assist participants in processing the experience of surfing to recognize effective emotional regulation, sensory modulation, and stress management skills that emerge, and support participants in building self-efficacy, self-awareness, and intentional mindfulness. OT practitioners can further assist program participants in translating these skills to daily life to build meaningful occupations, a role for which OT is uniquely prepared as a part of an interprofessional surf therapy team.

Benninger, E., Curtis, C., Sarkisian, G. V., Rogers, C. M., Bender, K., & Comer, M. (2020). Surf therapy: A scoping review of the qualitative and quantitative research evidence. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 11(2), 1–26.

Burtscher, M.; Britton, E. "There Was Some Kind of Energy Coming into My Heart": Creating Safe Spaces for Sri Lankan Women and Girls to Enjoy the Wellbeing Benefits of the Ocean. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2022**, *19*, 3342. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19063342>