

Discuss how outdoor adventure can be seen to contribute towards an individual's health and wellbeing.

Health and wellbeing are increasingly pressing issues in the modern world, with countless efforts being made to improve the general wellness of society. This essay will consider the value of outdoor adventure in combatting this problem and improving the lives of those who choose to engage in it. While outdoor activities have steadily become more popular through the decades with the work of theorists like John Dewey and David Kolb promoting its value in education, the potential for outdoor adventure to support and prevent the decline of mental and physical health is becoming evident (Ord and Leather, 2011).

Outdoor adventure is a concept that can be interpreted in vastly diverse ways due to the different perspectives available and the vagueness of the terminology. However, it is generally considered to require some connection to the natural environment and a variety of daring or risk-taking activities and perceived excitement, as well as providing an alternative to mainstream sports (Beames *et al*, 2019). For the purposes of this discussion, there will be a consideration towards Outdoor Adventure to include the pushing of personal limits, in a physical and exiting way whilst in an outdoor, or imitation of an outdoor environment. This is to include a wider range of abilities and activities like indoor climbing which can provide similar and more accessible experience of an outdoor-like adventure.

In both a physical and mental sense, health and wellbeing are extremely relevant topics in the modern era of technology and in post COVID-19 recovery. Constant access to news and information during the pandemic provided a source of comfort to many at the time, allowing them to feel well-informed and safer knowing they were up-to-date with regulations and safety instructions. Conversely, this access could also have the opposite effect, wherein the inescapable nature of news and the technology which communicates it led to overwhelming stress and anxiety from the constant bombardment of information, whilst trapped at home; especially for younger people at the time (Samji *et al*, 2021). This was, in some cases, exasperated by the boredom of having little to do at home, thus pushing people to spend more time online than they had previously.

Systematic reviews of the affects outdoor adventure can have on the wellbeing of participants have found consistently positive results that implied benefits to multiple areas of life (Holland *et al*, 2018). The reasons for this positive affect can differ between individuals and the methods of applying outdoor activities can also vary, thus requiring a more in-depth look at how positive outcomes are reached. When examining the effects of outdoor adventure programmes the prevalence of feelings, such as depression and anxiety, has been observed to decrease, while hope and resilience rise in response to the experience (Davidson and Ewert, 2024). This may

indicate that the ability to regulate extreme emotions is improved by these activities, and that participants are indeed uplifted by them.

In an analysis of outdoor recreational activities, Hammit (2015) suggests the value of restorative experiences in the outdoors is vital to the positive affect of outdoor adventure. An opportunity to refresh and rejuvenate both mental and physical processes can be found in pleasurable outdoor activities, providing separation to the usual environment people spend their time in, and allowing them to return with improved functionality. Mutz (2016) supports a similar idea, suggesting the “novel environment, under simple conditions, far away from the distractions of modern life and in a slowed-down mode” provides a near opposite atmosphere to the daily experience of high-stress, demanding work or education. This complete change of environment and expectations allows for the release of stress and anxiety, instead providing an opportunity to focus only on the present moment and indulge in both relaxation and adventure without outside pressures (Hammit, 2015 and Mutz, 2016).

Furthermore, these positive effects can be viewed in multiple demographics. An exploratory study into the benefits of outdoor adventure for recovering United Kingdom military personnel showed an improvement in wellbeing immediately after the course's activities, and its conclusions were reinforced six-months later when participants reported they perceived positive changes in their self and their wider lives (Kay and McKenna, 2019). Participants described an ability to “recognise the positive qualities and skills I have” after the course; implying an improved awareness and appreciation of themselves similar to the rise in hope and resilience documented by Davidson and Ewert (2024). People living with developmental disabilities have also found that they benefit from the experience of outdoor adventure (Armstrong *et al*, 2023). The reprieve from usual stressors that is often reported is present for this group too, but is also accompanied by the unique sense of positive sensory stimulation. This is promoted by engaging in and enjoying activities like climbing and other such physical activities, as if they were a stimulating action. A sense of empowerment and social engagement is also a major benefit to this group, as typical daily situations tend to place those with developmental disabilities at a constant disadvantage, attempting to keep up with normal expectations.

Regarding physical health, outdoor adventure provides a stimulating alternative to typical gym and workout activities. The natural environment can provide more varied and surprising experiences and opportunities to truly test oneself when compared to repetitive workouts; as well as being more mentally stimulating when engaged in the activity (Zwart and Ewart, 2022). Outdoor adventure allows for introspection, problem-solving, and observation of nature - all while being active and improving an individual's health.

While it would be hard to argue against the overwhelmingly positive initial effects of outdoor adventure on a wide range of individuals, it would be misleading not to mention that some groups may not match this experience, and that research in this area is lacking. Costs associated with outdoor adventure programmes can prove an immediate barrier to entry for lower income individuals, while the need for significant free time spent at varied distances from a person's normal life can be problematic for those handling many responsibilities (Mutz and Müller, 2016). This often makes outdoor adventure an activity that can only be accessed by more privileged groups, thus studies feature a blind spot when it comes to how underprivileged groups might benefit (or potentially not benefit) from outdoor adventure. Contributing to this issue is the problem of sample size and length of study (Davidson and Ewart, 2024) (Holland *et al*, 2019). The smaller samples provided by typical group size in outdoor activities can make it harder to apply results onto the wider population, as it poses the risk of skewed results or anomalies being taken as commonplace, when results may in fact be abnormal, thus making it vital for future studies to acknowledge and combat this issue as best they can. In a similar issue, the permanence of outdoor adventures benefits can be called into question by the lack of long-term studies. Of the research that has been undertaken, one example suggests that some benefits of outdoor adventure are temporary improvements, returning to baseline levels within 8-16 weeks after a residential experience (Holland *et al*, 2024). This could imply that outdoor experiences are not potent enough to remain influential in an individual's life and decision-making, or it could be evidence that the return to normal work and social structures is so opposed to outdoor recreation that it erodes the learning acquired for more convenient or useful ideas in urban life (Holland *et al*, 2024).

When considering the usefulness of outdoor adventure in regard to health and wellbeing, its benefits are applicable to the whole body, and that this is consistent amongst almost all people (especially from a developed, western perspective). It allows for complete psychological disconnection from daily stressors, allowing mind and body to work in tandem to complete adventure activities rather than separately. For example, situations can include the mind being active in work or social situations where people are often sitting for extended periods and gym exercise requiring no mental stimulation to complete. This change then can result in increases to a person's confidence and overall happiness. While the need for more research is frequently emphasised, the current evidence may suggest that the separation of mind and body perpetuated in modern life is detrimental to personal well-being.

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