

INTL  
**SURF  
THERAPY**  
ORG

**SURF  
THERAPY  
DECLARATION**



# INTRODUCTION

*Surf therapy* takes a structured approach to surfing to achieve a therapeutic benefit. Surf therapy plays a significant role globally in improving peoples' health and wellbeing. Target groups include, but are not limited to, disadvantaged children and youth, people with autism spectrum disorder, people with physical impairments and people with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or other forms of mental illness. The last five years have seen a rapid increase in the use of surfing as therapy for vulnerable populations. However, until now, surf therapy organizations around the world have operated primarily alone.

The *International Surf Therapy Organization* (ISTO) is a collective of the world's leading surf therapy proponents, researchers and influencers working together to share best practice, collaborate on research, and advocate about the benefits of surf therapy. Established in October 2017, ISTO's goal is to enable more people in need to access safe surf therapy programs globally, and for surf therapy to become a widely accepted evidence-based form of care. We collaborate to help change the lives of individuals using surf therapy to positively impact physical and mental wellbeing.

This *ISTO Surf Therapy Declaration* is a statement of intent and a demonstration of the evidence base behind surf therapy. It recognizes the importance of providing surf therapy in not only the prevention space, but also in early intervention and long-term support. This declaration reflects an international consensus among surf therapy organizations on the key principles and processes needed to execute effective surf therapy programs, while providing a gold standard of surf therapy programming to improve health and wellbeing.

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## Mission statement

*To understand, grow, advocate for and equip excellence in surf therapy.*





*If we had the entire world surfing, the fact is, we'd have a much more peaceful place.*

— Peter Mel, World Surf League, 2017

## We envision a world where...

- Surf therapy holds a trusted and valued place within an integrated approach to healthcare and personal development.
- The outdoor environment combined with structured healthy social engagement is used for all forms of recovery.
- Health care professionals prescribe surf therapy as a standard means of care.
- Surf therapy empowers, breaks down stigma, and improves social engagement.
- Surf therapy is accessible to everyone in need.



PIC: FLASHPOINT LABS

# THE CHALLENGE

*ISTO's founding organizations currently run programs across the following priority areas; mental health, disability, adverse environments, and marginalized communities. These priority areas are complex and challenging to address. They account for a significant burden of global health as highlighted below:*

## Mental Health

- Mental health conditions are one of the main causes of the overall global burden of disease. They account for 21.2% of years lived with disability worldwide.
- Mental health conditions are particularly stigmatized across all contexts with individuals facing discrimination even in health care settings.
- Depression, currently ranked fourth among the 10 leading causes of the global burden of disease, is predicted to be positioned in first place by 2030.
- In the United States 22 military veterans commit suicide each day.
- Eating disorders have the highest mortality rates among psychiatric disorders while specifically Anorexia Nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness.

## Disability

- Currently, an estimated 975 million people are living with a disability worldwide.
- Of these, it is estimated that 190 million have "severe disability" – the equivalent of disability associated with conditions such as quadriplegia, severe depression, or blindness.
- An estimated 95 million children (0–14 years) are living with a disability worldwide.
- Disability is a human rights issue; people with disabilities experience inequalities including denial of equal access to health care, employment and education.

## Adverse Environments

- It is estimated that of people with severe mental health conditions, a staggering 76-85% in developing countries receive no treatment, as compared with the also high rate of 35%-50% in developed countries.
- On average, there are five psychiatrists per million people living in low and middle-income countries.
- Studies have suggested that around half to two-thirds of young people will be or have been exposed to at least one traumatic experience or event by the time they reach 16 years of ages.

## Best practice requirements

- To provide best practice, we must consider a holistic approach to healthcare, including the outdoor environment. Nature-based therapies provide added benefits to those carried out in traditional settings.
- Surf therapy, like all therapy, should be strengths based and recovery focused, centered around the 'whole person'.
- Surf therapy must include a rigorous approach to safety provision, governance, evidence and inclusion in practice.



*Taking part in activities outdoors can do so much to build confidence, and the in-depth evaluation of surf therapy shows what great outcomes it can achieve.*

— Alison Johnston MSP,  
Health and Sport Committee  
Scottish Government, 2018

# THE BENEFITS

*Surf therapy provides significant benefits across a wide range of populations and has been successfully utilized for the benefit of individuals facing challenges associated with disability, mental health, social isolation, combat veteran status and living in a post-conflict zone.*

Surf therapy is associated with the following benefits:

- Improved physical health.
- Improved physical mobility.
- Improved mental health, including reduction of specific symptomologies.
- Improved personal wellbeing, including improvements to:
  - Confidence
  - Self esteem
  - Personal empowerment
  - Resilience and coping.
- Improved social skills.
- Improvements to positive functioning.
- Reduced costs and burden associated with future preventable illness.
- Greater quality of life.

*The ocean has a way of putting everything in perspective, ready or not it forces you to focus, clearing your head and helping you relax.*

— Lance Corporal Frank Schnitenbaumer



*The two hours that I spend here, are the only two hours that I don't hear the voices in my head, or I don't have to rehearse everything I'm going to say.*

— Anonymous



# OUR GOALS

1. Provide access to surf therapy for people who are physically, mentally or socially disadvantaged.
2. Build a research and evidence base to showcase global innovations in surf therapy.
3. Grow the global network of gold standard, high quality surf therapy interventions servicing various vulnerable populations.
4. Mentor upcoming surf therapy programs for inclusion into the ISTO network.
  - a. Help these programs meet the minimum requirements of surf therapy.
  - b. Ensure a high safety standard.
  - c. Monitor outcomes and program evaluations.
5. Highlight the importance of the natural environment and its benefits in therapeutic interventions.
6. Promotion of surf therapy access to landlocked areas using new wave pool technology alongside other innovations.



*All people should have safe access to salubrious, wild, biodiverse waters for well-being, healing, and therapy.*

— Wallace J. Nichols, *Blue Mind*, 2014

## Pathways to impact

*ISTO believes in pioneering surf therapy, and helping new organizations flourish and grow. The following 3 pillars define ISTO:*

### Pillar 1 UNDERSTAND

#### Increase understanding of surf therapy

Conduct shared research projects, publish existing research annually and share on [intlsurftherapy.org](http://intlsurftherapy.org). Execute an annual Surf Therapy conference to highlight impact and best practice in the sector.

### Pillar 2 SHARE

#### Promote excellence in surf therapy

Connect leaders of surf therapy organizations worldwide, share knowledge and exchange program tools, evaluation tools and evaluations to help each other improve practice and evidence base.

### Pillar 3 ADVOCATE

#### Build awareness of surf therapy

Share research and impact data at conferences globally, grow social media accounts and recruit global ambassadors to push awareness of surf therapy globally. Increase inclusion of surf therapy beneficiaries in the growth of surf therapy worldwide.





*Surfing has saved my life,  
if it wasn't for surfing, I don't  
know if I'd be around.*

— Anonymous

## Five year target

**Within the next five years, our aim is to ensure:**

*Surf therapy is regarded as an evidence based and integrated approach to healthcare, prescribed and practiced with excellence globally.*

### Background to the Declaration

This declaration was initiated following the inaugural conference of eight surf therapy organizations in Cape Town, South Africa in September 2017. The group, consisting of surf therapy practitioners, clinicians and researchers from four continents, established this consensus to promote the widespread promotion and evidencing of surf therapy.

### Contributing organizations

- A Walk On Water
- Jimmy Miller Memorial Foundation
- Kind Surf
- Surfers Healing
- Surf Industry Manufacturers Association
- The Wave Project
- Wave By Wave
- Waves for Change
- Waves of Wellness Foundation
- World Surf League



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To download this document or to access references alongside further information about how you may support and endorse this ISTO Declaration please head to:  
[www.intlsurftherapy.org/declaration](http://www.intlsurftherapy.org/declaration)

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