

# Beach cleans aren't just good for the sea—they can boost mental health and encourage better behavior

July 19 2024, by Kayleigh Wyles

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I love exploring the shoreline. I wander along my local Devon beach at least once a week, and my curiosity is naturally pulled to the high water

line. I enjoy discovering pretty shells but also the rubbish that the sea has washed in. The colors, shapes and sizes of this human-made waste stand out from the sand and seaweed.

Finding an old 1990s sweet wrapper is not only nostalgic, it's also a stark reminder that this [rubbish](#) doesn't go away and is an ongoing and growing problem that needs to be addressed. So once I have investigated what it is that's caught my eye, I add it to my small bag of rubbish to take back to the bin. It feels good and it's fun.

Removing that litter is not only good for the ocean, but also for me and everyone else who cleans up a beach. My research shows that participating in beach cleans is good for our [mental health](#) and encourages people to adopt more environmentally friendly behaviors.

To unpick the benefits of helping in a beach clean, [I ran a study](#) with a team of social and natural scientists. We asked 90 participants to complete one of three activities: a coastal walk (the most common activity people do on the coast), a beach clean (recording and removing rubbish found) or rockpooling (exploring species in the pools of water) at low tide.

The beach clean and rockpooling activities had a citizen science component whereby participants recorded scientific data. Rubbish items were collected, then logged onto the [Marine Conservation Society's](#) database of marine litter. Wildlife spotted in rockpools was recorded as part of the Marine Biological Association's [Shore Thing](#) program to monitor the nationwide impact of rising sea temperature on coastal species.

I asked the participants how they were feeling, assessed their knowledge about marine issues and asked about their everyday behaviors that have an impact on the environment both before and after each activity and

again a week later. By using quantitative rating scales that gave me numbers for these answers, I could see changes over time and compare between the three activities.

Participants told me that they were happy being on the coast, regardless of the activity. Out of the three activities, beach cleaning was the most meaningful and enriching experience. Being in the environment encouraged people to do more to protect it. Beach clean participants were much more likely to engage in future beach cleans compared to the other two groups.

## **A triple win**

Many studies have shown that spending time in nature, especially by the coast, makes us feel good. It improves our [mood, calm anxiety](#), improves our [breathing and our physical health](#), increases our concentration and [helps us recharge](#). But the cleanliness of that marine environment is important.

My research highlights how the benefits to our health and well-being are reduced on a littered or polluted beach. As a mixed team of social and natural scientists, we wanted to explore what the impacts are on people's psychological experiences of the beach.

Does it harm their mood or detract from the benefits that the coast normally provides? By getting 99 people to rate a number of photos of coastlines that were either clean or littered, [we found that](#) this was indeed the case: people disliked beaches that had rubbish.

Many commented that litter detracted from the mental and [physical health](#) benefits they would ordinarily get from being by the sea, especially if they see everyday litter like food packaging, as these items had much more negative associations.

One participant shared that this type of rubbish "seems much more intrusive" and a sign that people were being "careless and disrespectful." But knowing that [marine litter](#) is bad for the environment, wildlife and us, there are steps we can take to fix this.

Beach clean ups are a triple win. Volunteering at events run by groups such as the [Marine Conservation Society](#) and [Keep Britain Tidy](#) helps clean up our seas, protects marine wildlife and benefits us. This positively impacts other people who visit and enjoy the coast, plus the act of cleaning the coast has immediate health and well-being benefits on volunteers themselves.

So the next time you're having a stroll, take a look around—if you see some rubbish on the ground, take it to the nearest bin. Alternatively, join an event near you, either on your local [beach](#) or inland at parks or [by rivers](#) that all eventually lead to the ocean.

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