

- Water sports

Want better mental health? Just add water

The Gold Coast Bulletin · 28 Jul 2022 · 08 · KEVIN KEMP-SMITH Kevin Kemp-Smith is an Assistant Professor of Physiotherapy at the Bond Institute of Health and Sport.

HAVE you ever watched someone rush down the beach and plunge into the chilly water at dawn on a freezing winter's day and thought to yourself, "they need their head read"?



Chances are, their head is just fine, because being in the water is one of the best things you can do for your mental health. And according to our research, taking a friend along is even better.

Over the past three years, a litany of disasters, including fires, floods, the pandemic and increased cost of living have sparked a surge in reports of people suffering mental health issues.

Exercise is often touted as an excellent management tool for mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, and here at the Bond University Water-based Research Unit, we wondered if aquatic exercise had similar benefits.

We discovered that one of the best things people can do to tackle anxiety and depression and boost their mood and self-esteem is to just add water.

The research shows that when people engage in aquatic exercise, primarily in a group setting, that engagement has a positive effect on improving people's moods and their psychological wellbeing, decreasing depressive moods and feelings of anxiety.

Our review assessed studies conducted in 13 countries, including Australia, the US, Brazil, Finland, Israel and Iran. Most of the cohorts studied were relatively healthy adults, but others included people with dementia and depression, elderly individuals, female teachers, teens with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and women with premenstrual syndrome (PMS). They came from all genders, ages, ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, levels of aquatic exercise and swimming expertise. While this review focused on swimming and group aquatic exercises, we can confidently say the same social benefits would be reflected in any aquatic exercise, be it surfing, standup paddling or surf lifesaving.

And it's not necessarily about catching the biggest wave or swimming the fastest lap – the benefits can come from sitting out there chatting with your buddies while you're waiting for the sets or pulling on your swimming gear.

It's those social connections that have a benefit and these get stacked on top of the benefits that come from the physical activity itself.

In fact, we found that water-based activity rivals almost every land-based activity when it comes to improving mental health. Yoga was the only land-based activity to come close.

This may be because some of the therapeutic traits found in aquatic exercise are mirrored in yoga, including the relaxing environment, low-impact movements and breath control.

The water itself can be a calming factor – studies found that people tended to approach the activity they're undertaking with more mindfulness. This positively affects their cognitive wellbeing because they are

very focused on trying to relax and decrease their stress and water is the medium where they can do it. Water-based activities can also allow the benefits of exercise to be experienced by those with physical limitations. When you unload your spine or hips, you can move quite freely in the water compared with when gravity pushes down on you.

We see patients have really significant changes in how they move in the water. And that also reflects on how they feel about themselves.

They feel better when they get out of the water and they have done something for themselves, whereas on land, they wouldn't be able to do those types of activities.

We know the best health benefits come from a combination of land and water-based activities.

This makes water an important leverage point to move people who are uncomfortable on land back to land-based activity. And for those people who are training on the land, the water can be a way of unloading, while still maintaining or even improving their cardiovascular capacity and muscle tone. So the evidence is clear – getting wet can help you get well.