

A qualitative study on emotions experienced at the coast and their influence on well-being

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An increasing number of studies have demonstrated that residential proximity to the coast is associated with a better health and well-being. Research on putative factors contributing to the well-being benefits of living near the coast has mainly focused on physical, social, and cognitive mechanisms but less so on emotional mechanisms. To create a more comprehensive framework of how and why the coast benefits well-being, the present study explored how coastal residents make sense of the emotions they experience at the coast and how these emotions influence their well-being.

We conducted semi-structured individual interviews with a purposive sample of eight Flemish adults aged between 21 and 25 years old, who had grown up near the Belgian coast and/or were currently residing near the coastline. The interviews took place from October to December 2020 via Skype and lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. A predetermined interview guideline was set up and involved asking participants to describe their relationship with the coast, the specific emotions they feel at the coast, and what effect these emotions have on them. Questions remained flexible and participants were encouraged to speak freely, to bring up areas that were not considered by the researchers.

The interviews were analyzed according to the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis framework. This approach led us to identify five superordinate themes that emerged from the interviews: emotional restoration, awe, nostalgia, emotion regulation processes, and the coast as a 'safe haven'. The themes demonstrate that for our participants, the coast represents a place that facilitates emotionality and vulnerability and provides the means to cope with difficult thoughts and feelings, through contemplation and exteriorization for example. Prominent emotions were mostly regarded as positive, but our participants also reported ambivalent emotions containing facets of both positive and negative affect.

The study highlights experiences of complex emotions and adaptive emotion regulating processes facilitated by the coast's multisensory and symbolic qualities. These experiences appear to have a beneficial impact on the participants' well-being and should therefore be considered as potential contributors to the coast's therapeutic potential.

Keywords: Coast; Well-being; Emotions; Emotion regulation; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis