

BEGINNERS' SWIM BOOSTER COURSE

Nervous about open water swimming? You're not alone. Even the most experienced open water swimmers have the odd fleeting fear about strong currents, waterborne diseases, mass starts and sharks. Rick Kiddle looks at how to keep those worries in proportion

PART TWO: OVERCOME YOUR FEARS

▶▶ However much we might deny it, those training for open water swimming will doubtless all have a modicum of fear at some point, whether it is about fighting for position, the water depth, or that you will panic. If you do have a

PEOPLE WHO PANIC

I coach one age-group triathlete, a man's man in his 40s. He's a black belt in karate, not afraid of anything: except water. Take him two feet away from the shore and there's a strong possibility he will succumb to a panic attack, convinced he's going to drown.

His irrational and unpredictable fear stems from a near-drowning accident he had as a teenager. He can swim – with a wetsuit on, he's virtually unsinkable – but the fear is never far away. Although his confidence grows throughout the season, we need to restart each year.

Over the years we've developed a number of strategies that help him to cope. Initially we swim within touching distance so he knows I'm there if he needs help. However, he needs to race alone, so we've had to learn how to deal with that. The key is to have things to focus on, other than the possibility of drowning. I usually start with breathing, as that is fundamental (see 'Breathe easy', page 26).

If he feels a panic coming on, I get him to roll onto his back. With his wetsuit on, he floats comfortably, his mouth is out of the water and he can breathe. However, when lying on one's back in the water it's hard to look around. He therefore calms himself for a count of three and then moves into a sitting position. Again, the wetsuit keeps him afloat, but sitting lifts his head of the water allowing him to look around. When racing, he makes sure he stays close to the rescue boats. The reassurance of the boats helps reduce the chance of a panic attack.

Another swimmer, a woman this time, was convinced her wetsuit was too tight. However, this is hardly ever the case. It's more likely that people have over-inflated their lungs. I asked this woman to lie face down in the water, in a deep-water start position, and breathe out. Once I saw enough bubbles, I knew she'd emptied her lungs and would be able to breathe again normally. I then suggested she concentrated on counting her strokes when swimming, and minimised the use of her legs to conserve energy and oxygen. Often a change of focus can make the difference between a successful swim and a panic attack.

tendency to panic, sometimes it may only be one small thing that sets you off, or a combination of seemingly innocuous things that add up to a worrying situation in your head.

Fear of water is perfectly natural – it evolved to protect us from drowning – but panicking can lead us into more difficulties, so it's important to do whatever we can to prevent this feeling. It's also vital to understand the risks of open water swimming so you can manage them, while still enjoying the sport.

There's no sure-fire way to avoid panic attacks, as everyone's psychology is different. However, there are a number of strategies you can use for facing your fears, which you can adopt and adapt to your own needs.

SAFETY FIRST

Ensuring practical safety measures are in place means you will have no legitimate reason to panic. When swimming in open water it is vital that you pick a venue where it is safe and never swim alone. If it is an event organised by a group, ensure they have both lifeguards and boat cover. This will boost your confidence as you know support is there if you get into difficulties. If you're particularly nervous, tell the group leaders that you may have a problem so they can keep a close eye on you. Remember: they are there for you.

Beginners may want to attend a training course or 1-2-1 session with a qualified open water coach. This is particularly helpful for those who aren't confident in the water or who have had problems in the past. Working with an experienced coach can help remove the risk of future panic attacks.

BE PREPARED

Choose your equipment wisely. If you have complete trust in it then it will be safer. Start with your goggles. Are they comfortable? They should fit perfectly and be totally watertight. Most importantly, you have to be able to see when wearing them so they need the correct lenses: prescription goggles can be a big help to some people. Clear- or rose-tinted lenses may leave you dazzled on sunny days. On the other hand, a darkly tinted lens may be a handicap in poor light, so ensure you have the right pair for the conditions.

Most goggles now have an anti-fog coating. However this doesn't last. A hot face, combined with cold water, can steam up new goggles. Your kit bag should therefore include anti-fog spray.

If you're doing a wetsuit swim, choose your suit carefully. An ill-fitted or badly made wetsuit will increase your stress levels. If it fills with water, it may feel as if it's dragging you down. Don't let anyone sell you a diving or surfing wetsuit for open water swimming as they won't deliver the performance benefits of a swimming-specific suit and you will tire more quickly. I always recommend full-sleeved suits for the additional warmth as you can't relax if you're cold. See our guide on page 44 about how to put on a wetsuit properly, and note also the advice on using anti-chafing cream.

Finally, while elite swimmers use caps for streamlining and keeping hair out of their faces, in open water they also help keep you warm. Brightly coloured caps are good. If people can see you, you are safer, and that should keep your confidence up.

SET YOUR SIGHTS

Learning to swim straight, sight and navigate efficiently in open water will make a more enjoyable swim. Swimming off-course wastes time and energy, adds to the stress of your swim and can cause some people to panic. If possible, choose your sighting points before you enter the water. Pick objects that won't move: buoys, trees, electricity pylons or buildings.

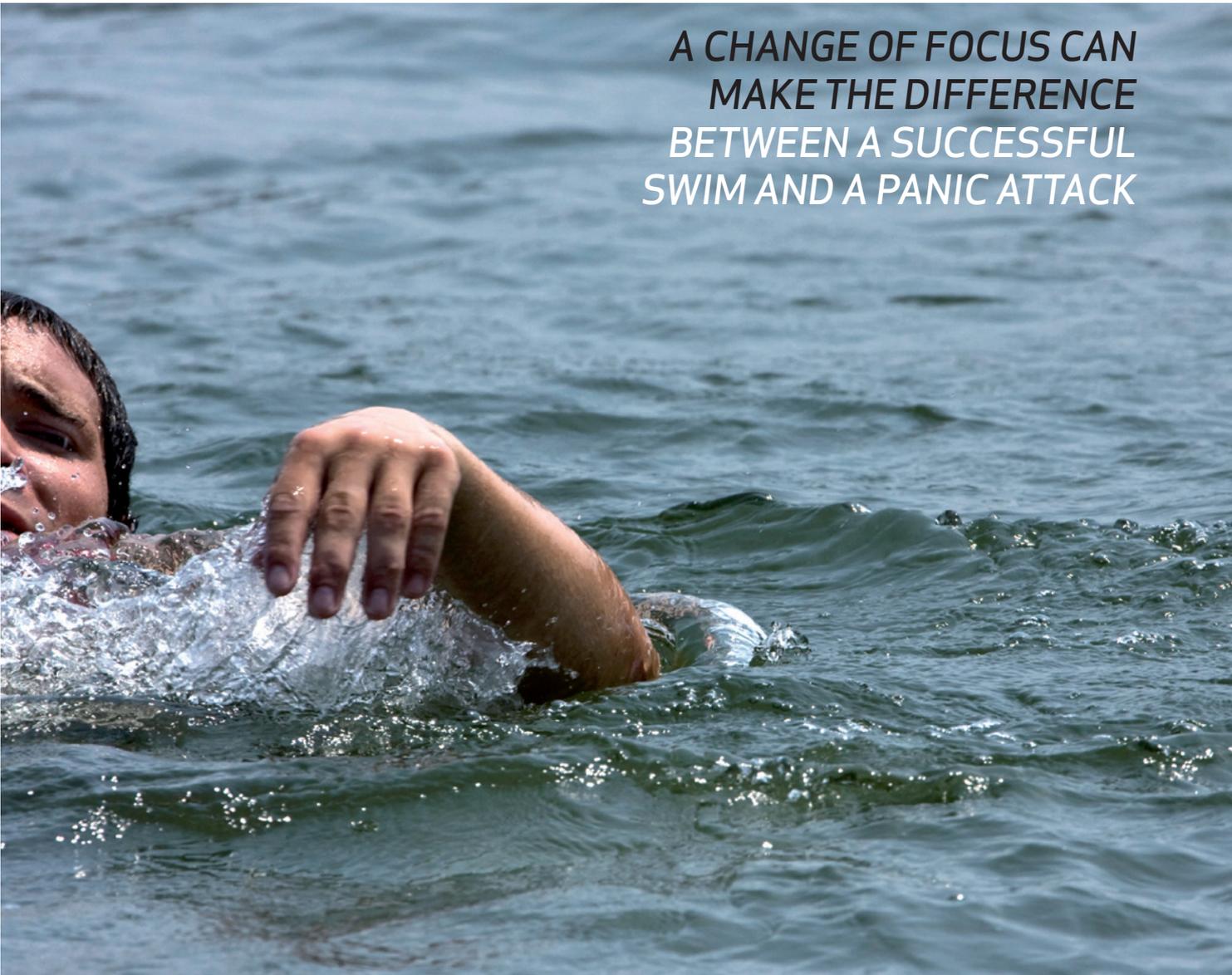
It's sometimes difficult to see buoys once you're in the water so it helps to identify landmarks behind them if possible. Accept that sometimes you won't be able to see where you are going because of waves or other swimmers splashing around you and try to stay calm until you can.

If you do get worried about where you're going, swim breast stroke or aim for the nearest bank, beach or buoy so you can stabilise yourself before continuing.

IS IT CLEAN?

One worry people have, although it's often unfounded, is pollution in open water. Sometimes events require that we swim in water that smells bad and looks worse, and we have to ask: "Is it really safe enough to swim in?" Any swimming event or venue will regularly monitor the water quality, so the answer should be yes, and the risks of falling ill as a result of swimming are small, but if you do feel unwell after contact with the water, especially if you develop flu-like symptoms, seek medical advice.

Leptospirosis, or Weil's disease, is a minor concern. It is a bacterial infection carried by animals, particularly rats, that can be passed out in their urine into lake or river water. You can become infected by drinking contaminated water or if ►►



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contaminated water comes into contact with your eyes, nose, mouth or unhealed cuts.

In the UK, Weil's disease is very rare (33 cases in England and Wales in 2009, of which 14 were contracted abroad) and the National Health Service says "there is no reason why you should not participate in freshwater recreational activities, such as swimming, sailing, waterskiing or windsurfing." The NHS advises taking precautions such as covering cuts and grazes with waterproof dressings, and showering after your swim.

Another good reason to keep your mouth shut is blue-green algae, which tends to develop during hot summers and sits like blue-green clouds in the water. These algae can be poisonous to humans and should be avoided.

GETTING IN AND WARMING UP

Always enter open water cautiously – there may be hidden hazards just below the surface. Tread lightly. There could be sharp stones or broken glass. Float as soon as you can (easier in a wetsuit) and use shallow strokes to take you into deeper water where you can start swimming normally.

For some people, the sudden change in temperature can cause hyperventilation. Acclimatising in advance will help prevent this. When you enter the water, start by splashing cold water on exposed skin, especially your face, neck, hands and feet, before swimming. (See also 'Breathe Easy' on how to avoid hyperventilation.)

Next, slowly mobilise your larger joints and muscles, perhaps with some head-up breast stroke before moving into front crawl. Spend three or more minutes doing this, then maybe try some deep breathing. Finally move into a faster warm-up and short sprints to elevate your heart rate.

STAY CALM

Breathing is the most important aspect to calm and relaxed swimming. Practise sighting and breathing bilaterally, as described in last issue's 'Swim Plus' feature. If you watch an experienced swimmer in open water you will notice that every 3-6 strokes their head comes higher out of the water following a longer roll and arm recovery. This helps to stabilise the stroke as they look around to see where they're going.

Staying calm is especially important in crowds – a tense situation for many open water swimmers. Both starts and turns can become horribly congested in open water races when it can feel like you have a million arms and feet all over you. Mentally prepare yourself for this. Most collisions are accidental so keep focused on your own swim. At the turn, try to relax and ease around the buoy by staying consistent with your stroke and maintaining a horizontal position in the water. Kick harder if necessary.

The common theme through this is that experience, knowledge and preparation make for safer, more enjoyable (and faster) swimming. The more you practise, the better you get, and the less likely you'll succumb to fear and panic.

Assistance is usually close at hand if you need it. In the unlikely event you do get into any difficulty, roll on your back, raise your hand in the air and call loudly for help.

Whenever you go out in open water, no matter how experienced you are, you may have legitimate concerns but there's never a need to panic. Just remember to respect the water, don't be blasé about it and always follow the advice of professionals. And, most importantly, relax and enjoy yourself. ●

BREATHE EASY

Open water swimmers sometimes experience tightness of breath, which can be confused with asthma or exercise induced asthma. However, in many cases it's a result of failing to breathe out properly, or hyperventilating. People keep trying to breathe in when their lungs are already full.

The trick is to relax and empty the lungs first so that normal breathing can resume. I recommend 'parasympathetic breathing' to achieve this, as follows. Breathe deeply and slowly into the stomach through the nose over a count of three. Listen for the air hissing through the nostrils. Then breathe out, again for three seconds, but this time through the mouth, and let out an 'ahh' sound as you do so. Continue for at least a minute.

The combination of focused breathing and the sound it makes is deeply calming. At rest we typically take 13-15 breaths per minute, rising to above 30 during intense exercise or as a result of stress. With parasympathetic breathing this can be reduced to three or four breaths per minute.

This is such a good pre-race exercise I recommend all my athletes do it, whether they suffer from hyperventilation or not.

RESPECT THE WATER, DON'T BE BLASÉ ABOUT IT AND ALWAYS FOLLOW THE ADVICE OF PROFESSIONALS

To calm down, reduce your breathing to three or four breaths a minute

