

# Mental Health Benefits of Fishing for Veterans

## Mental Health Benefits of Fishing: How Angling Supports Veterans Coping with PTSD and Anxiety

In recent years, healthcare providers, mental health professionals, and veterans' organizations have increasingly recognized the therapeutic value of nature-based recreational activities—especially fishing—as a complementary approach to traditional treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety. Grounded in research from clinical studies and supported by anecdotal evidence from veterans themselves, fishing has emerged as a practical, enjoyable, and accessible form of therapeutic engagement.

### A Natural Stress-Reducer

Central to fishing's mental health benefits is its location: the natural environment. Research in environmental psychology consistently demonstrates that exposure to nature reduces stress levels, lowers heart rate and blood pressure, and improves overall mood. A frequently cited study in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008) showed that participants who spent time in natural environments experienced significant improvements in attention and affect compared to those who remained in urban settings.

For veterans coping with PTSD—where hyperarousal, intrusive memories, and anxiety are common—regular access to quiet, natural settings offers a therapeutic contrast to the overstimulation and potential triggers of crowded or noisy environments. The gentle sounds of water, the rhythmic casting of a line, and the meditative observation of the environment create a calming sensory experience.

### Mindfulness and Focus

Fishing can be seen as a form of “active mindfulness.” The process requires focused attention on subtle cues: detecting slight changes in line tension, observing fish behavior, reading the water's movement, and adjusting techniques accordingly. This deliberate focus naturally shifts the mind away from rumination or negative thoughts and anchors it in the present moment.

Studies on mindfulness-based interventions for PTSD have demonstrated positive outcomes in symptom reduction, including decreased anxiety and improved emotional regulation (Polusny et al., 2015). Although not identical to formal mindfulness training, the attentive nature of fishing fosters a state of heightened awareness and calm that can emulate some aspects of these evidence-based treatments. In essence, the angler's concentration on the immediate task—casting, waiting, and reeling—is a gentle exercise in focusing attention on the here and now.

### **Building Confidence and Autonomy**

Many veterans transitioning from military life to civilian settings experience a loss of structure, camaraderie, and purpose. Activities like fishing can help restore a sense of competence and self-sufficiency. The skills required—learning to tie knots, selecting appropriate tackle, understanding fish habitats—offer small challenges that, when mastered, improve self-esteem. Acquiring these skills can remind veterans that they are capable learners, able to adapt and overcome difficulties.

Moreover, fishing is inherently goal-oriented, whether the goal is catching a particular species or mastering a new technique. Setting personal targets and seeing them through builds confidence and fosters a sense of accomplishment. As clinical literature suggests, experiences that enhance self-efficacy can contribute to overall psychological well-being (Bandura, 1994). For veterans, this can be particularly empowering, as it helps rebuild trust in their own abilities after traumatic or disorienting events.

### **Social Connection and Camaraderie**

Recreational fishing programs specifically designed for veterans, such as Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, Inc., have reported measurable improvements in participants' mood and coping abilities. These organized outings often pair veterans with experienced mentors, creating a supportive social environment. The shared experience of learning to fish, exchanging tips, and celebrating each other's successes fosters connections that can mitigate feelings of isolation, a known risk factor in veterans' mental health challenges.

Research on group-based nature activities supports this community-building effect. A 2017 study in *Military Medicine* (Otter & Currie) found that group recreational activities in natural settings helped reduce feelings of loneliness and encouraged peer support among veterans with PTSD. Such camaraderie not only eases symptoms of anxiety and depression but also provides an informal support network that can continue beyond the fishing trip itself.

### **Integrating Fishing Into Holistic Treatment Plans**

While fishing should not be seen as a replacement for evidence-based treatments—such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), trauma-focused therapy, or medication—it can serve as a valuable adjunct to traditional approaches. Mental health providers, recreational therapists, and veteran service organizations increasingly advocate for integrating these activities into comprehensive care plans. For example, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs includes recreational therapies like fishing as part of holistic treatment strategies for PTSD, acknowledging their potential to improve quality of life.

## **Conclusion**

The therapeutic value of fishing for veterans coping with PTSD and anxiety is supported by a growing body of research and numerous anecdotal accounts. The practice combines the calming influence of nature, the mindfulness of a focused pastime, the confidence of skill-building, and the warmth of community support. Taken together, these factors create a potent healing environment. By including fishing as part of a broader, evidence-based mental health strategy, veterans have another accessible pathway toward reduced stress, improved mood, and enhanced resilience.

## **Resources**

Veterans Crisis Line: 988

Warrior Cove Contact: [support@warriorcove.org](mailto:support@warriorcove.org)