



HOW SURFING AFFECTS THE PSYCHE

LIFE BEGINS IN THE OCEAN



Photos: Elise Crigar

By Kendall Toothe | Contributor

Some say surfing is a religion that connects us to a higher state of consciousness. Others say it offers equal components of lifestyle, sport and spiritual pursuit.

The addiction is passed down through generations. Surfers follow their family into the water, until it quickly becomes a part of them. There is no lack of clarity that we, humans, came from the ocean. Seventy percent of our body is water. Our brains are bathed in saltwater and even neurons fire because of salt level changes in the brain.

In search of logical reasoning, surfers often question, "What exactly is going on in our brains while surfing?" What we feel in the moment is not based solely on current sensors, but also on past experiences. Surfers are constantly being presented with different challenges, due to the fact that no wave is ever the same. The euphoric feeling of flow or being one with the ocean is a direct result of matching one's ability with the challenge.

Despite different circumstances, we can all agree with the endless clichés about the addiction to surfing. "There is no greater high," or, "Only a surfer knows the feeling," or, "Surfing saves our lives." The clichés become the reasons we tell ourselves it's okay to call in sick to work, to not study for an exam or to skip dinner plans. There are valid reasons a surfer's significant other quickly learns, "The ocean always comes first."

The evolutionary connection to the ocean explains some of its fixation, but surfers are drawn to the ocean by unseen forces. Breaking waves, diamonds dancing along the water and an endless horizon universally attract people seeking calm and revival. Sigmund Freud took the unexplainable stoke and created a scientific rea-

soning behind it called, "the oceanic feeling." He explained this feeling as, "An all-embracing, inclusive ego feeling existing alongside the mature ego."

Surfers reach to understand the feeling that we know is there, but despite Freud's theory, we still can't precisely explain the high that is felt on a wave. Physical and mental rehab centers around the world are using surfing as a way to replace the high of drugs with the endorphin rush of strenuous physical activity, not to mention the pure joy that standing on a surfboard and riding a wave can bring.

"Physically, surfing helps patients strengthen their bodies, find balance, identify vulnerabilities and connect the mind and body by having to engage in demanding physical activity," explained Amanda Swartzlender, Surf Therapist at Lakeview Health, a private drug and alcohol rehab center in Jacksonville.

By using surfing as a therapy, patients at Lakeview Health are tested both mentally and physically, after neglecting their health. The patients are challenged to try something new, trust the instructors, become vulnerable, face fears, give up control and surrender. Patients often report being "completely in the moment" with no outside thoughts, which they are often plagued with on a constant basis.

"After surfing, we explore their ability to stay present in other situations, now that they've had the experience while surfing," Swartzlender said. "It is very interesting how patients' core issues [what's underlying in their addiction] show up during surfing."

Despite the reasons behind why humans benefit from the ocean, the everlasting mental and physical high will continue to draw people in and instill a sense of safety, purpose and reason for being.

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