HEROES ON THE WATER
OPERATION EARLY IMPACT

Executive Summary

Founded in 2007, Heroes on the Water (HOW) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to supporting veterans, first responders, and their families through kayak fishing. What began as a recreational escape quickly revealed itself as something more powerful. Participants experienced profound "Ah-ha!" moments during outings, where the combination of nature, water, and camaraderie created an environment for healing.

Since its early days, HOW has expanded to include two core programs:

- **VOLUNTEER-LED CHAPTERS:** Over 55 chapters across the U.S. host monthly kayak fishing events, open to all veterans, first responders, and their families.
- **THERAPEUTIC PROGRAMS:** Provides the benefits of kayak fishing to improve the recovery of active-duty military and veterans in treatment.

As HOW grew, so did the need to explore its impact on a larger scale. In 2021, we launched the Operation Early Impact Study to assess these benefits using a peer-reviewed tool developed by our Research Coordinator, Shelby Sharpe, Ph.D., MPA, CTRS/L.

Background of the Study

Operation Early Impact evaluates the effectiveness of HOW's kayak fishing programs in addressing mental health challenges. The study focuses on three critical areas of well-being:

STRESS MANAGEMENT: Examines the role of HOW in reducing anxiety, promoting relaxation, and equipping participants with coping skills for everyday life.

SELF-EFFICACY: Measures the impact of participation on an individual's belief in their own abilities and confidence.

RELATIONSHIPS: Explores the bonds built among participants, the development of new connections, and the effects on relationships with family and friends outside of HOW.

The study follows a strict ethical review process through an Internal Review Board (IRB), ensuring that participant data is handled with care and integrity. Once research findings are compiled, they undergo peer review for presentation and publication in professional journals, ensuring high levels of accuracy and credibility.

Study Findings

The study found that participants experience:

A non-clinical, stress-free environment conducive to healing

Improved emotional regulation and reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression

Increased social connection, strengthening personal relationships

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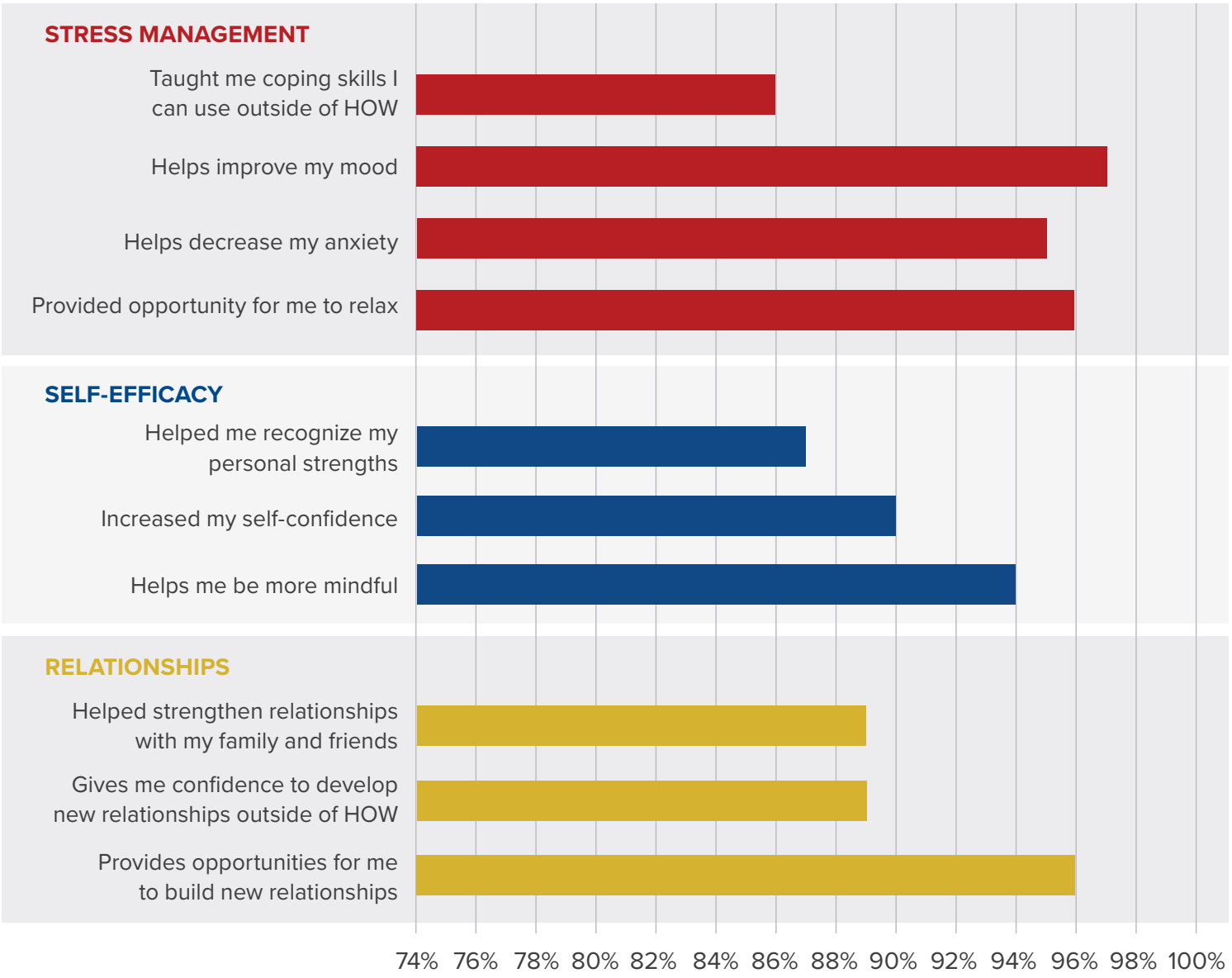
Major Findings

RESPONSE SUMMARY

(updated Feb 2025)



Continued Expansion

Operation Early Impact is an ongoing commitment to understand and validate the therapeutic power of kayak fishing. As the research continues, the goal remains the same: effective ways to support veterans and first responders to find healing, connection, and a renewed sense of purpose.