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The Case for a Non-Medical Approach to Tackling Mental Health in the UK

Why experiential learning — learning by doing — is an evidence-based, cost-effective way to build resilience and promote lifelong wellbeing.

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Executive Summary

Over the past decade, the UK has seen a marked rise in mental health challenges, especially among young people and working-age adults. Despite increases in medical interventions, including a record rise in antidepressant use and NHS service contacts, the prevalence of common mental health disorders continues to climb. The data highlights an urgent need for alternative, non-medical strategies.

This report makes the argument that **experiential learning (EL)** offers a powerful, evidence-based and cost-effective approach to building mental and emotional resilience — helping people of all ages not just to cope, but to truly thrive.

1 The State of Mental Health in the UK (2015–2025)

1 in 4 adults experience a mental health problem each year	**8.7 million** patients in England received an antidepressant prescription in 2023/24 (≈15% of the population)[6]
+45% rise in people in contact with NHS mental health services since 2019[8, 9]	**11.4 per 100,000** suicide rate in 2023, the highest since 1999[11]

Figure 1. Key indicators of mental health in the UK.

- **One in four adults** experience a mental health problem each year, and **one in six** report a common mental health issue in any given week.
- Among young people, probable mental disorder prevalence has risen sharply: among 8–16-year-olds from 12.5% (2017) to 20.3% (2023), and among 17–19-year-olds from 10.1% to 23.3%.[7]
- Young women and vulnerable groups, including LGBTQIA+ people and ethnic minorities, show disproportionately high risk.
- **Antidepressant use** has more than doubled since 2015, with prescriptions for 12–17-year-olds rising fastest. In 2023/24, over 8.7 million patients in England received an antidepressant prescription.[6, 13]
- **Contacts with NHS mental health services have risen by around 45% since 2019**, from 1.36 million (March 2019) to 1.97 million (November 2024). Contacts denote people actively

receiving support in a given month, not simply referrals. Access by children and young people has more than tripled since 2016, from around 142,000 to 466,000.[8, 9, 10]

- **Suicide rates** reached their highest level since 1999 in 2023: 11.4 per 100,000 people, with male suicides at 17.4 per 100,000.[11]

2 The Shortcomings of a Medicalised Response

While medical treatments are essential for many, current trends show:

- a widening gap between demand and supply in NHS services, with long waiting times and rising disability claims for mental ill-health;[12]
- over-reliance on prescription medication, especially among young people, despite only partial efficacy and the potential for long-term dependency;
- continued year-on-year increases in prevalence, showing that medication and therapy alone are insufficient.

3 The Science and Necessity of Experiential Learning

> ***Definition.*** *Experiential learning is a structured cycle in which individuals do (engage in purposeful, often novel activity), reflect (analyse the experience), conceptualise (draw general principles) and apply (transfer insights to new situations).*

At Empowr, we are driven by a profound understanding of how experiential learning shapes both the mind and the body.

Science shows that the brain, like the body, thrives on stimulation. Just as physical exercise strengthens muscles, **engaging in challenging experiences triggers neuroplasticity** — forming new neural connections, boosting cognitive flexibility and promoting emotional resilience. Without such mental exercise, neural pathways weaken, reducing our ability to adapt to and navigate life's complexities.

Through carefully designed experiential learning programmes, we introduce individuals to fresh challenges that stimulate brain activity at a cellular level. This activation leads to the creation of new neural pathways, improving brain function, reducing stress hormones and enhancing the body's natural ability to stay youthful and adaptable.

Empowr's initiatives are guided by a simple truth: without regular and meaningful stimulation, our neural connections weaken, and our ability to grow, cope and thrive diminishes. That is why we create hands-on experiences that keep people thinking, moving and connecting — nurturing sharper minds, stronger bodies and deeper human connection.

At Empowr, we don't just believe in lifelong wellbeing — we actively cultivate it, through experiences that empower people to thrive in every aspect of life.

4 Evidence: Experiential Learning as a Mental Health Intervention

Neuroplasticity

Repeated engagement in novel, hands-on activities leads to the growth of new neural pathways and improved brain health.[1, 2]

Resilience and self-efficacy

Real-world challenges foster confidence, adaptability and coping strategies — skills that protect against anxiety and depression.[3]

Social connection

Group-based experiential learning environments directly counteract isolation, a recognised driver of poor mental health.[4]

Physical health synergy

Movement-rich and outdoor-based programmes deliver simultaneous mental and physical benefits, reducing stress hormones and enhancing emotional regulation.[2, 5]

Long-term impact

Studies show that participatory, experiential learning models in schools, communities and workplaces improve mood, lower anxiety and reduce reliance on healthcare.[5]

5 The Societal and Economic Value of Experiential Learning

Humans — regardless of age — are wired to seek progress and thrive on accomplishment. The ability to achieve even small, everyday milestones reinforces a sense of purpose, confidence and motivation. Whether it is mastering a new skill, such as solving a Rubik's Cube or standing steadily on skates for the first time, moving with more confidence, or simply showing up and trying again, these experiences have a measurable effect on brain health and emotional stability. As more people feel capable and fulfilled, their contribution to society naturally increases.

This increased personal competence leads to broader economic value:

Greater workforce engagement

Individuals who stay mentally and physically active are more focused, adaptable and productive at work. This empowers them to take initiative, solve problems creatively and maintain a healthier work–life balance.

Health system relief

Many physical ailments stem from unresolved mental strain. By improving mental resilience through experiential activity, we reduce reliance on NHS and mental health services, easing pressure on public health resources and allowing funds to be redirected towards critical, acute care.

A more resilient population

A society built on continual learning and personal agency is more resilient in the face of social, economic and technological change. People become not just healthier, but more self-reliant, adaptable and proactive contributors to their communities.

Indirect public benefit

Even when individuals are not consciously aiming to contribute to the common good, the psychological effects of learning and achievement — such as increased dopamine and serotonin levels — lead to more positive social behaviour. In this way, personal growth becomes an unintentional act of public benefit.

This is why Empowr's work must be seen as more than engaging people in activities: it is laying the groundwork for a more capable, healthier and economically resilient society. Investing in experiential learning is not just a cultural or educational decision — it is a smart, future-focused economic strategy.

Conclusion: The Case for Experiential Learning in Mental Health and Lifelong Wellbeing

The statistics are clear: the UK is facing a mental health crisis that cannot be solved by medication and therapy alone. Experiential learning is a powerful yet under-utilised tool — shown to build resilience, foster connection and promote lifelong wellbeing. Integrating experiential learning into communities, schools and health systems offers tangible progress for the millions struggling with their mental health.

Empowr is committed to leading this movement — because we believe in the potential for every individual to thrive through experience.

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