

Outdoor Tourism and its Influence on Mental Wellbeing

Ammar Hussain

Student, Department of Sport Science and Physical Education, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, The University of Lahore. Saifihammad4@gmail.com

Basit Ali*

Lecturer, Department of Sport Science and Physical Education, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, The University of Lahore. Corresponding Author Email: Basit.ali@sports.uol.edu.pk

Rashid Iqbal

Student, Department of Sport Science and Physical Education, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, The University of Lahore. Rashidiq0000@gmail.com

Tania Yousaf

Student, Department of Sport Science and Physical Education, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, The University of Lahore. Taniaazhar172@gmail.com

Hamza Mehdi

Student, Department of Sport Science and Physical Education, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, The University of Lahore. Hamzamehdikhan12@gmail.com

Junaid Abbas

Student, Department of Sport Science and Physical Education, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, The University of Lahore. abbasjunaid.jd@gmail.com

Muhammad Aoun Mahdi

Student, Department of Sport Science and Physical Education, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, The University of Lahore. muhammadaoun446@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of outdoor tourism on mental well-being, focusing on visitors to Naltar Valley, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. The research was motivated by increasing global concerns about mental health and the growing interest in natural and accessible approaches to enhance psychological well-being. A quantitative research design was adopted, and data were collected from 50 participants actively engaged in outdoor tourism activities such as hiking, camping, and exploring lakes and meadows. The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) was used as the primary tool to measure mental well-being. Data were analyzed using SPSS, with normality tests confirming non-normal distribution, leading to the application of non-parametric statistical approaches. Results revealed that the majority of participants reported frequent or consistent feelings of optimism, relaxation, confidence, usefulness, social connectedness, and cheerfulness, demonstrating that outdoor tourism positively contributes to both emotional and

social dimensions of mental health. While some participants reported lower levels of well-being, the overall findings strongly support the psychological benefits of engaging with natural environments. The study concludes that outdoor tourism serves not only as a recreational activity but also as an effective means to promote mental well-being. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, tourism planners, and mental health advocates, emphasizing the need to promote and sustain outdoor tourism as a complementary approach to enhancing psychological health.

Keywords: Outdoor Tourism, Mental Well-Being, Gilgit Baltistan.

Introduction

Recent research interest in tourism and mental health arises from a straightforward and fundamental premise: people pay for enjoyment (Buckley, 2023). When tourists spend money and time on holiday travel, they expect to enjoy themselves. Enjoyment promotes well-being, well-being contributes to mental health and health has a substantial economic value (Coghlan, 2015). Historically, most tourism economics research has examined how discretionary spending by tourists generates financial inputs into travel, accommodation, and tourism activity products, enterprises, and destinations. The mental health perspective adds another financial element (Knapp et al., 2006). Leisure tourists are investing in their own mental health, and this generates an independent set of economic contributions, through reduced healthcare costs, improved workplace productivity, and changes in social behaviors (Buckley & Cooper, 2022).

Tourism and health research and practice have complementary disciplinary emphases. Tourism research analyzes details of program and product design and setting, markets and marketing, including individual motivations, expectations, experiences, and satisfaction, because these are needed for profitable (Smith & Puczkó, 2014). It has not, historically at least, analyzed or compared clients' mental health outcomes, because those have not been seen as relevant. From a tourism research perspective, a mental health lens can yield new insights and opportunities. Health research, in contrast, does focus principally on outcomes, with less emphasis on the details of program design and participation. Healthcare and health research, including mental health, are much larger fields than tourism (Zhong et al., 2021).

They do not currently consider tourism as mainstream mental health therapy; but this may change during post pandemic recovery. This Foundations review has three principal aims. First, to introduce a mental health research framework, and show how it is relevant in tourism (Hu et al., 2025). Second, to review published research across both tourism and health literature, so as to identify the principal linkages. Third, to identify the different emphases and gaps in research in three major tourism sub sectors (Hall, 2008): urban and indoor; parks, nature, and wildlife; and adventure and outdoor recreation. This scope reflects the components of tourism where mental health outcomes depend most directly on the design of tourism products (Ge & Chen, 2024). Business travel, including conferences and events (MICE), is excluded, since it is not leisure travel and is not necessarily purchased with enjoyment in mind. Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) is also excluded, since its mental health outcomes are derived principally from family dynamics, not tourism (Miah, 2020).

Mental health has many different components: brain, nervous system, and sensory organs; senses, sensations, moods and emotions; and functions such as attention, cognition, memory, judgment, decision, and motor control (Harrison et al., 2019). There is no single measure of mental health, and no criterion for perfect mental health: there are only population distributions, means, and norms for different parameters (Lenhard et al., 2019). Many aspects are difficult to measure unambiguously, and there are many psychological tests, intended to encapsulate different aspects. Any aspect of the mental health of any individual can fluctuate considerably, at either short or long timescales (Houben et al., 2015). Poor mental health commonly implies that one or more mental functions, as measured by one or more tests, is below a standardized norm derived from population distributions. For example, a person who is anxious or depressed can be considered in poor mental health. Mental ill-health implies greater severity, usually involving a named psychological condition. There is a wide range of conditions and pathologies, defined formally in medical psychiatric manuals (EDITION, 1980). Most mental conditions involve both neurological and biochemical components, but many of the mechanisms are poorly understood. Poor mental health can impose substantial social and economic costs, on: the individuals affected; their families and social contacts; and their employers, insurers, and national economies (Knapp et al., 2006). There are

four main cost categories: direct healthcare costs, lost workplace productivity, costs of paid or unpaid careers, and costs of antisocial behaviors. Jointly, these costs amounted to ~10% of global GNP, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are now substantially larger. The social context for mental health has changed considerably in recent years, especially in developed Western nations (Organization, 2001).

Outdoor tourism's historical roots lie in the desire for relaxation, stress relief, and the exploration of nature (Burns, 2018). The practice has significantly impacted mental well-being, with evidence suggesting it reduces stress, anxiety, and depression, while also boosting social adaptability and positive emotional experiences (Fava & Tomba, 2009). The mental health perspective adds another financial element. Leisure tourists are investing in their own mental health, and this generates an independent set of economic contributions, through reduced healthcare costs, improved workplace productivity, and changes in social behaviors (Diener & Seligman, 2004). There are also differences in geography and timing. Tourist spending contributes economically at destinations, as well as origins and principally, before and during the holiday concerned. Mental health gains, in contrast, generate contributions at tourist places of origin, and largely after holidays are over. Tourism and health research and practice have complementary disciplinary emphases. Tourism research analyzes details of program and product design and setting, markets and marketing, including individual motivations, expectations, experiences, and satisfaction, because these are needed for profitability (Silvestro, 2002).

Problem Statement

In recent years, mental health concerns have become increasingly prominent, with individuals seeking natural and accessible ways to improve their well-being. Outdoor tourism, involving travel and activities in natural environments, is believed to offer psychological benefits. However, there is limited research specifically examining the direct impact of outdoor tourism on mental well-being (Buckley, 2020; Hanna et al., 2019). This study aims to explore whether engaging in outdoor tourism activities contributes significantly to enhancing mental health and overall well-being.

Hypothesis

H1: Outdoor tourism and outdoor activities in nature has a significant effect on

mental health and well-being.

Objectives

To evaluate the influence of outdoor tourism and nature based outdoor activities on mental health and overall well-being.

Material and Method

Place of Work and Facilities Available

The research was conducted in Naltar Valley, located in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. This region is known for its natural beauty and offers a variety of outdoor tourism activities, including hiking, camping, visits to natural lakes, and exploration of meadows. The availability of these natural attractions makes Naltar Valley an ideal location for assessing the influence of outdoor tourism on mental well-being.

Plan of Work and Methodology Adopted

The study adopted a quantitative research approach using a structured questionnaire to collect data. The primary tool used to assess mental well-being was the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), a validated and widely used scale for measuring positive mental health. The questionnaire also included items related to participants' engagement in outdoor activities during their visit to Naltar Valley.

Parameters /Variable to be Studied

Independent Variable: Participation in outdoor tourism activities (e.g., hiking, camping, visiting lakes and meadows).

Dependent Variable: Mental well-being of individuals, as measured by the WEMWBS.

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through in-person questionnaires administered to individuals visiting Naltar Valley for outdoor tourism activities. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, and their voluntary consent was obtained before participation.

Sampling Techniques and Procedure

The study employed a purposive sampling technique, selecting individuals who were actively engaged in outdoor tourism activities in the region. This method ensured that the sample was relevant and appropriate for assessing the research hypothesis.

Sample Size

A total of 50 participants were selected for the study. This sample size is consistent with previous research in similar fields; for instance, a study by Müller et al. (2018) examined the psychological effects of nature-based tourism with a sample of 50 participants and found meaningful insights into well-being outcomes. This demonstrates the adequacy of a 50-participant sample for exploratory field studies.

Statistical Analysis / Test to be Used

Data analysis were performed using SPSS or a similar statistical software.

Normality with tests Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests was applied to determine the distribution of the data.

Based on the results, parametric tests were employed.

Descriptive statistics, including the mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions of questionnaire responses, was calculated to summarize participants' mental well-being scores and their level of engagement in outdoor activities

Results

Table 1: Case Processing Summary

Cases							
		Valid		Missing		Total	
		N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
I've been feeling optimistic about the future	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%	
I've been feeling useful	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%	
I've been feeling relaxed	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%	
I've been feeling interested in other people	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%	
I've had energy to spare	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%	

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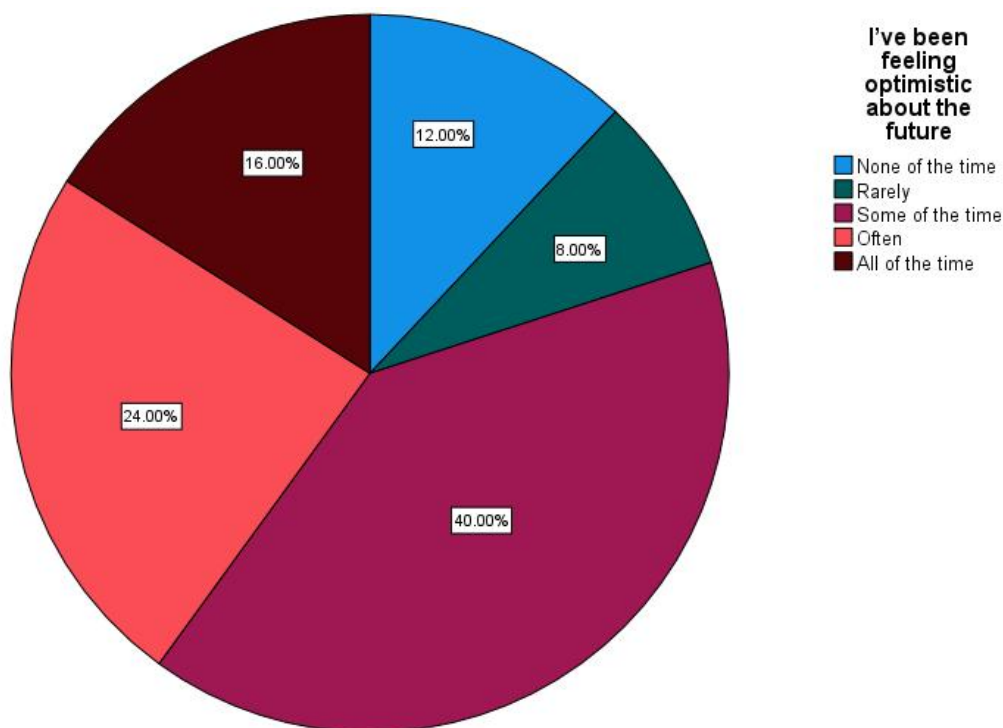
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I've been dealing with problem well	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%
I've been thinking clearly	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%
I've been feeling good about my self	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%
I've been feeling close to the other people	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%
I've been feeling confident	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%
I've been able to make up my own mind about things	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%
I've been feeling loved	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%
I've been interested in new things	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%
I've been feeling cheerful	48	96.0%	2	4.0%	50	100.0%

Note: The Case Processing Summary table shows that out of the 50 participants surveyed, responses from 48 individuals (96%) were valid across all items of the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale, while only 2 responses (4%) were missing for each item. This indicates a high level of data completeness and participant engagement, with minimal missing values that are unlikely to affect the overall reliability of the results. The consistency across all questionnaire items suggests that the dataset is robust and suitable for further statistical analysis to assess the relationship between outdoor tourism activities and mental well-being.

Figure 1:



Note: The pie chart illustrates participants' responses to the statement "*I've been feeling optimistic about the future*" during their outdoor tourism experience in Naltar Valley. A substantial proportion (40%) reported feeling optimistic "some of the time," while 24% indicated experiencing this optimism "often," and 16% felt it "all of the time." On the other hand, smaller shares expressed lower optimism, with 12% selecting "none of the time" and 8% "rarely." Overall, the results show that the majority of participants experienced at least some level of optimism about the future during their outdoor tourism activities, highlighting the potential of nature-based tourism to positively influence mental well-being by fostering hopefulness and a forward-looking mindset.

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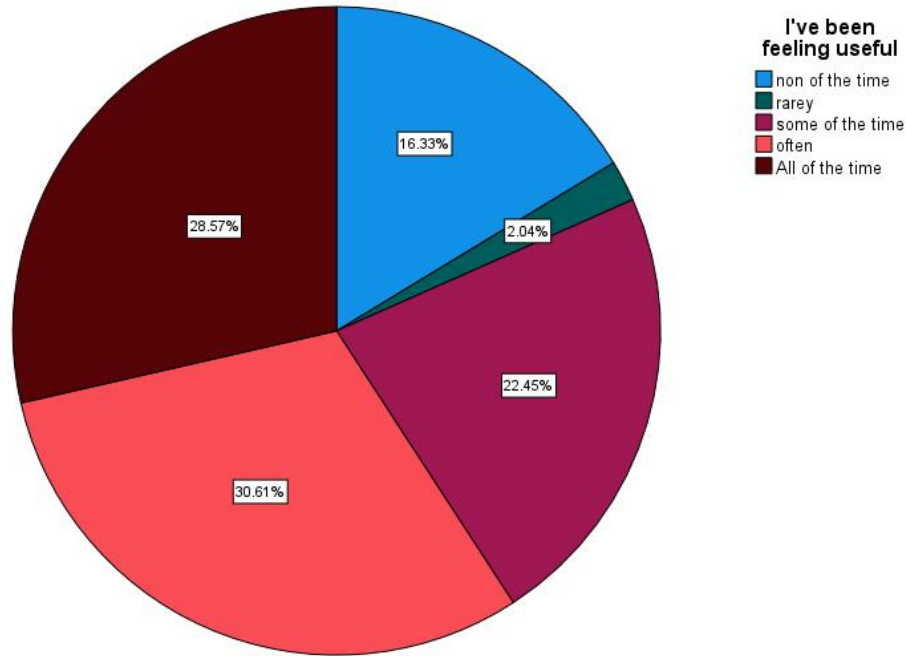
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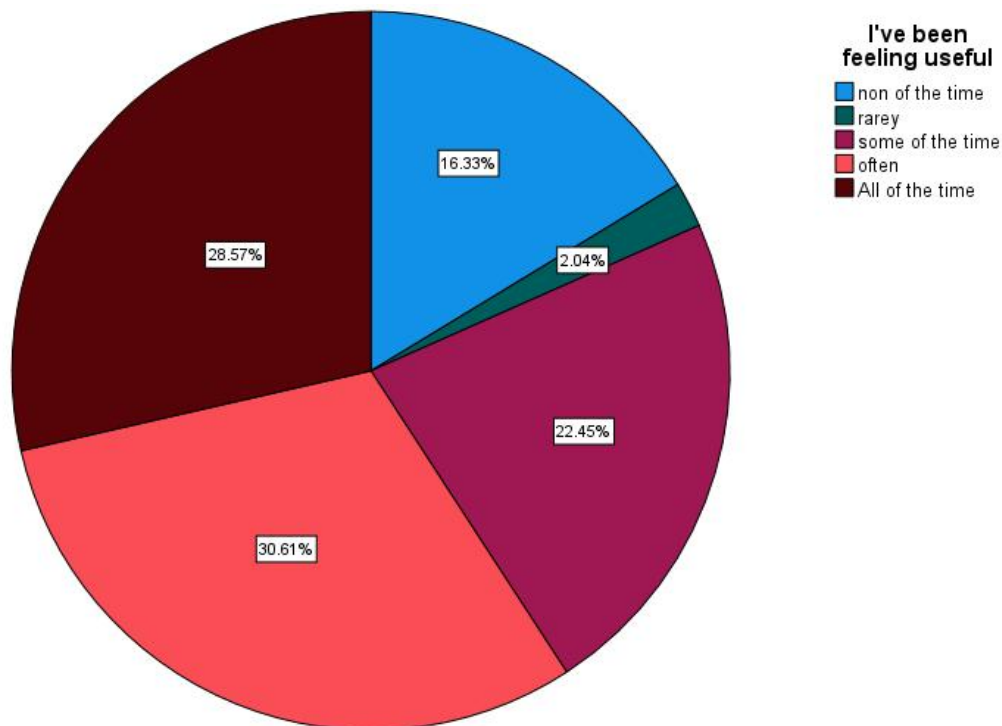
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Figure 2:



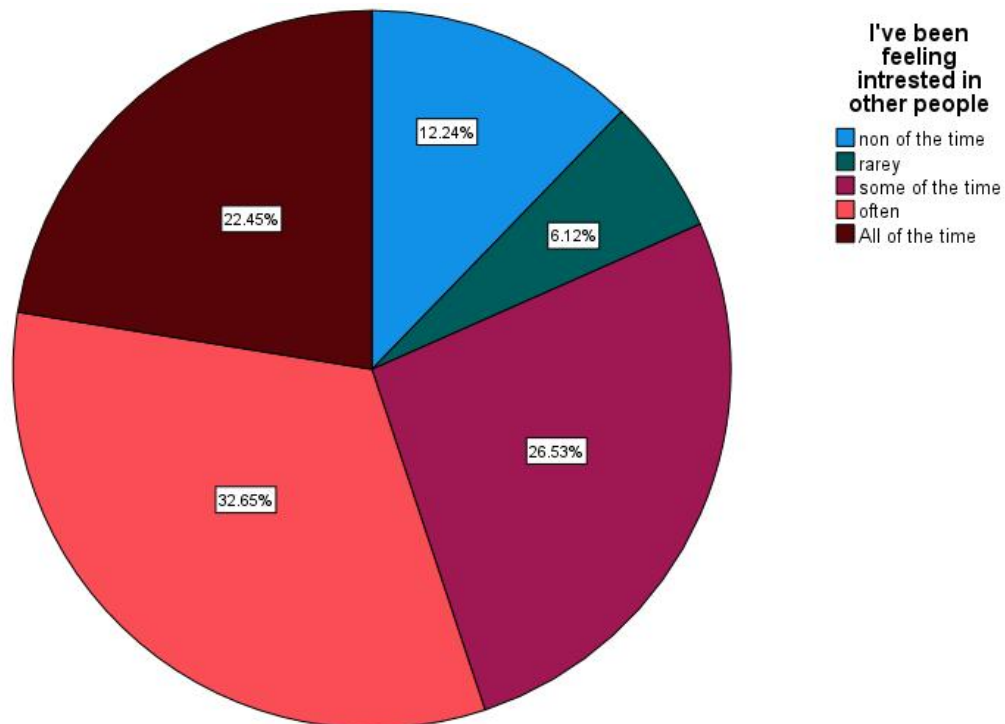
Note: The pie chart illustrates participants' responses to the statement "*I've been feeling useful*" during their outdoor tourism experience in Naltar Valley. The largest proportion (30.61%) reported feeling useful "often," followed closely by 28.57% who experienced this "all of the time," while 22.45% felt useful "some of the time." In contrast, only 16.33% indicated they did not feel useful at all, and just 2.04% reported feeling useful "rarely." These findings suggest that the majority of participants perceived enhanced feelings of usefulness, with over half experiencing this state frequently or consistently. This highlights the positive association between engagement in outdoor tourism activities and improved mental well-being, aligning with the study's objective of examining the psychological benefits of outdoor experiences.

Figure 3



Note: The pie chart shows participants' responses to the statement "*I've been feeling useful*" as part of assessing mental well-being during outdoor tourism in Naltar Valley. The majority of respondents reported positive outcomes, with 30.61% indicating they felt useful "often" and 28.57% reporting this feeling "all of the time." Additionally, 22.45% felt useful "some of the time," while smaller proportions indicated less positive experiences, with 16.33% choosing "none of the time" and only 2.04% "rarely." Overall, these results demonstrate that more than half of the participants experienced strong and consistent feelings of usefulness during their outdoor tourism activities, supporting the idea that engagement with nature-based tourism can contribute positively to mental well-being.

Figure 4



Note: The pie chart depicts participants' responses to the statement "*I've been feeling interested in other people*" during their outdoor tourism experience in Naltar Valley. The largest share (32.65%) reported feeling interested "often," followed by 26.53% who experienced this "some of the time" and 22.45% who felt it "all of the time." In contrast, 12.24% indicated they did not feel interested in others at all, while only 6.12% reported this "rarely." These findings indicate that a majority of participants experienced increased social interest and connection during their outdoor tourism activities, suggesting that engaging in natural environments not only supports individual mental well-being but also fosters greater social engagement and interpersonal curiosity.

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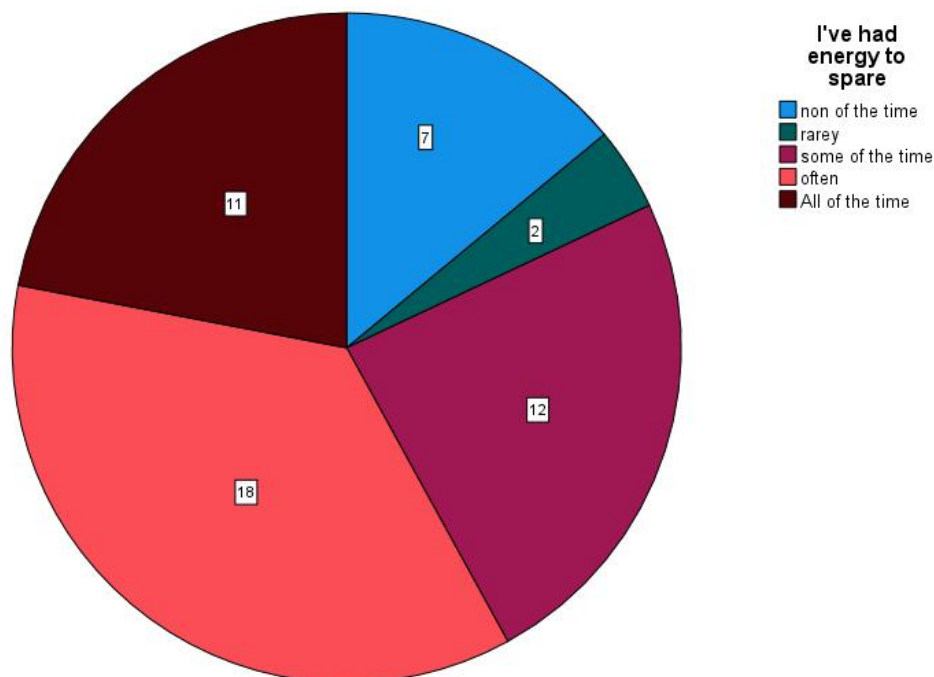
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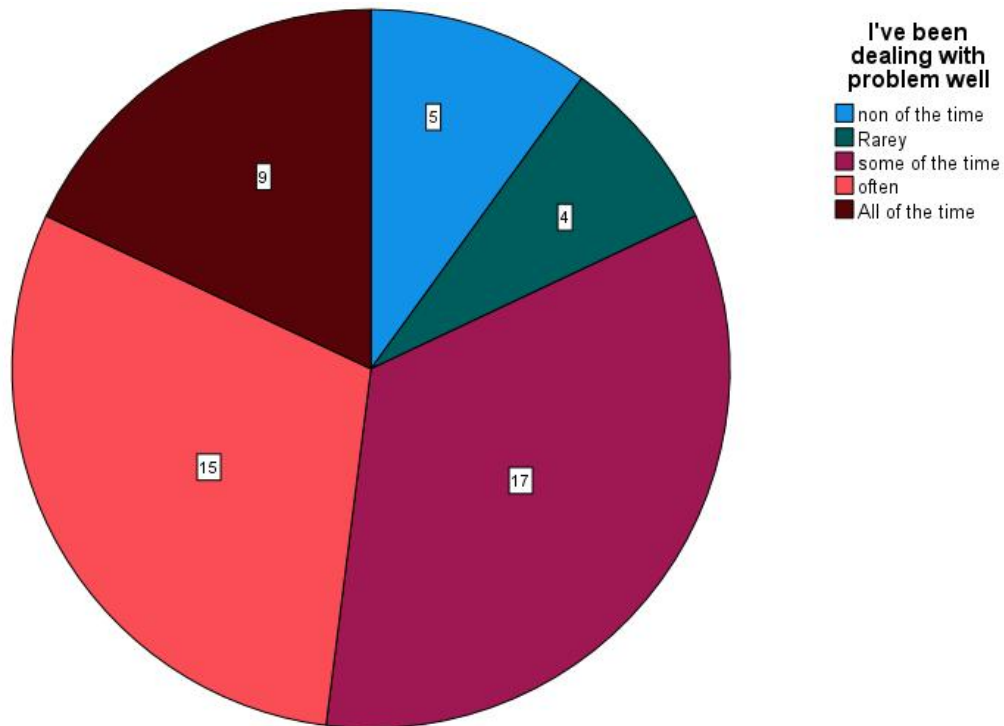
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Figure 5



Note: The pie chart depicts the frequency of individuals feeling they have energy to spare, with data categorized into five groups. The largest segment, representing 18 people, indicates that most individuals feel they have energy to spare "often," as shown in the deep red portion. The second largest group, 12 people, feel they have energy to spare "some of the time," as represented by the maroon section. A smaller portion, 11 people, feel they have energy to spare "all of the time," shown by the dark red section. Only 7 people report having energy "rarely" (in blue), and the smallest group, 2 people, feel they have energy "none of the time," as shown by the dark green segment.

Figure 6



Note: The pie chart illustrates how frequently individuals feel they have been dealing with problems well. The majority, 17 individuals, responded with "some of the time," shown in maroon, indicating a moderate ability to cope. This is followed by 15 respondents who feel they cope "often," represented by the red segment, suggesting a significant number manage well regularly. Nine people believe they are coping "all of the time" (dark red), showing a smaller yet positive group with consistent resilience. On the lower end, 5 individuals reported coping "none of the time" (blue), and 4 indicated they cope "rarely" (teal), highlighting a minority experiencing difficulty managing their problems.

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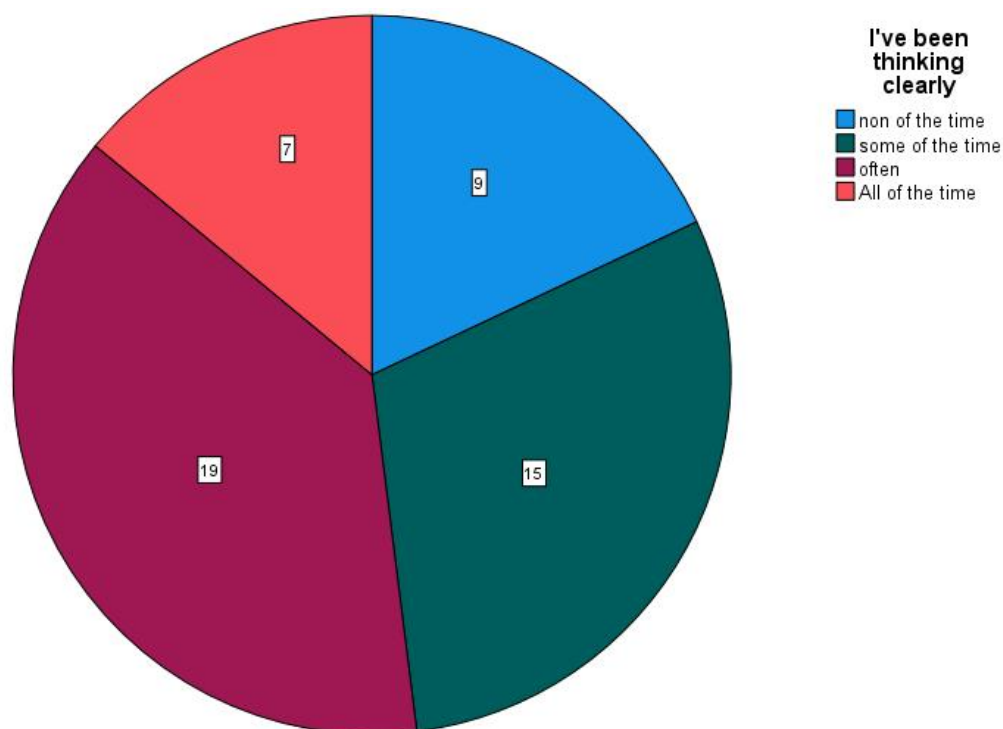
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Figure 7



Note: The pie chart illustrates responses to the statement "I've been thinking clearly," segmented into four categories. The largest portion of respondents (19) reported that they "often" think clearly, followed by 15 people who reported doing so "some of the time." A smaller group of 9 indicated they think clearly "none of the time," while the fewest 7 individuals reported thinking clearly "all of the time." This suggests that while a majority experience periods of clear thinking relatively frequently, consistent mental clarity is less common, and a notable portion struggles with clarity altogether.

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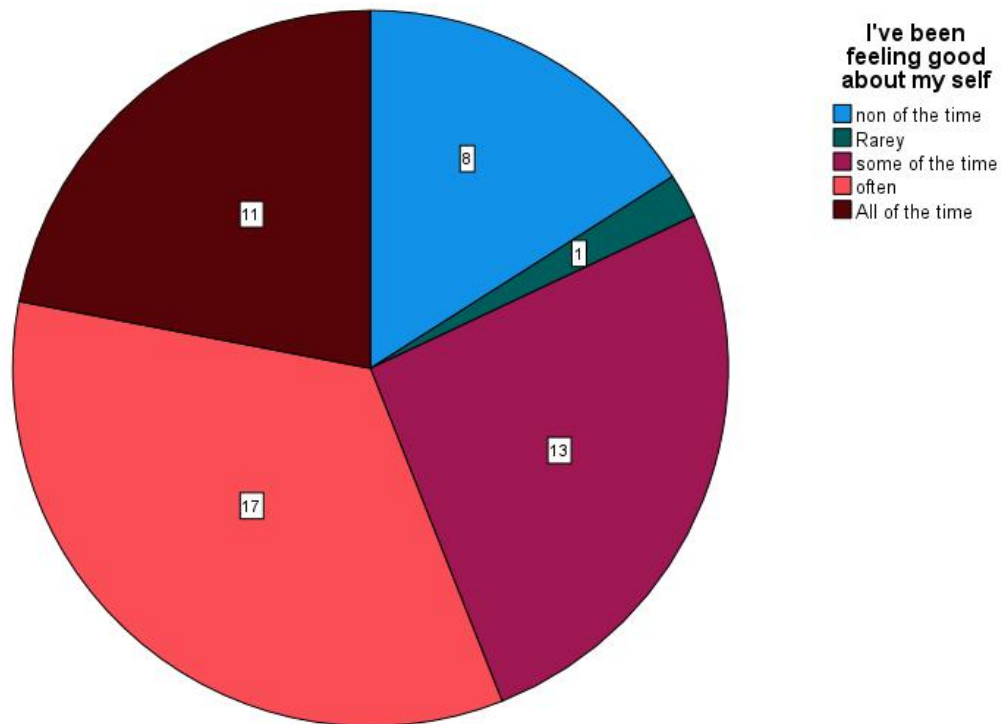
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Figure 8



Note: The pie chart represents responses to the statement "I've been feeling good about myself," categorized into five levels of frequency. The largest segment (17 respondents) indicated they "often" feel good about themselves, followed by 13 who selected "some of the time." Interestingly, 11 people reported feeling good "all of the time," showing a relatively high level of consistent self-esteem. A smaller group of 8 felt good "none of the time," and only 1 person chose "rarely." Overall, the majority of respondents report at least a moderate level of positive self-regard, with a significant number experiencing these feelings frequently or consistently.

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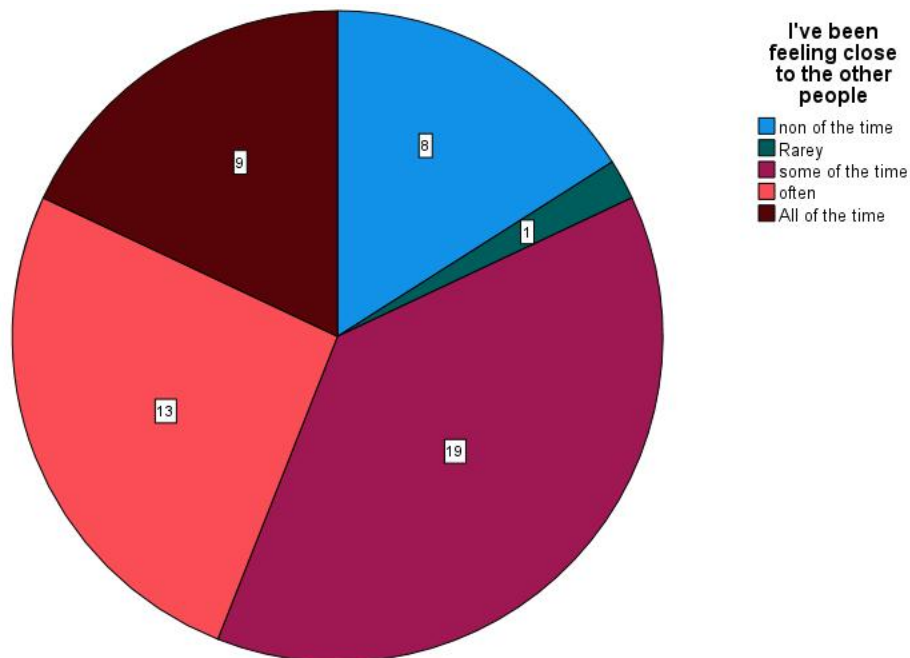
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Figure 9



Note: The pie chart illustrates how frequently respondents feel close to other people. The largest group, with 19 individuals, reported feeling close to others "some of the time," followed by 13 who feel this way "often," and 9 who experience closeness "all of the time." A smaller segment of 8 indicated they feel close to others "none of the time," while just 1 person selected "rarely." These results suggest that while social connection is fairly common among respondents, there is a significant portion who only occasionally or rarely feel close to others, highlighting potential gaps in social support or emotional connected.

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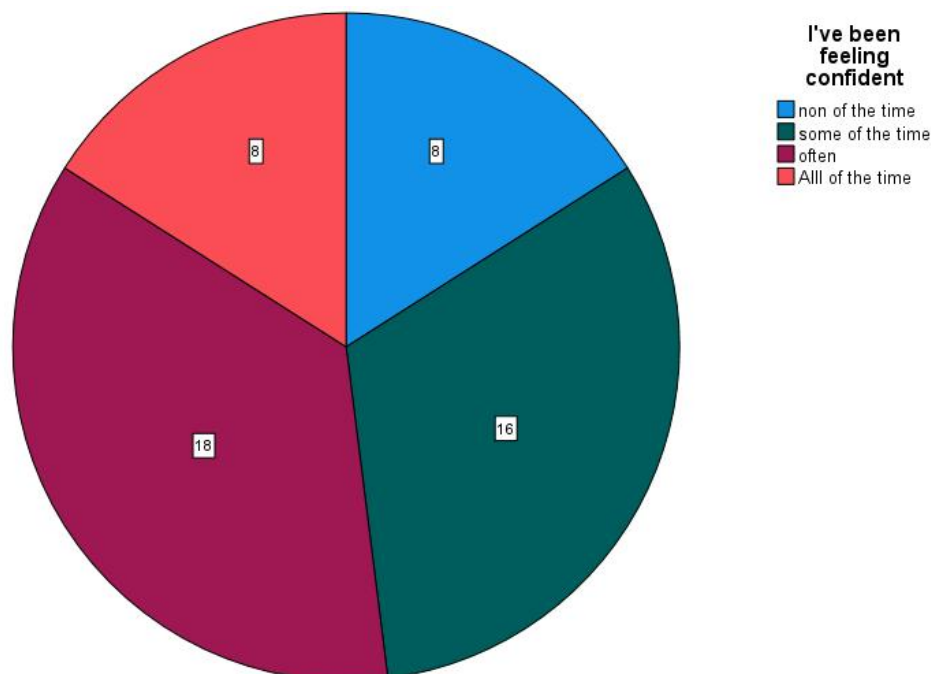
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Figure 10



Note: The pie chart displays how frequently respondents have been feeling confident. The highest number of participants (18) reported feeling confident "often," followed by 16 who felt confident "some of the time." In contrast, 8 respondents felt confident "none of the time," and another 8 reported feeling confident "all of the time." These results indicate that while a significant majority experience confidence regularly or occasionally, there remains a portion who struggle with consistent self-assurance, suggesting a varied distribution of confidence levels within the group.

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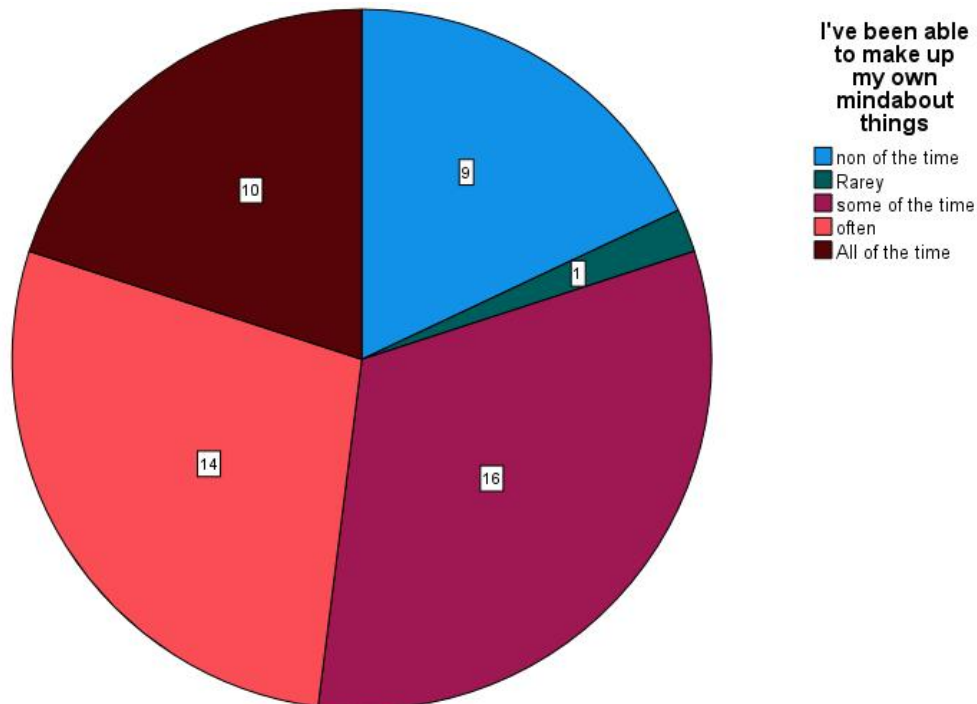
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Figure 11



Note: The pie chart presents the frequency with which respondents have been able to make up their own minds about things. The largest group, 16 individuals, reported being able to do so "often," followed by 14 who said they could do so "some of the time." A smaller group of 10 people indicated they could make up their minds "all of the time," suggesting a good level of decisiveness. However, 9 respondents felt they could not make up their minds "none of the time," and only 1 person chose "rarely." This distribution suggests that while most individuals experience regular or occasional clarity in decision-making, there is still a portion who struggle with decisiveness or uncertainty.

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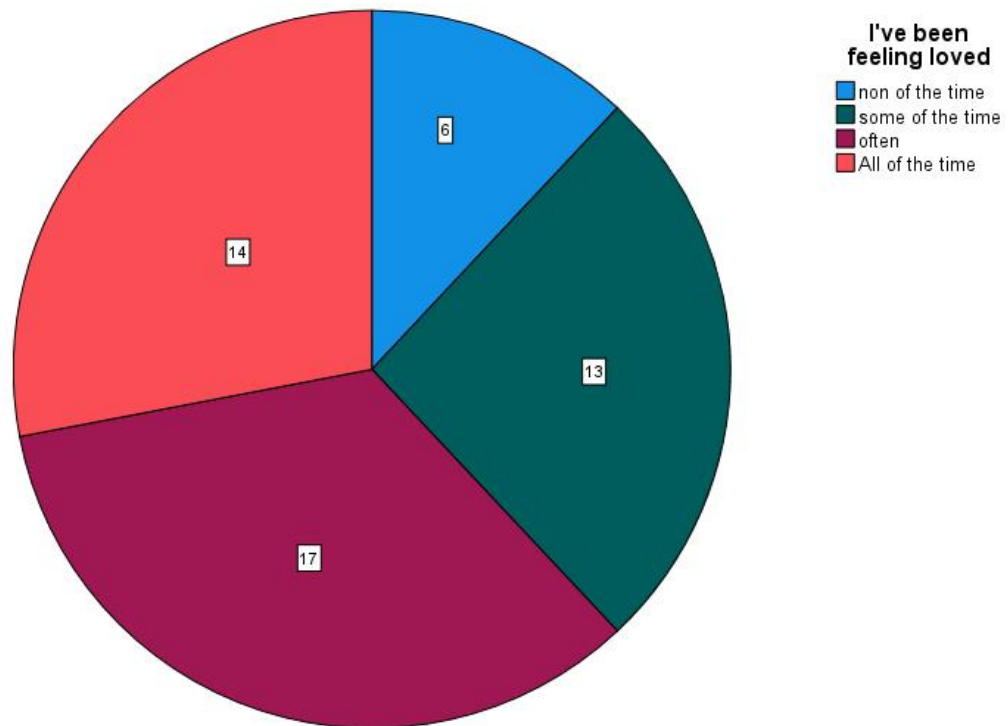
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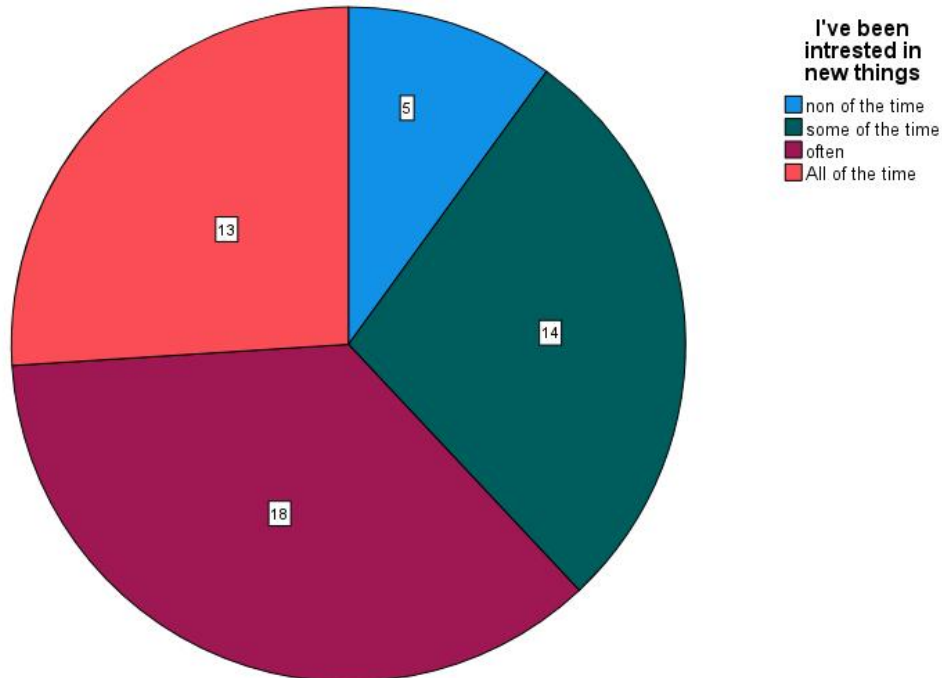
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Figure 12



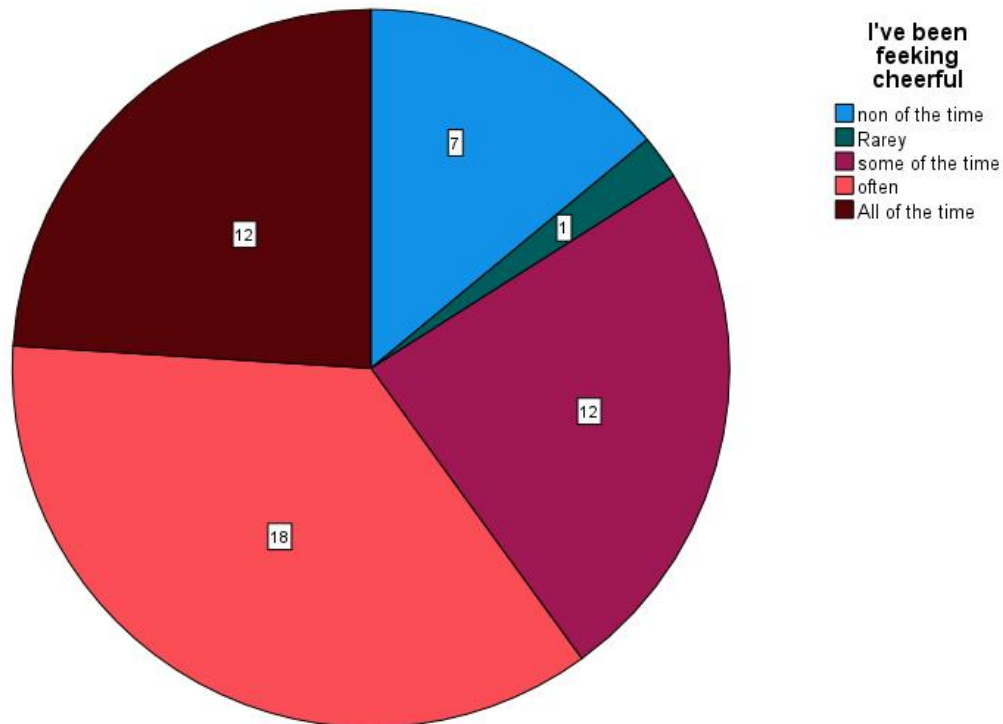
Note: The pie chart depicts how often respondents have been feeling loved. The largest portion, 17 people, reported feeling loved "often," followed by 14 individuals who feel loved "some of the time." A smaller group of 13 respondents feel loved "all of the time," while 6 people reported never feeling loved, indicating a notable portion of individuals who do not experience this emotion consistently. The results show a generally positive trend, with most respondents feeling loved either often or sometimes, but there is a small group who rarely experience this feeling.

Figure 13



Note: The pie chart illustrates how frequently respondents have been interested in new things. The majority, 18 individuals, reported being interested "often," while 14 said they experienced interest "some of the time." Additionally, 13 participants indicated they were interested "all of the time," suggesting a generally high level of curiosity and engagement. Only 5 respondents reported having no interest in new things at all. Overall, the data reflects a strong inclination among most individuals toward exploring and engaging with new experiences or ideas, with only a small minority lacking such interest.

Figure 14



Note: The pie chart illustrates participants' responses to the statement "*I've been feeling cheerful*" during their outdoor tourism experience in Naltar Valley. The highest proportion (18 participants) reported feeling cheerful "often," while 12 participants each stated they felt cheerful "some of the time" and "all of the time." In contrast, smaller groups indicated lower cheerfulness, with 7 participants reporting "none of the time" and only 1 participant selecting "rarely." These findings suggest that the majority of respondents experienced frequent or consistent cheerfulness during their outdoor activities, underscoring the positive role of outdoor tourism in promoting happiness and uplifting mood as part of improved mental well-being.

Discussion

The present study explored the influence of outdoor tourism on mental well-being by examining the experiences of visitors to Naltar Valley, Gilgit-Baltistan, using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS). The findings provide valuable insights into the positive psychological outcomes of engaging in nature-based tourism activities such as hiking, camping, and exploring lakes and meadows. Results from the descriptive statistics and pie chart distributions show that the

majority of participants experienced improved mental well-being during their outdoor tourism activities. Key indicators such as feeling optimistic about the future, useful, relaxed, interested in other people, confident, cheerful, and loved were reported positively by more than half of the respondents, with many selecting “often” or “all of the time.” Although a smaller proportion reported low levels of well-being in some areas, the overall trend strongly supports the idea that outdoor tourism contributes positively to mental health. The findings indicate that outdoor tourism promotes both emotional and social aspects of well-being. For example, 40% of participants reported feeling optimistic about the future some of the time and another 40% reported feeling it often or all of the time. Similarly, feelings of usefulness and cheerfulness were experienced consistently by the majority of respondents. These outcomes align with past research which argues that immersion in natural environments fosters positive affect, reduces stress, and supports mental resilience. In addition to emotional benefits, the data also suggest enhanced social connections. More than half of participants reported feeling interested in other people and close to others either often or all the time, showing that outdoor tourism encourages interpersonal engagement and stronger relationships. This is consistent with findings from other studies which highlight the role of nature-based tourism in strengthening both individual and collective well-being.

While the majority of respondents reported positive experiences, the data also revealed variation in mental well-being outcomes. Approximately 12% of participants reported feeling none of the time optimistic, relaxed, or confident, and a small proportion indicated never feeling loved or close to others. These variations may reflect individual differences in personal circumstances, baseline mental health, or social support systems, highlighting that although outdoor tourism generally has a positive influence, it may not fully mitigate all aspects of psychological distress for every individual. This observation supports the view that while nature-based interventions promote well-being, outcomes depend on personal and contextual factors. This research also contributes to the growing body of literature on outdoor and nature-based tourism as a facilitator of psychological health. By applying the WEMWBS in a South Asian mountain context, this study extends the generalizability of findings from earlier studies conducted in Europe and Australia.

The results reinforce theories of biophilia, which suggest that humans have an innate need to connect with nature for psychological restoration. They also support attention restoration theory, which posits that natural settings reduce mental fatigue and promote clear thinking, reflected here in participants' reports of often or sometimes thinking clearly and dealing with problems well.

The findings have important implications for tourism development and mental health promotion in Gilgit-Baltistan. By emphasizing the mental health benefits of outdoor tourism, local authorities and tour operators can design sustainable tourism programs that not only boost the regional economy but also serve as accessible well-being interventions. Incorporating guided activities, wellness retreats, or group-based outdoor programs may further strengthen the positive outcomes observed in this study. However, despite these contributions, the study has certain limitations. The sample size of 50 participants, although adequate for exploratory research, limits the generalizability of results to larger populations. Additionally, the purposive sampling approach may have introduced selection bias, as participants who chose to visit Naltar Valley may already have higher inclinations toward nature and well-being. The reliance on self-reported measures also raises the possibility of response bias, while the cross-sectional design prevents establishing long-term causal effects of outdoor tourism on mental health. Future studies could employ larger and more diverse samples to validate these findings and explore differences across gender, age groups, or cultural backgrounds. Longitudinal research would help assess whether the positive effects of outdoor tourism on mental well-being persist over time. Experimental or mixed-methods designs could also provide deeper insights into the mechanisms such as stress reduction, social interaction, or physical activity that mediate the relationship between outdoor tourism and psychological well-being. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that outdoor tourism in Naltar Valley is strongly associated with improved mental well-being, as participants frequently reported feeling more optimistic, useful, relaxed, confident, cheerful, and socially connected. These findings highlight the therapeutic potential of nature-based tourism and underscore its role as a complementary approach to enhancing psychological health.

Conclusion

The findings of this study clearly show that outdoor tourism in Naltar Valley has a positive impact on mental well-being, as most participants reported feeling optimistic, cheerful, confident, relaxed, and socially connected during their visit. While a few individuals expressed lower levels of well-being, the overall trend highlights that engaging in nature-based activities such as hiking, camping, and exploring natural landscapes promotes happiness, reduces stress, and strengthens social bonds. These results confirm that outdoor tourism not only serves as a source of recreation but also functions as an effective tool for enhancing psychological health.

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