

The outdoors, mental health and university students

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Mental health impacts how we think, feel and act. Outdoor experiential education experiences allow participants to see the relationship between the action and subsequent consequences. Outdoor experiential education is authentic; students are engaged, and they are involved both physically and cognitively with almost immediate feedback. Participants (n=30, 20 female identified, 10 male) completed semi-structured journal entries for impact on self-perception of mental health. They participated in various outdoor experiences such as abseiling, hiking, and kayaking. Consistent themes as evidenced include comments indicating they achieved more than they believed they could; and belief in the ability to achieve big things in the future. "...worse nightmare to be stuck in small space filled with water - occasion when I thought I would either cry, pass out, or fall and die. I was very proud of myself for getting through it without ever outwardly freaking out - taught me a lot of how much I can achieve ..." And, "My biggest eye-opening moment is that I am stronger than I have ever given myself credit for.... I need to be setting higher goals in every aspect of my life because I clearly have more mental, emotional and physical strength than I thought ..." Responses support previous studies indicating outdoor adventure programs have a positive impact on personal sense of self, including mental health. A greater understanding of these encounters may help facilitators enhance learning experiences for the participants. Although preliminary in nature, these results provide support for this theory, adventure programs can be utilized to help develop strong, mentally resilient young adults. A supportive and empowering outdoor experiential environment increases self-concept, self-efficacy and other psychological measurements.