

**FEELING GOOD AND  
FUNCTIONING WELL:**

**HOW THE OUTWARD BOUND TRUST IMPROVES  
PERSONAL AND SOCIAL WELLBEING**





## INTRODUCTION

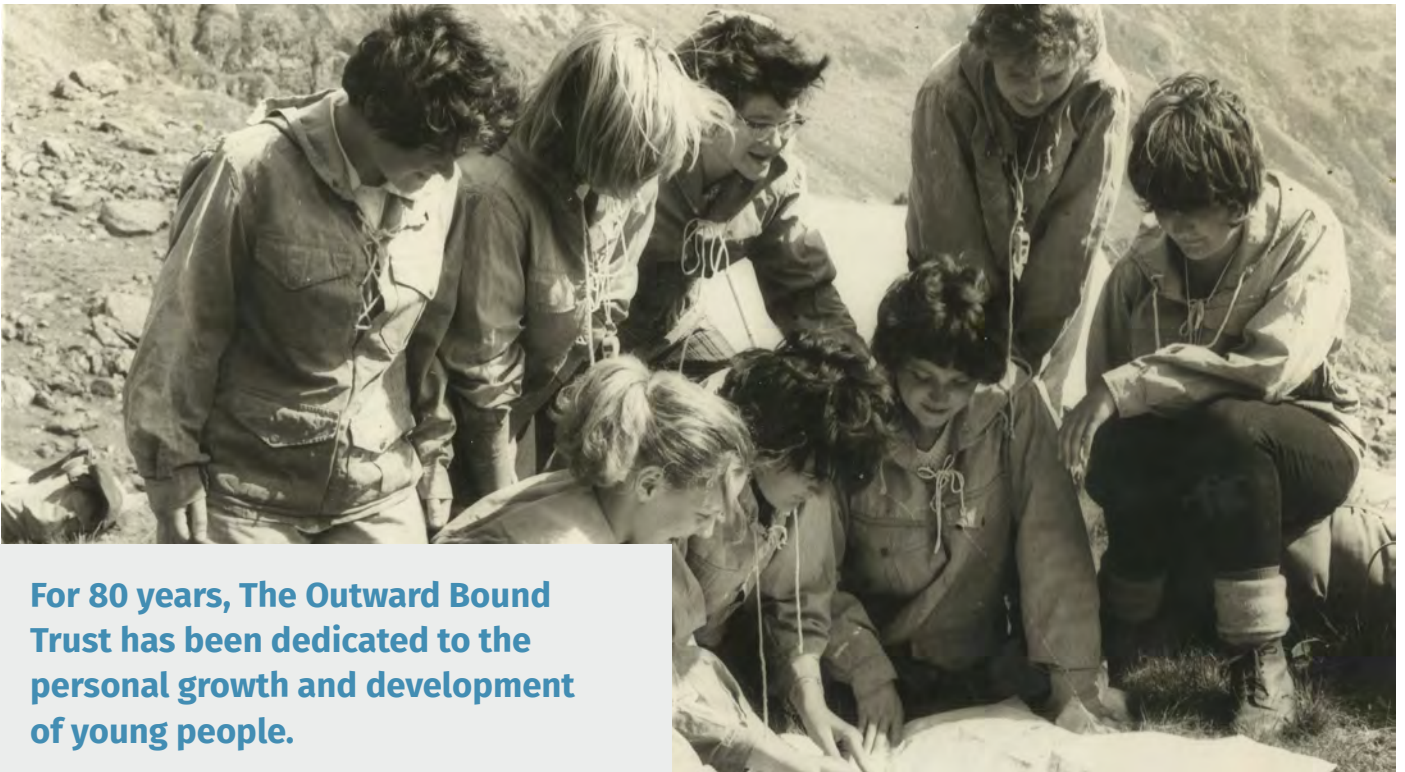
**Wellbeing is about feeling good and functioning well. When an individual feels good both day-to-day and overall, is functioning well and thinks their life is going well, they are considered to have high wellbeing – indeed they are considered to be “flourishing”.<sup>1</sup>**

Young people who are flourishing and thriving in life is the ultimate goal of educators, youth organisations, health providers and policymakers alike. When young people are feeling **happy** and **positive**, feel **competent** and able to **cope with day-to-day stresses**, and have a **sense of purpose** and **autonomy** in their lives, they're able to contribute their very best to society. They're more likely to **do better at school**, be **productive at work**, have **good health**, **live longer** and be **good citizens**.

There's no doubt that wellbeing is important in and of itself – as the Children's Society states in its Good Childhood Report, “*Children have the right to enjoy a*

*good childhood, and for it to equip them with the tools to grow and transition into a good adulthood.”<sup>2</sup> However, there are significant wider implications for investing in the wellbeing of young people for the health of our communities, the environment, society and the economy as a whole.*

**For this reason, the wellbeing of young people in the UK is a major cause for concern: not only do they report some of the lowest levels of wellbeing compared to other European nations but figures over recent years have shown a gradual decline in overall happiness coupled with an increasing prevalence of stress, anxiety and worry.**



**For 80 years, The Outward Bound Trust has been dedicated to the personal growth and development of young people.**

Taking part in an Outward Bound course gives young people the opportunity to build **confidence** and **self-belief**, to develop **skills** and to improve their relationships with others, providing them with the **tools and resources they need to function well** as individuals and to **flourish in life** – the very foundation of wellbeing.

As the mental health and wellbeing of many young people reaches a crisis point following the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become more important than ever that we understand the role that Outward Bound courses play in enhancing wellbeing. We have begun a programme of work through which we aim to gain a clearer understanding of how we currently build wellbeing and to identify areas for development in our practice so that we can better support young people in the future.

This paper is the starting point for this work. Through it, we aim to outline what we mean by the term wellbeing in relation to Outward Bound courses, and to provide an initial review of the various ways that our courses help to build the foundations for personal and social wellbeing of young people. We present findings from evaluations carried out over a number of years as they relate to the core components of wellbeing and, finally, we set the scene for our intentions regarding wellbeing over the coming years.



**The mental health and wellbeing of many young people has reached crisis point following the Covid-19 pandemic**

**This paper outlines what we mean by wellbeing, what this means in relation to Outward Bound and what part our courses can play in building the foundations for personal and social wellbeing of young people.**





## WHAT IS WELLBEING AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

**Wellbeing matters because it's about flourishing – as individuals, as communities and as society as a whole. Children and young people who are happy and flourishing today are those who will live well as adults – thriving at work, living healthy lives and contributing well to society.**

The term “wellbeing” has become a buzzword in recent years and is used across a range of different sectors to promote a sense of happiness and feeling good. But wellbeing has a much broader definition than that, encompassing how individuals, communities and the nation as a whole are doing. Personal wellbeing is the part of wellbeing specifically concerned with how individuals are doing – **how well they're functioning** and **how they feel their lives are going**. When an individual feels good both day-to-day and overall, is functioning well and thinks their life is going well, they are considered to have high wellbeing – indeed they are considered to be “flourishing”.

More often than not, it's the “feeling good” aspect of wellbeing that's emphasised – for instance feeling **positive, happy** and **relaxed**, as opposed to feeling

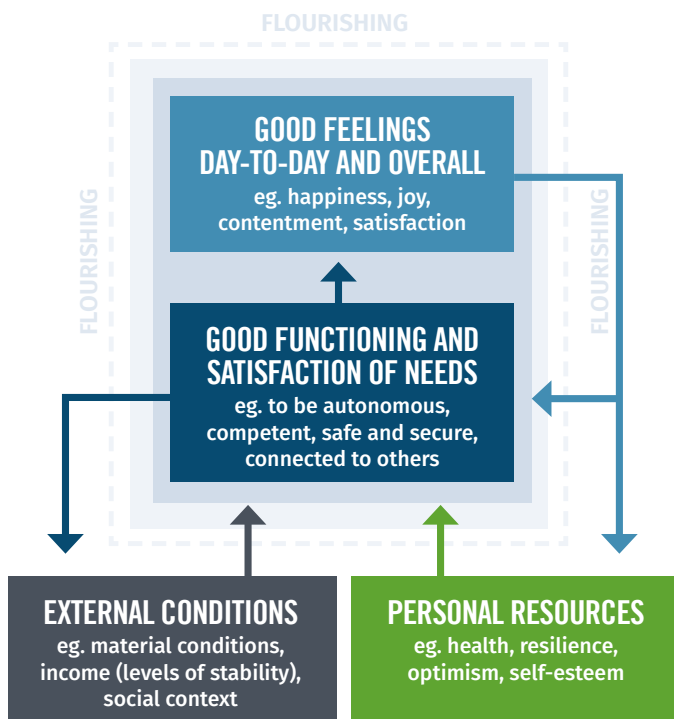
**stressed, anxious** or **worried**. However, there's a great deal more to wellbeing than just feeling good. Being able to function well – sometimes described as “psychological wellbeing” – is just as important, if not more so, and it's this aspect of wellbeing that's concerned with **personal growth, competence** and our **relationships with others**. This is reflected in the World Health Organization's definition of mental health:

*“a state in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her own community.”<sup>3</sup>*

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) has led a significant programme of work in the last 12 years to develop a dynamic model of wellbeing that describes how the different components interact with each other<sup>4</sup> (see Figure 1 on next page). Personal circumstances such as income and living conditions are important for wellbeing, and when they act together with an individual's personal resources such as resilience and self-esteem, individuals are able to function well and feel good, which in turn enable them to flourish in life.

**Figure 1: NEF's dynamic model of wellbeing**

Source: Measuring Wellbeing: A Guide for Practitioners (NEF)



## UNDERSTANDING WELLBEING IN MORE DETAIL: THE COMPONENTS OF FLOURISHING

NEF's early work draws on other theories of human flourishing and identifies a number of sub-components of wellbeing (see Figure 2). For instance, *self-determination theory*<sup>5</sup> describes how wellbeing is achieved by meeting three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Another is positive psychology's PERMA model of wellbeing,<sup>6</sup> which describes five building blocks for human flourishing: *positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment*.

Drawing on these various theories and models, it is clear that a number of core factors underpin wellbeing, including **relationships** and **connections with others**, a sense of **competence and achievement**, a sense of **purpose and meaning** and **autonomy**. Each of these are important for understanding the specific ways that Outward Bound courses help to drive improved wellbeing.

**Young people who are happy and flourishing today are those who will live well as adults, contributing well to society.**

## WHY IS WELLBEING IMPORTANT?

Wellbeing matters because it's about flourishing – as individuals, as communities and as society as a whole. Children and young people who are happy and flourishing today are those who will live well as adults – thriving at work, living healthy lives and contributing well to society. High levels of wellbeing are associated with **doing better at school**,<sup>7,8</sup> **better physical and mental health**,<sup>9</sup> **living for longer**,<sup>10</sup> and **pro-social behaviour**. Low wellbeing, on the other hand, is associated with depression, drug and alcohol use and anti-social behaviour.<sup>11</sup>

Investing in the wellbeing of children and young people, and promoting wellbeing at school, is particularly important. A sense of belonging at school, feeling connected to peers and teachers and feeling able to achieve, are associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and are considered to be protective factors against poor mental health, not just as teenagers but in adult life as well.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 2: Sub-components of personal wellbeing<sup>13</sup>**



## A NOTE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Although the terms mental health and wellbeing are often used together and interchangeably, wellbeing is considered to be different to mental health and not just its opposite. Mental health – or more specifically mental ill-health – encompasses a wide range of recognisable diagnosable conditions such as clinical depression and anxiety, whereas wellbeing is a broader measure of how well life is going. It's possible for an individual to have poor wellbeing but good mental health, and to have good wellbeing with poor mental health. However, mental health is an important aspect of wellbeing and a number of studies show how poor mental health is linked with lower levels of wellbeing.<sup>14</sup>



# YOUNG PEOPLE'S WELLBEING IN THE UK

For a number of years now, the wellbeing of children and young people in the UK has been in decline, and the situation becomes even more stark when we consider that UK youth report some of the lowest levels of wellbeing when compared with other European nations.

## DECLINING HAPPINESS AND SATISFACTION WITH LIFE

The Good Childhood Report, published by The Children's Society, has tracked young people's wellbeing over a period of 12 years, and has reported a **significant fall** in their **overall wellbeing** since the survey began. **Happiness with school, friends** and **appearance** have **all declined** in recent years, and in 2020 an increasing number of young people reported that they were **unhappy with the choices they have in life**.<sup>15</sup>

The OECD's PISA report<sup>16</sup> sets the UK within an international context and highlights **worryingly low levels of wellbeing** amongst **young people in the UK**.

Comparing the wellbeing of students in the UK with students in 23 other European countries, students in the UK report some of the lowest levels of wellbeing: by age 15, they are the **least satisfied with their lives**, they rank the **lowest** for having a **sense of purpose** in their lives and have the **second highest level of sadness**.

## OECD'S PISA REPORT COMPARES

the wellbeing of students in the UK with students in 23 other European countries.



UK



23 COUNTRIES

## THE RESULTS FOUND

Students in the UK report some of the lowest levels of wellbeing and are the least satisfied with their lives.

## INCREASING LEVELS OF STRESS, ANXIETY AND FEAR OF FAILURE

A number of reports in recent years have highlighted the increasing prevalence of **stress, anxiety** and **worry** amongst young people, particularly in relation to **schoolwork, relationships** and the **future**. The Prince's Trust's Youth Index has been recording young people's confidence across various aspects of their lives since 2009 and has reported **falling levels of confidence** and **emotional health** in recent years. Its 2021 report<sup>17</sup> showed that nearly two thirds of young people "always" or "often" feel stressed, and over half said they "always" or "often" feel anxious. This is reflected in the most recent Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study,<sup>18</sup> which surveys the health and wellbeing of Scottish adolescents. Its 2018 survey shows how confidence levels amongst Scottish adolescents were the lowest seen in 24 years, with just 51% of young people reporting they often or always felt confident in themselves. Furthermore, OECD's PISA survey shows that pupils in the UK report a greater fear of failure than the OECD average of 23 other European countries.<sup>19</sup>

## INEQUALITIES IN MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

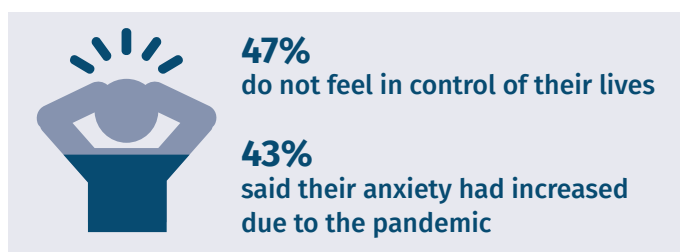
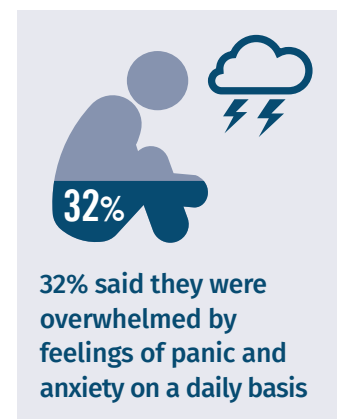
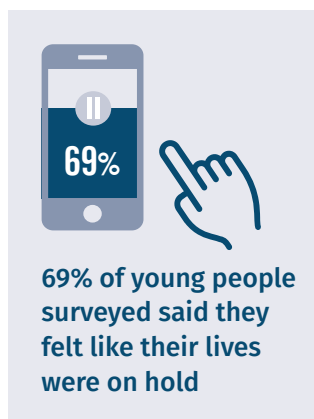
Wellbeing has been shown to decline as children move into adolescence and there are some differences based on gender. For instance, girls are more likely to report lower wellbeing in relation to appearance<sup>20</sup> and pressure to succeed,<sup>21</sup> whereas boys tend to report lower wellbeing in relation to schoolwork.<sup>22</sup> Girls are also more likely to express fear of failure than boys.

Socio-economic background has a particularly strong influence on mental health and wellbeing, with those from **poorer backgrounds** more likely to have **low wellbeing** and experience **poor mental health**.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the Good Childhood Report highlights rising poverty as one of the possible drivers in declining wellbeing amongst children and young people in the UK.

Vulnerable young people are also at more risk of poor wellbeing, including those who are in care, young carers, and those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).<sup>24</sup>

## IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

With restrictions placed on seeing family and friends, extended cancellation of clubs and activities and months of school closures, it's no surprise that the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of confidence and independence and rise in mental health issues amongst young people. Mental health providers saw a rapid increase in the number of young people seeking help and support during lockdowns and anxiety levels have increased for young people across all stages of education, as the isolation caused by the pandemic has removed them from their usual support networks both within and outside of school. The Prince's Trust Youth Index 2021 highlights the wide-ranging effects that the pandemic has had on young people's day-to-day wellbeing and future aspirations:



## SUMMARY

Fear of failure and an overwhelming pressure to succeed, coupled with external factors such as rising poverty, are just some of the factors contributing to a dramatic decline in wellbeing, raising a number of concerns for the future health, happiness and success of many young people in the UK. Given the central importance of wellbeing in creating a flourishing society, it is essential that action is taken to reverse this decline.



# HOW DOES THE OUTWARD BOUND TRUST DEVELOP PERSONAL AND SOCIAL WELLBEING IN YOUNG PEOPLE?

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A flourishing life involves good relationships, autonomy, competence and a sense of purpose, as well as feelings of happiness and satisfaction.<sup>25</sup>

Measuring our progress:  
the power of wellbeing (NEF) 2011

”

The Outward Bound Trust uses challenge and adventure in the outdoors to help young people develop confidence and **self-belief**, **social** and **emotional skills** and **stronger connections with their peers**. Using the concept of “**authentic adventure**”, Outward Bound courses provide opportunities for young people to deliberately **challenge themselves** to overcome obstacles and setbacks. **Learning from mistakes** is a central part of every course and instructors give young people the space they need to **make their own decisions** and **solve problems**. This allows them to **take**

**responsibility** for themselves, to experience **autonomy** and learn **self-reliance**. **Relationship development** is also central to every course, as young people **live** and **work together** as a team.

When we look at Outward Bound courses through the lens of wellbeing, it's clear that they help young people develop the capabilities and personal resources that are essential to enabling them to flourish and thrive. The focus on relationship development and building confidence and self-belief, whilst learning to cope with failure and recover from setbacks stand out clearly as mechanisms for enhancing wellbeing. **Below, we describe three key ways in which Outward Bound courses help to improve young people's wellbeing by developing skills that enable them to function well:**

- 1 Building connections and relationships with others**
- 2 Tackling fear of failure and building the ability to respond to adversity and change**
- 3 Building a sense of confidence, capability and purpose**



# OUTWARD BOUND COURSES THROUGH THE LENS OF WELLBEING

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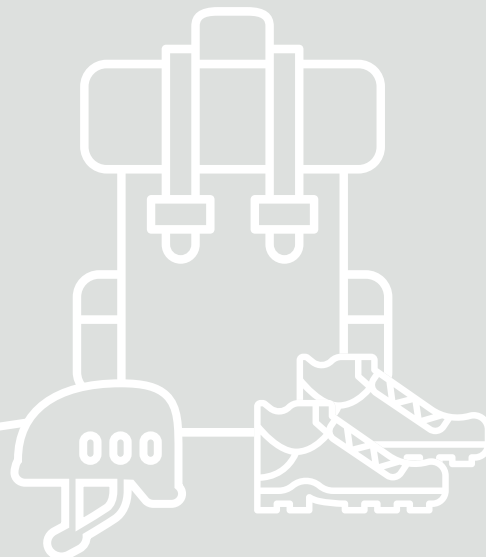
Building  
connections and  
relationships  
with others

2

Tackling fear of  
failure and building  
the ability to  
respond to  
adversity and  
change

3

Building a sense  
of confidence,  
capability and  
purpose



1

Building connections and relationships with others



## 1. IMPROVING SOCIAL WELLBEING BY BUILDING SKILLS AND INCREASING YOUNG PEOPLE'S CONNECTIONS WITH OTHERS

The social connections young people have with others are a key driver of wellbeing,<sup>26</sup> enabling them to learn important social skills and providing support networks that help them through periods of difficulty. However, many young people struggle in their relationships with others, feeling **isolated, disconnected** and both **anxious** and **afraid of meeting new people**. Over time, this can put their mental health at risk.

Outward Bound courses have a strong influence on social wellbeing because they are first and foremost a social experience, where young people spend extended time with each other, living and working together as a team. They tackle challenges and solve problems together, learn to **value each other's skills** and **ideas**, and to **rely on** and **support each** other through difficulties and setbacks. Through this, they experience a **sense of connectedness with others that they may have never felt before** – a feeling of **belonging** and **appreciation** and a sense of being **understood** and **cared for**.

The extended time spent together is particularly valued by young people<sup>27</sup> because it provides opportunities for them to develop **closer and stronger relationships** with each other. Eating meals together, sharing dormitories and spending 'non-activity time' with each other all enable them to **get to know their peers in new ways** and **form new friendships**. This creates a support network that not only helps them through the course, but that **brings them together** long after their course has finished.<sup>28</sup>

“

*Being 16, when you're that age and at high school, you know, everyone has their own little quirks, and you don't really talk to anyone else. Outward Bound was great for me because I went not knowing anyone, and I left being friends with all these great people, some of whom I still talk to today. So it helped me with my confidence and it made me able to start talking to more people and building relationships with other people.*

Claudia, age 20, speaking 4 years after her course

”



“

**You know, when you're climbing up a cliff face and they're the people holding you up, there is a fair amount of trust in it. You learn who you can rely on, who are your friends and who aren't.**

Daniel, age 16

”

Figure 3: Evidence of improved interpersonal skills



Through the relationships developed, Outward Bound courses can have the additional impact of helping to **strengthen the connection young people feel to school** and build a **culture of support and cooperation** in the classroom and wider school environment. Better relationships with teachers are particularly important for school connectedness<sup>29</sup> and are associated with higher levels of wellbeing. When pupils see their teachers struggle with the challenges and overcome their own personal fears, they see them in a different light which helps to build a greater level of trust and openness. This leads to improved relationships with teachers back at school.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS AND SOCIAL INTERACTION



**93%** OF PARTICIPANTS recorded an increase at the end of their course



**91%** OF TEACHERS reported an increase in social interaction between peers a month after their course. (43% reported “a lot more” interaction; 48% reported “a little more”).

“

*The teachers struggled with some of the activities but they made a joke out of it, they made a bit of banter out of it. I think that's **one of the most precious moments** – we saw them as people and not just professionals. We were out of the norm and it really was **something quite special**.*

Natasha, age 15, speaking one year on from her course

”

A sense of cooperation and belonging is also essential for overall wellbeing and happiness at school. Where a programme involves a class, year group or the whole school, the skills and the quality of the relationships pupils develop during their course are recreated back at school, leading to a more cohesive classroom and school environment for pupils.



**95%**  **OF TEACHERS**

reported an increase in the extent to which pupils supported each other in the classroom. (51% reported “a lot more” support; 44% reported “a little more”).

10

“

*The pupils definitely work better as a team. They are more likely to take into account everyone's views and to make diplomatic decisions without being reminded by staff. They also give peer praise more frequently for achievements without being prompted and appear to be more supportive of each other.*

Secondary school teacher, one month after course

”

“

The children are more friendly around school and are more inclined to speak with adults in school on a more mature level.

Primary school teacher, one month after course

”



“

The group of students are much more able to work as part of a team and support each other with their school work. Their communication with members of staff has also massively improved and they seem much more able to communicate any ideas or areas in which they are struggling.

Student Achievement Manager, one month after course

”

2

Tackling fear of failure and building the ability to respond to adversity and change



## 2. IMPROVING PERSONAL WELLBEING BY TACKLING YOUNG PEOPLE'S FEAR OF FAILURE AND BUILDING THEIR ABILITY TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGE, CHANGE AND ADVERSITY

Studies are increasingly recognising **fear of failure** as a **key driver of low wellbeing** and this can have a damaging effect on young people's performance at school and their mental health. Many of the young people who arrive at Outward Bound have a crippling fear of failure that prevents them from trying new things and engaging fully with the opportunities available to them.

Outward Bound courses have a strong influence on this aspect of wellbeing because the challenges that our instructors present young people with are carefully designed so that failure can be **positively experienced and overcome**. Instructors help them develop a **positive relationship with failure** by encouraging them to redefine it as a learning experience, where "fail" stands for "**F**irst **A**tttempt **I**n **L**earning". Activities are experienced at a slower pace than they would be in school, which allows young people the **time** and **space they need to make mistakes** and **try again until they succeed**. In doing so, they learn about how to tackle challenges with a growth mindset,\* to stick with tasks and to overcome obstacles.

Review sessions throughout the course provide regular opportunities for young people to **reflect on how they respond to adversity** and to consider things like 'what went wrong?' and 'what would I do differently next time?' They learn that feelings like anxiety and fear are natural responses to facing a challenge, and by taking a step back from a situation and planning a new approach, they develop strategies for coping with challenges and setbacks that they can use in daily life. This gives them the confidence to embrace challenges they go on to encounter in their lives, rather than shy away from them.

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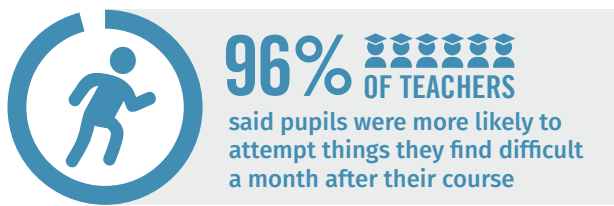
I am less anxious and can cope better because I plan for the 'what if' and try to remove as many unknowns as I can. At the beginning of the year, I failed a key subject that I need for my university course. It was a bit of a reality check, but you know what? It's fine, failure is just part of the process, you can still do it, you just need to find a different way, change your priorities. It might take longer, there will be setbacks but as long as you are moving forward, you know you can do it.

Amisha, age 19

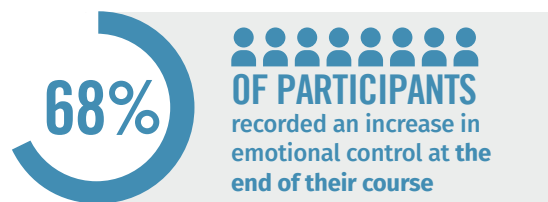
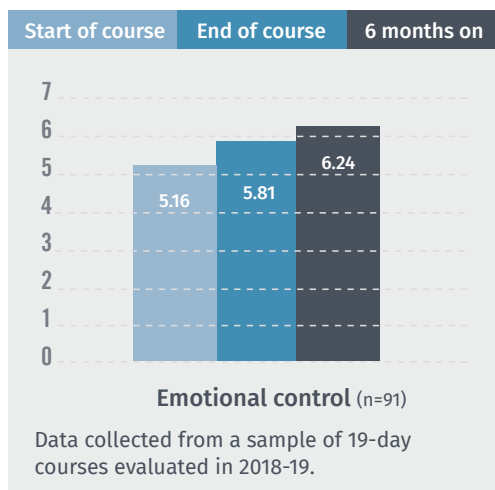
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\*With a growth mindset, young people are more likely to embrace challenges and persist despite failure.

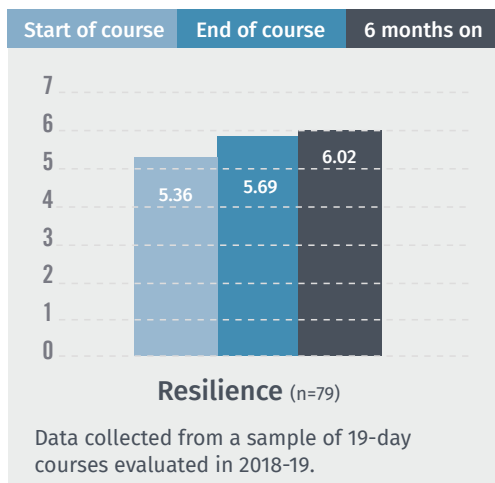
Figure 4: Evidence of improved ability to cope with change and respond to adversity



Evidence for improved emotional control



Evidence for improved resilience



*There were so many times on the course that I thought, "No, this is too much," but I made it. You learn that nothing really is too much for you.*

Rosie, age 16



3

Building a sense  
of confidence,  
capability and  
purpose



### 3. IMPROVING PERSONAL WELLBEING BY BUILDING YOUNG PEOPLE'S SENSE OF CONFIDENCE, CAPABILITY AND PURPOSE

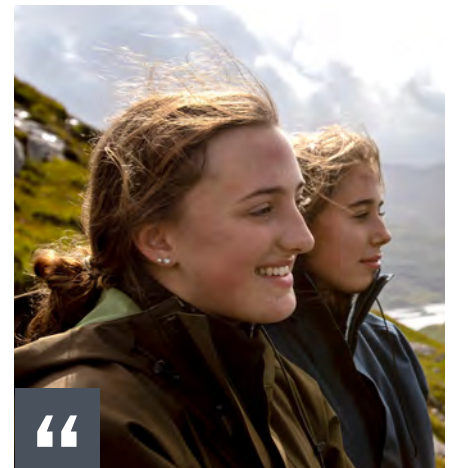
Self-efficacy - or an individual's belief in their own ability to perform certain tasks - is a key part of wellbeing and is considered to be the opposite of fear of failure. Low levels of self-efficacy can affect motivation and behaviour, and can lead to anxiety and perfectionism. Many young people show signs of low self-efficacy when they arrive at Outward Bound in how they strive for perfection in their schoolwork, or in their reluctance to try new things.

Outward Bound courses have a strong influence on this aspect of wellbeing because they provide opportunities for young people to develop new attitudes and skills that generate a sense of capability, particularly in relation to challenge and adversity. Learning new skills like problem-solving, planning and working collaboratively with others provides young people with the tools they need to perform tasks and achieve goals, and overcoming obstacles and tackling fears gives them a sense of accomplishment they may have never felt before. Openness to new experiences is a strong predictor of wellbeing among adolescents<sup>30</sup> and instructors carefully design activities so that every young person is challenged to tackle something they've never done before. This experience of accomplishment and achievement creates strong positive emotions of pride, exhilaration, joy and happiness - all of which build and reinforce wellbeing. This can lead to an enthusiasm for new experiences that continues to build confidence long after the course has finished.

“

*I learned not to be reluctant to try new things. I remember the first activity we did we had to go into the lake. I'm not going to lie - we were, like, 'I don't really want to do this'. But once we got past that first boundary [sic] - just putting our feet into the lake - by the end of it we literally just jumped in. I wouldn't forget it.*

Sian, age 18, speaking three months after her course



“

**Outward Bound has helped me in my everyday life, like when I don't feel like doing something I'd be like, 'no, let me just do something that will better myself'. It's like a whole journey, once you start doing that, you can only get better.**

Alice, age 18, speaking one year after her course

”

“

If I hadn't have gone on the course, I wouldn't be as **confident or as strong as I am now**. I think the opportunities I've had since the course probably would still be there but I don't think I'd have been as willing or confident enough to apply for them. Since coming off the course, it's definitely made me sort of grab life with two hands. To grab at every opportunity that comes my way, regardless of how difficult I think it is. The course has definitely made me ten times stronger.

”

Eva, age 19, speaking 18 months after her course

“

I absolutely hate walking, so climbing the mountain and camping overnight was tough. There was something about being with people who I knew would make it fun and knowing, if I did this and looked back, then this would possibly open more opportunities on the horizon. I learnt **there's always a silver lining and little moments that you need to cherish** to make things more enjoyable and there was a lot of them on the course.

”

Soraya, age 15, speaking one year after her course



“

I used to be like, I'll wake up, maybe I'll put some clothes on, maybe I'll stay in my pyjamas, binge watch some Netflix... I have hobbies now, I have an exercise routine. I feel a lot happier, you know, when you start off your day right?

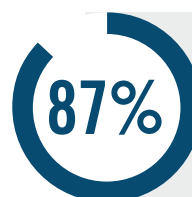
Ameena, age 18

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Figure 5: Evidence of improved capability and self-efficacy



**97% OF TEACHERS** reported increased awareness amongst pupils of what they were capable of achieving one month after their course



**87% OF PARTICIPANTS** recorded an increase at the end of their course



## PILOT STUDY

# EVALUATING THE EFFECT OF AN OUTWARD BOUND PROGRAMME ON MENTAL WELLBEING

The evidence presented in the previous three sections is drawn from evaluation studies we have carried out of specific course outcomes that relate to wellbeing. Here we present the findings from the first targeted study we have carried out into the effect of an Outward Bound programme on young people's mental wellbeing.

Over a five month period from the end of October 2019 to March 2020, young people attending an Outward Bound programme completed the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)<sup>31</sup> four times in order to track changes in their mental wellbeing. The WEMWBS questionnaire measures both the feeling good and functioning well aspects of wellbeing.

The programme began with a five-day residential course, after which the participants went on to design and deliver a project for their local community. The aim of the study was to record changes to the participants' wellbeing both following their residential course and on completion of the programme.

A comparison group that matched the participants' age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background as closely as possible also completed the questionnaires at roughly the same time.\*

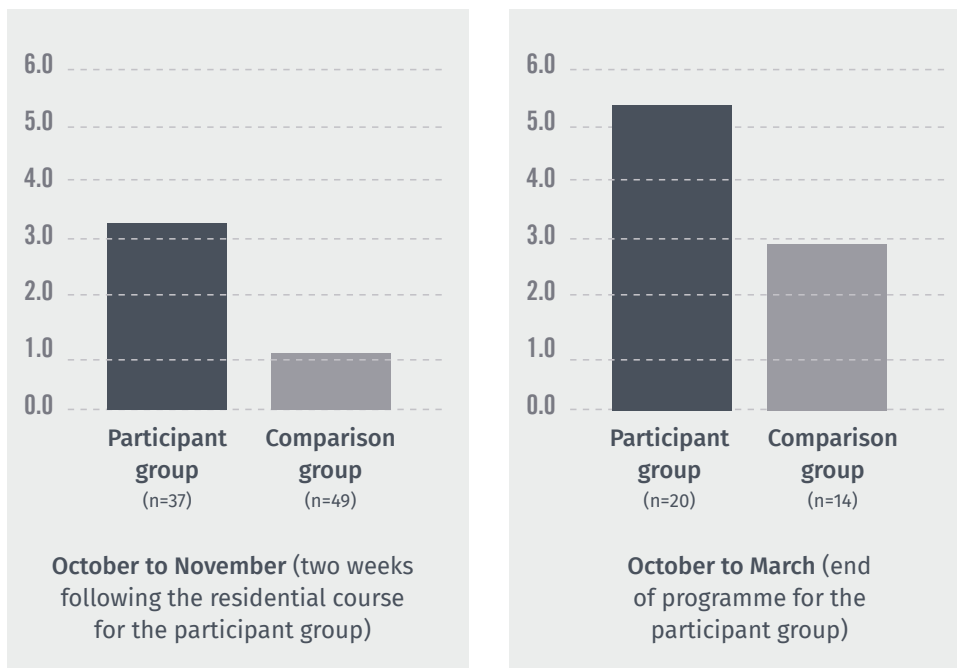
## IMPACT OF THE RESIDENTIAL COURSE AND THE OVERALL PROGRAMME

Following participation in the residential course, average scores for the Outward Bound group **increased by 3.3 points**, in contrast with the comparison group which **increased by 1.0 point** over the same time period (see Figure 6). An average change of 3 points or more is considered to be a meaningful change. These findings indicate that the Outward Bound residential course had an immediate positive impact on the participants' wellbeing.

\*A fourth questionnaire was due to be completed by the participant and comparison groups in March 2020. Unfortunately, due to school closures at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, only a small number of participants from both groups were able to complete their final questionnaire. The results presented in Figures 6, 7 & 8 are for those who completed all questionnaires up to the stated time point.

At the end of the programme, average wellbeing scores for the participant group **increased by 5.4 points**, in contrast with the comparison group which **increased by 2.9 points** (see Figure 6). The sample sizes were very small at this point, so the results should be treated with caution, but they indicate the positive impact of the overall programme on the participants' wellbeing.

**Figure 6: Average improvement in mental wellbeing of participant and comparison groups**

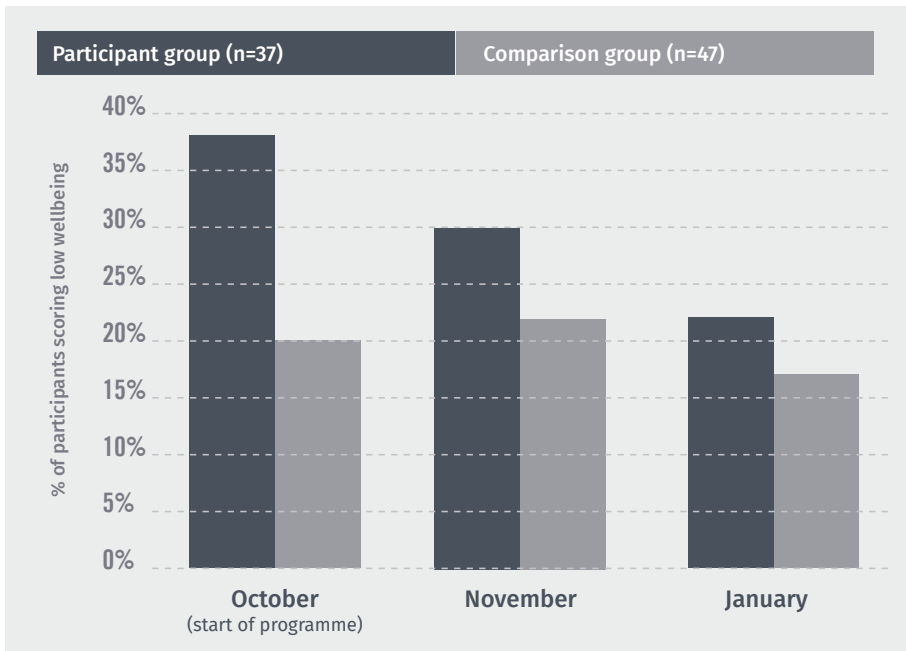


## IMPACT FOR PARTICIPANTS WITH LOW MENTAL WELLBEING

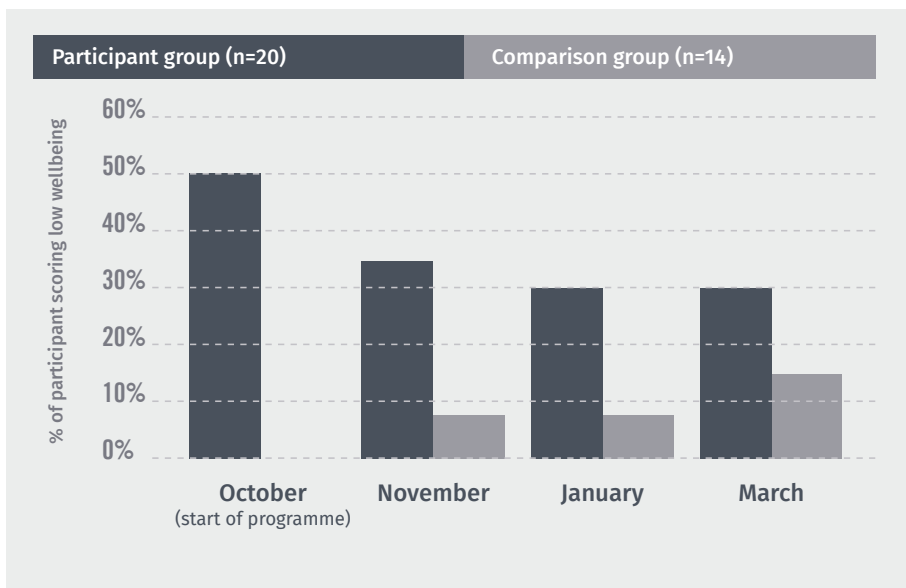
Further analysis shows that the **most significant changes occurred** within the group of participants who recorded **low mental wellbeing at the start of the programme**. The percentage of participants with low mental wellbeing dropped from 38% to 30% following the residential course, and to 20% three months into the programme, whilst the percentage of those recording low mental wellbeing in the comparison group remained roughly the same. (see Figure 7).

A similar pattern is observed for the smaller sample who completed all four questionnaires: the percentage of participants who recorded low wellbeing dropped from 50% to 35% after the residential course and to 30% at the end of the programme (see Figure 8). This contrasts with the comparison group, where the percentage who recorded low wellbeing steadily rose, despite being lower at the start. This suggests **that the programme may have a particularly positive effect on young people with poor mental wellbeing, helping to increase their wellbeing to average levels for their age.**

**Figure 7: % of participants with low wellbeing October - January**



**Figure 8: % of participants with low wellbeing October - March**





# DEVELOPING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF HOW OUTWARD BOUND COURSES IMPROVE WELLBEING

We believe that there are a number of other aspects to our courses that enhance young people's wellbeing, in addition to the ones we've described, and a key part of our work to better understand the effect of Outward Bound on wellbeing is to begin to explore these further.

One of them is specifically related to **mental health** and **emotional wellbeing** and how young people feel better able to manage common conditions such as stress or anxiety. Another is about their **connection with nature** and how they benefit from spending extended time in the natural environment.

As already mentioned, reflection and review are a key part of every Outward Bound course, where young people take time out to reflect on how they're feeling, what's working and what isn't. Through this process, they develop self-awareness and learn to understand their feelings better. Developing the ability to take notice is important for maintaining wellbeing,<sup>32</sup> but many young people may never have experienced this before their course. For this reason, we're interested to learn more about the role that these aspects of an Outward Bound course play in supporting wellbeing.

We're also interested to explore how young people's connection with nature improves as a result of their course and the impact that this has on their mental health and wellbeing. In interviews we carry out with young people after their course, we're hearing more and more about how they discover the calming effects of nature whilst at Outward Bound and how they are more likely to use the outdoors to help them manage their mental state once they get back home.

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We'd have time to ourselves to just think and that's something I didn't ever do before. Outward Bound taught me that just sitting and thinking on things is a great way to deal with your emotions, and before that I didn't really know how to deal with my emotions, I'd just let them build up.

Charlene, age 20, speaking four years after her course

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I do find myself going outside and just standing outside a lot more. It's much nicer being outside than it is inside. It's more fun, it's better than spending time looking at a TV screen or laptop or phone, it's good for your mental health to be outside in green spaces. Being outside and doing something – like in the woods outside my house, allows me to forget about everything else, in the sense that if I've got homework at home or I've got friends who are doing this or I've got a teacher who I've annoyed for whatever reason today, I've gone out into the woods and it doesn't matter, I can forget about it, I can destress. Nothing matters when I'm in the middle of the woods, there's nothing I can do about it. Definitely being outside is a really big benefit for me.

Tim, age 16, speaking a month after his course

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Being outdoors, it feels brilliant, it's like a relief, you're coming away from your phone and you're really just getting that peace and quiet - that time to think to yourself, which I don't think many people experience.

Bryony, age 17

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*I've been going to the parks a lot more. I went for a chill walk with my pals – I forced them outside as well. We're collectively getting healthier. I think during the walk you feel more at peace. When you're at home, you've got your **phone** and your **laptop** and your **gadgets**, and a **tonne of distractions**, whereas when you're out and about, you just kinda get the chance to **chill out**. I think it's important because student life is full of stress. First you've got your exams and your coursework, then you've got social media which is always buzzing. It's always good to turn off. There's a tonne of stuff nowadays about meditation and turning off, but I find that a lot harder because you're not doing anything whereas walking, you're actively doing something, but your brain is not active.*

Ameena, age 18

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*I try to get out more often because, being stuck at home, it changes your views about things. Being out it gives you a clearer head, especially with GCSEs coming up you need to go out and destress somehow.*

Mark, age 15

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## CONCLUSION

Wellbeing matters because it's about flourishing – as individuals, as communities and as a society as a whole. Children and young people who are happy and flourishing today will live well as adults - thriving at work and contributing well to society. However, the wellbeing of young people in the UK is worryingly low, with increasing numbers in recent years feeling anxious, stressed, unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives. This raises a number of concerns for the future health, happiness and success of a whole generation of young people.

For 80 years, The Outward Bound Trust has been dedicated to the personal development of young people and through an initial review of our courses, it's clear that wellbeing lies at the heart of Outward Bound – in particular through our focus on relationship building, tackling fear of failure and building self-belief and confidence.

Over the next few years, we intend to develop our research and evaluation to better understand the various ways that Outward Bound courses support and enhance young people's wellbeing. This includes expanding our use of specific wellbeing evaluation methods and investigating aspects of our practice that we haven't previously studied. For instance, we're particularly interested in learning more about

how participants' connection with nature improves both during and after their course, in light of growing evidence linking connection to nature with wellbeing. We hope that this work will provide new insights into the important role that Outward Bound can play in improving wellbeing and we will look to enhance our practice wherever relevant.

It goes without saying that ensuring the wellbeing of our staff is also crucial, so that they can give of their very best whether they're working directly with young people or in the wide range of other roles that enable The Outward Bound Trust to thrive. Over the last few years, we have listened more carefully to the mental health and wellbeing needs of our staff and have made them an increasingly important part of our organisational strategy. One of the first investments we are making is in additional training for our instructors to better support young people who may be struggling with their mental health during their course, so that they can more confidently deal with issues before they become more serious. We have also strengthened the existing package of support we provide to staff in relation to wellbeing, in particular making it easier to access and more wide-ranging. Over the coming years, we will consider a number of other current recommendations for ensuring workplace mental health and wellbeing and look to make improvements to the support we provide.

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