



Hanging ten and letting go

After years of feeling 'too fat' to enjoy sporty activities, **Helen Earley** hops on a surfboard and leaves her worries on the shore

Having successfully pulled a layer of thick Neoprene over my right ankle, I teeter on one foot and clumsily step into the other leg of the wetsuit. With a little bit of resistance over the knees, the thick, spongy fabric rolls easily over my thighs and hips until it reaches my belly, where it clings to the smooth round lump that my children affectionately refer to as my "Mum tum."

"Thick around the middle," is how I describe myself at size 16. On dating sites, I might qualify as a "BBW" (Big Beautiful Woman). According to the BMI (body mass index), I am obese.

Rather than congratulating myself on squeezing into a wetsuit for the first time, I scan the room for a mirror and finding none, compare myself against a fellow surfer, whose petite hourglass figure strides confidently out of the changing room, toward the beach. Her slick black wetsuit makes her look like a sexy, surfy Catwoman. I feel a pang of envy, followed by despair. "I can't do this," is my automatic thought, "... because I'm too fat."

Fistral Beach in Newquay, Cornwall, England, is where I have come to strangle my inner critic. With brand-name surf shops and beach bars cradling a wide expanse of sand, Fistral is the home of British surfing. Today, I am told, the waves are "clean" — perfect for a first-timer.

Jenny Briant, manager of Fistral Beach Surf School, says she sees plenty of apprehension in her students, many of whom are trying surfing for the first time on vacation. "I think there's a lot of fear about putting on a wetsuit," she says, "but the wetsuit is a piece of equipment that allows you to do something. It shouldn't be there to stop you from doing something."

Despite being physically strong and active, feeling "fat" has left me with a sense of non-entitlement to many sports, particularly those that require fitted gear. For example, my broad shoulders have never found comfort in a "women's" life jacket of any size.

Boards need to be larger too. The first time I tried stand-up

paddleboarding, in Vernon, B.C., our tour guide shouted: "Give her the big one!" The instruction was intended to enhance my experience (it's easier to balance on a wide board) but those words, which I translated into "give the fat girl the big board," formed my primary recollection of the event, relegating the exquisite hour of paddling on beautiful Lake Kalamalka to second place.

Even alpine skiing is a turnoff. I have a million excuses for not skiing, but the truth is that my winter jacket (a woman's size XL) is too tight around the middle and rides up, causing my cheap, baggy, plus-sized ski pants to fall

down.

You wouldn't imagine that 21-year-old Tom Reed, my instructor at Fistral Beach, would understand the fears of a plus-sized 44-year-old woman, but his gentle approach suggests otherwise. As we go through a dry run of basic surfing techniques on the sand, there appears to be no doubt in his mind that not only will I catch a wave, but stand up on the board and ride it into shore.

As well as instructing newbie surfers such as me, Reed is a coach at the Wave Project, a charity that brings children from all over Britain to Newquay for surf therapy. Children who participa-

te in the project have been diagnosed with, or are at risk of, mental illness, have had negative life experiences, or are experiencing isolation.

The founder and CEO of the Wave Project, Joe Taylor, says the first benefit of surf therapy is simply being in the water.

"Being in the sea is such a different kind of environment. You're weightless, you can move in all directions ... you're outside, under the sky."

Another benefit is the process of surfing itself, which involves paddling out and watching for a wave — a meditative, mindful occupation, he says.

Then, there's the high. Studies have demonstrated, Taylor says, that surfing triggers the neurochemicals that impact the brain's reward system. "When you actually catch a wave, that change in speed, that feeling of being carried along by the water ... it gives you a sort of a rush," he says.

Back at the beach, I'm in the water, feeling confident, but unsure of which wave to catch.

"This one! This one!" Reed cries out. As instructed, I turn to shore and, lying belly down on the board, paddle my arms furiously. Suddenly I feel propulsion — that change of speed that Taylor describes — and next, I'm flying on water. Things are going so well that I decide to get up to a kneeling position. I lean, the board turns, then boom! I have fallen off the surfboard and slammed into the shallow water just before the shoreline, totally elated.

Over and over again, I repeat the sequence. Each time, Reed gives my board a push — a bit of acceleration to help me along. On my fourth try, I manage to stand up on the board — and that's good enough for me. Box ticked. But of course, I keep going.

"There is something about having the anxieties beforehand that is part of the experience," Taylor says. "It's by overcoming them that people become more resilient to other problems."

Taylor is referring to children's fears (drowning, getting stung by a jellyfish and not fitting in are the top ones, apparently), but I can't help finding something in common with the kids: the fear of not fitting in, in my case, because of my size.

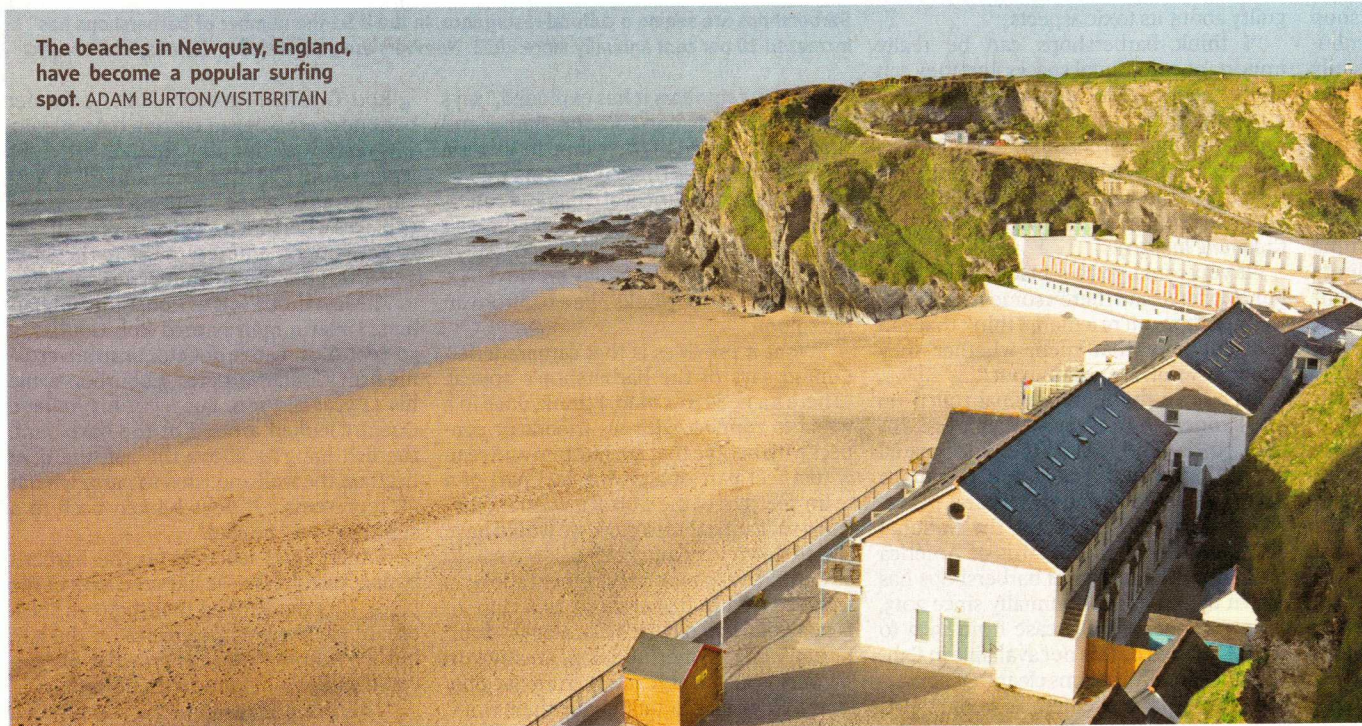
With maturity, I'm choosing experience over insecurity. I have become resilient, which is to say that I have stopped listening to the destructive inner monologue that prevents me from doing fun things on vacation — the same negative thoughts that completely disappeared when I was in the surf in Newquay.

I learned many things during my surf lesson at Fistral Beach, not least of all that it feels good to catch a wave at any size ... and that a wetsuit, once it's on, is warm and surprisingly comfortable.



The writer learned how to surf with lessons at the **Fistral Beach Surf School** in Newquay, England. PHOTOS BY MIKE BARKER

The beaches in Newquay, England, have become a popular surfing spot. ADAM BURTON/VISITBRITAIN



Special to The Globe and Mail

The writer's surf lesson was provided by Fistral Beach Surf School. It did not review or approve this article.

YOUR TURN

Fistral Beach Surf School is open year-round. Lessons start at £35 (\$56.50) for two hours; fistralbeachsurfschool.co.uk.

The Wave Project is an award-winning surf-therapy program for children; waveproject.co.uk.

Newquay, England, can be reached by train from London Paddington (approximately five hours). It also has a small international airport with direct flights from many airports including London Heathrow, Glasgow and Dublin; visitcornwall.com.