

Surf Action is a Registered Charity

Surf Action is a registered charity dedicated to supporting serving and former members of the armed forces and emergency services who suffer the effects of psychological and/or physical injuries as a result of their service or have difficulty readjusting to civilian life, and their families .

Surf Action promotes good mental and physical health through strenuous physical activity, personal development, education and employment and empowers its service users to lead healthy, fulfilled and independent lives and to become valued and active members of their community. Central to this is the concept of ‘the blue gym’.



The 'Blue Gym' Concept

The 'blue gym' is the concept of using our stunning natural ocean, coastal and beach environments as a resource for pursuing human health and wellbeing through surfing and other strenuous water based activities.

Surf Action's projects offer the opportunity to those who engage to experience the outdoor classroom environment and an exhilarating physical, emotional and social experience which can act as the foundation for improvement in health and wellbeing . This in turn can act as the catalyst which empowers them to make other positive changes in their family life, working life and community involvement.



The Recovery Model

Surf Action works from one model only, the 'Joined-Up Recovery' Model.

Recovery is defined as living well in spite of any difficulties we may have to face. We view recovery as a journey, a movement from the place a person is in to places that are better to be in, learning and making use of new skills and understandings along the way.

The joined-up recovery model is a holistic, multi-dimensional integrated approach to improving ones mental health which takes into account an individual's needs, environment, social network, relationships, diet, physical and psychological wellbeing and so forth.



'Joined-Up Recovery'

We recognise that recovery:

- Does not necessarily mean getting back to where you were before
- Happens in 'fits and starts' and, like life, has many ups and downs
- Requires a well organised system of support from all involved
- Requires services to embrace new and innovative ways of working.
- Is profoundly influenced by people's expectations and attitudes

The development of the 'Joined-Up Recovery' model by the charity gives the service users and their families a bespoke pathway which they can access in order to achieve the best outcomes for themselves. It has been trialled and refined by Surf Action and qualitatively evaluated by Dr Nick Caddick of the 'Peter Harrison Centre for Disability Sport' at Loughborough University.



Surf Action is the only organisation providing evidence-based Ocean Therapy to support the mental health and wellbeing of the serving military, veterans and their families in the UK.

The research at Surf Action has considerably added to the existing knowledge of the concept of Ocean Therapy as devised by Carly Rogers at the University of Southern California whilst she was working with veterans.

She devised Ocean Therapy as an adaptive surfing program to assist individuals coping with psychological and physical injuries in accessing the ocean environment. It was taken up by the Jimmy Miller Foundation who now deliver it on behalf of the US Marine Corps at Camp Pendleton to both serving and veteran marines along with many other groups.



How it all works

We see everything working but, in the words of a nameless academic:

“Sure, it works in practice, but does it work in theory?”

Here’s some science, philosophy and common sense to explain how and why it does.



Surf Action gets needs met

When we look at any life that is working well, we see that certain needs are being met within it. Surf Action enables veterans to:

- **Build Connections:** being involved counters isolation and builds a connection into a community
- **Develop new competencies and feel 'stretched':** This can happen either through surfing, being involved as a volunteer or through one of the organised activities
- **Feel valued:** Surf Action acts as a healthy peer group within which people are valued for their participation, contributions and recognised for the roles they fill
- **Give and receive positive attention:** Often attention can be all about problems. Surf Action focuses in equal measure on the positives and on achievements and fun
- **Feel Secure:** Surf Action provides a safe environment where veterans are respected and their particular experiences understood

.....amongst other things



Lessens time spent alone

Research shows that spending a lot of time alone with our thoughts if we are stressed, depressed or suffering from PTSD can have a detrimental effect. Being involved with Surf Action, whether on the beach, in the office, volunteering or meeting with other veterans for an informal chat or organised activity can lessen the amount of time spent alone worrying or feeling angry. Focusing on and engaging with present reality rather than past trauma or fears about the future can have very positive knock-on effects



Surf Action helps build self-esteem and self-confidence based on a real understanding



Surf Action does not just offer tea and sympathy but also provides information about the science of PTSD and coping strategies that work in line with these understandings.

Tea is offered too, of course, and sympathy, and coffee... and very occasionally cake!

When we see our relationships and friendships beginning to work, when we learn a new skill or are recognised as being competent in a certain area, self-esteem and self-confidence naturally follow.

Rather than setting out to boost these things artificially, Surf Action provides opportunities for them to grow naturally and sustainably in the lives of all involved.



Surf Action helps to build hope

It's when the situation seems hopeless that things get really bad. Surf Action helps build hope that change is possible by finding a glimpse of the old you that has been long hidden by a mass of symptoms. It doesn't matter whether that glimpse happens on a wave, in the office, during an organised activity or at home. It's just such a glimpse and the hope that it brings that is often the beginning of a route through the difficulties and back to a life that works and functions for the individual



We offer Holistic Support

Surf Action offers holistic support to veterans affected by PTSD as they build or put the finishing touches to a life that works for them. This might mean offering practical advice or support. It might mean encouraging them to take part in regular surf clinics so that they are able to distance themselves from current difficulties and thus think more clearly about a possible way through for them. It might mean signposting to other agencies or it might mean offering them the opportunity of doing therapeutic work. Above all, however, it means enabling and allowing those involved to recognise and use their own resources to move forward and build a life that works for them.



Surf Action Encourages Creative Interventions

The process of creating art has long been recognised as being therapeutic. It is a way of expressing and communicating, of stretching ourselves and developing new skills and, for some, time spent in this way is a time when they can enter a state of 'flow'; where the rest of the world and its attendant difficulties disappear for a while whilst they are completely focused on the task in hand. Alongside this, when we engage our rational brain as we try to work out how to translate thoughts into images on paper we gain 'critical distance' from whatever subject we are trying to capture or express. When we have difficult memories to deal with this can aid in their reprocessing.



Creative Interventions

Surf Action is proud to work closely with the internationally respected Exeter based artist John McDermott who is himself an ex-serviceman who suffers from PTSD. In 2009 he set up the social enterprise 'Aftermath PTSD' as a way to assist other trauma sufferers through remedial, existential art. This has resulted in 4 major exhibitions which have attracted national media attention. He has visited several Surf Action residential events to talk about art and give lessons in its use as a therapy to help relieve the symptoms of some stress related conditions.



Surf Action offers access to therapeutic support

When we work with an up-to-date understanding of the physiology of PTSD it can be possible for people to move on from past traumatic memories so that they cease to cause huge emotional distress in the present.

Relaxation techniques and specific therapeutic re-processing techniques can be accessed through Surf Action.

If you have faced a traumatic experience you may simply feel emotionally numb to begin with and feelings of distress may not emerge immediately but sooner or later you are likely to develop emotional and physical reactions and experience changes in behaviour.



Therapeutic support

On a psychological level, when people are frightened they remember the incident very clearly and while it may be incredibly distressing to remember, it sometimes helps us to understand what has happened and come to terms with it and to be better prepared should it happen again. We need to let go of these reminders as they can make us jumpy, overcautious and worry the people we are with. It interferes with sleep, wellbeing and general health.

Surf Action is proud to work closely with 'PTSD Resolution' and many other agencies. Through a nationwide network of accredited therapists, PTSD Resolution and Surf Action can provide treatment to enable Veterans and Reservists to resolve the mental health problems associated with military trauma that obstruct a normal range of family and work relationships.



We Support Families

We recognise that in order to work effectively at all, we need to be aware of the bigger picture. Surf Action always welcomes family members – both in the office and to the Surf Clinics. We are currently expanding our work with families so that we can provide more dedicated support for partners, help with practical issues (such as housing, debt and benefits) and Family Days where fun activities can be enjoyed by veterans' families in an environment where the particular needs of participants are fully understood



Surfing is a fast-track to a tribe/community

One of our basic human needs is to be connected in some way to a wider community, peer group or tribe. The human brain is not designed to function in isolation and when we are isolated our thinking tends to become more skewed and strange.

As anyone who has been in the services will know, a few hours of sharing raw experiences together, where you are watching out for your 'mates' is, in terms of bonding, far more effective than spending hours together in a bar, in front of a computer game or even chatting casually.

Surfing with Surf Action taps into this and is thus a fast-track to fulfilling the basic human desire to be one of a tribe.



Surfing is a core activity in Ocean Therapy and here are some reasons why it is so well suited!

Surfing Improves Physical Health

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that being physically active leads to a healthier and happier life. People who do regular activity have a lower risk of many chronic diseases such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, strokes and some cancers.

Taking care of our body and getting fit can also boost self-esteem and self-confidence.



Surfing boosts ENDORPHIN levels

Taking exercise, especially vigorous exercise like surfing, in good natural light has long been known to be beneficial. When we exercise, hormones called ENDORPHINS are released by the PITUITARY GLAND, creating a sense of well-being.

Exercise also increases the flow of oxygen throughout the body, stimulates the nervous system and affects levels of brain chemicals such as SEROTONIN which in turn relieve tension, induce calm and make it easier to handle anxiety and stress.



Surfing boosts SEROTONIN and MELATONIN levels

SEROTONIN is a neurotransmitter linked to feelings of well-being and levels of it are artificially raised by some anti-depressants. Indeed research suggests that the benefits of regular exercise can be very powerful and comparable to those of an anti-depressant for mild to moderate depression.

MELATONIN is a hormone closely associated with regulating our sleep. In prescribed form it is used as a sleeping aid.

When dusk falls, SEROTONIN naturally converts into MELATONIN, allowing us to drop off to sleep more easily. If we have built up a good supply of SEROTONIN during daylight hours by taking vigorous exercise such as surfing, this conversion can take place more efficiently.



Surfing uses up body chemicals associated with stress

PTSD is all about the fight/flight response and high states of emotional arousal. When our body prepares for fight or flight or is in a high state of emotional arousal it is preparing for vigorous physical activity and a whole host of stress-related hormones like ADRENALIN and CORTISOL are produced.

The constant high arousal that is a symptom of PTSD and the unpleasant symptoms of extreme anxiety and panic attacks are caused when hormones such as ADRENALIN and CORTISOL are not used up by fighting or fleeing.

Vigorous physical activity like surfing uses up the ADRENALIN and CORTISOL allowing our system to calm down.



Surfing helps interrupt pattern matches in the brain

The brain stem is the oldest and smallest region in the human brain. It evolved hundreds of millions of years ago and is more like the entire brain of present-day reptiles. For this reason, it is often called the 'reptilian brain'. Various clumps of cells in the brain stem determine the brain's general level of alertness and regulate the vegetative processes of the body such as breathing and heartbeat. The AMYGDALA (the brain's security guard) stores templates for danger and when a 'near-enough' pattern match is made it fires the fight/flight response. In PTSD there are often many faulty pattern matches, meaning that everyday life can be peppered with false alarms.

Because surfing takes us away from our usual element (earth) and into another (water), a key part of any pattern is broken (unless the original trauma was water related). This can make triggers less distressing. Equally, the sound of the ocean masks and interrupts any potential sound pattern matches that usually cause distress (such as the shouts and squeals of children) allowing families who struggle to enjoy normal, boisterous activities for this reason to bond.



Surfing is a form of 'Mindfulness' and helps create 'Islands of Calm'

One of the difficulties with PTSD is that it often causes people to spend a huge amount of time thinking angrily or fearfully about the past and future.

Surfing focuses our attention on the present. We have to pay attention to what we are doing to stay afloat, to ride a wave, to stay safe and to watch out for our mates. If we drift off, the cold firm slap in the face by a Cornish wave is a powerful reminder of where we are.

Even if much of our time is swamped by the unpleasant symptoms of high emotional arousal, recognising those times when our symptoms are less pronounced and using them as a resource and something to repeat as often as possible is a key to making improvements. Often, starting positive change is like rolling a snowball down a hill; to begin with you have to push it but gradually its own weight begins to make it move naturally in that direction. Surfing, for many veterans, is just such a break from the symptoms.



Surfing is a good reason to have a laugh!

Your mate falling off a wave. You falling off a wave. One of Dits' jokes! Laughter works with our physiology to make us feel better.

Laughter relaxes the whole body, relieving physical tension and stress and leaving your muscles relaxed for up to 45 minutes afterwards.

Laughter also boosts the immune system by decreasing stress hormones and speeding up the rate of flow through the lymphatic system by up to a factor of 15 thus increasing immune cell production and infection fighting antibodies.

Like strenuous exercise, laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals. The endorphins promote the overall sense of well-being and can even temporarily relieve pain.



Surfing is not a cure

Surfing is not a cure but it is a focus, a passion and an activity that requires determination, perseverance and above all the aspiration to succeed. We cannot change the way that waves break but we can learn to ride in tune with them. It is also fun, makes you laugh and smile and encourages mutual respect with fellow surfers.

Surfing allows you to experience, appreciate and, most importantly, to respect the often visceral natural strength and rapidly changing moods of the ocean and its ancient rhythm of tides. It allows you to be an infinitesimal and vulnerable part of that power and makes you feel so incredibly alive and instils the desire to succeed.

Surf Action encourages its service users to take these elements forward into everyday life. They can be the catalyst which inspires change and then anything becomes possible.



Surf Action currently offers:

- Twice-weekly surf clinics with a focus on bonding and team building.
- Coastal and woodland walks and team-building activities that allow buddy support relationships to flourish
- Educational sessions and presentations which allow understanding to develop and which help lessen the fear about some of the symptoms associated with anxiety, depression, stress, PTSD and physiological trauma
- Home Front Family Days where close personal relationships can strengthen and where bonding or re-bonding can take place within a family environment.
- Surf Action Residential weeks spent learning new skills, forming strong peer-support relationships and in personal reflection.
- Employment Programme – Surf Action with its partners have developed core life employment skills for the betterment of moving people forward to satisfy their individual needs.
- Access to the arts through music tuition, art activities and creative workshops which allow veterans to explore and develop new life skills.
- Access to high intensity water-sports for the relief of PTSD, depression, anxiety and stress.
- Access to self-help and self-assessment tools and strategies, enabling veterans and family members to take informed and effective responsibility for their own psychological well-being.
- Signposting to recommended sources of support
- A Homeless outreach project



Surf Action also carries out the following activities:

- Supporting visiting units of the armed forces by providing them with surfing and other high intensity water-sports.
- Supporting local schools by running surfing based projects to help better integrate the children of the military and civilian communities.
- Supporting the families of servicemen who are deployed by providing surfing and beach activities for their families.
- Engaging in research projects which will help add to the current knowledge of how to best support good mental health and wellbeing.
- Developing close relationships with local military bases and facilities.
- Developing a strong volunteer base
- Surf Action and its volunteers go out into both the military and civilian communities and continue to raise awareness of the effects of PTSD and other stress related conditions amongst service users and help to overcome the negative attitudes towards those who suffer from such mental health conditions.
- Surf Action speaks at mental health conferences, to community and local government organisations, to health professionals, in schools and to employers.
- Surf Action speaks to employers and employer organisations about the benefits of employing our service users and about practicable 'reasonable adjustment' for those who may suffer from a mental health condition.

