

# SOCIAL SWIMMING

Helen Davis investigates the importance of social support networks in swimming



## WHY WE LOVE SWIMMING!

**S**wimmers love to swim for a whole host of reasons whether it be social swims with friends who love the same things as you, swims in clubs and groups where you are pushed to swim faster and harder, challenging swims in dark, murky water across straits and channels with jellyfish and other wildlife. Perhaps you like long, cold swims in never-ending lakes or rough, choppy seas? Or do you like slow,

contemplative swims in ponds with ducks for company and low hanging willow trees? Short, fun swims in tiny hotel pools might be your preference with the sun shining down on your back. All these kinds of swims have their own qualities and they all have rewards.

When you encounter a sport that you connect with, the next step is often to hook up with others who share that connection. Swimming provides us with a social space, a nexus for people, places and swims. These special swimming spots can be shared, tips and techniques be

discussed, swim-training methods analysed and the highs and lows of our experiences communicated. This sharing of swimming with others in a group, no matter how big or small, can add enormous value to our swimming experiences.

### WHY GROUPS?

People generally get together to form groups because they have something in common. The social group is an important part of our day-to-day existence. Typically we work, socialise, play and live in groups and as social beings, humans seem to have a need

The Chalkwell  
Redcaps. Photo by  
Clare Calder



to identify and associate with others. This similarity is important, but it's not the only factor that creates a group. Groups have a connection when they have frequent interaction and communication with each other. Although communication can occur in groups that meet together in a single place, it can also occur among individuals who are at greater distances from each other. Membership and involvement in groups results in a reciprocal exchange of influence on other people in groups, and in turn, those groups and their members have an influence on us.

#### WHY DO YOU SWIM IN A GROUP?

Most swimmers join groups because they perceive that it is in their personal interests to do so. You might join because you just like to swim with others, you might particularly like the people who are in your swimming group and it satisfies a need that you have to swim. The group might give you a means for achieving goals or a feeling of belonging. Being part of a group helps us to define who we are and gives us a connection to society. By swimming with others in a group, we develop a sense of 'we' and the importance of 'I' can be reduced. Associated with the development of a stronger sense of 'we' is an increase in group cohesiveness. Group cohesiveness is being committed to a group or to group members where all members of the group have similarities in their nature and interest. Cohesiveness is what bonds your swimming groups together and can bring benefits to all individuals involved.

## GROUP COHESIVENESS →



Helen Davis is a sport psychology consultant who works with individuals, teams and coaches on all aspects of sporting performance.

Helen has a BA (Hons) in Psychology, an MSc in Sport and Exercise Psychology and is currently working towards chartered status with the British Psychological Society. Helen is a qualified REBT Primary Practicum practitioner. She is also an active masters and open water swimmer.

**Find out more:** [thinkbelieveperform.co.uk](http://thinkbelieveperform.co.uk). Follow Helen on Twitter @helenDav22453

SWIMMING PROVIDES US WITH A SOCIAL SPACE, A NEXUS FOR PEOPLE, PLACES AND SWIMS



The Bluetits swimming group. Photo by Ella Richardson



**SITUATIONAL FACTORS**

The social

setting and physical environment can contribute to you feeling part of your swimming group. When you are in close proximity to others you have a greater tendency to bond together. This physical proximity encourages close contact; chats in the changing rooms; conversations during the journey on the way to swimming or laughter as you try and get your wetsuit off behind a tree! All of these scenarios can give us social support benefit.

An open water swimming group can also set you apart from others and make you feel you have 'distinctiveness' about yourself and your fellow swimmers as a group. This distinction from others can lead to feelings of oneness and unity with your fellow swimmers. Traditionally, distinctiveness can be achieved

through team clothing or mottos, special initiation rites or special privileges.

**PERSONAL FACTORS**

Similarities with others in your group contribute to how your group gels together; this might be similarity in terms of attitudes, aspirations, commitments and ability. Another important factor in your group is satisfaction.

Satisfaction can be derived from many sources in swimming. The quality of the competition may be one element, having opportunities for social interaction with teammates may be another. Swimmers might need to feel they are improving in a skill or they are not satisfied. Satisfaction can result in recognition from others – parents, coaches, teammates, fellow students or the public. When these elements are satisfied, cohesiveness in your swimming group will be enhanced.

THE MORE YOU IDENTIFY WITH YOUR SWIMMING GROUP, THE BETTER IT CAN MAKE YOU FEEL

**TEAM FACTORS**

Groups provide us with many structural aspects that can influence the characteristic of your swimming group. A group's structure can be made up of elements such as position, roles and norms. These result in interactions among individual members, their perceptions of one another, and their expectations for themselves, other individuals, and the group. These structural characteristics are inevitable when sets of individuals come together, but they can aid the cohesiveness of your group.

**POSITION**

When you swim with others you often find that people typically begin to consistently occupy a specific geographical space (e.g. a certain lane in the pool or a certain position in the river). This fact alone contributes to a sense of continuity and unity and the development of perceptions of 'we' versus 'they'.

**ROLE**

A role is a set of behaviours that are expected from the occupants of specific positions within the group. Within every group there are two



general categories of roles: formal and informal. Formal roles might be the coach, team captain or leader of your group. Informal roles evolve as a result of interactions that take place among group members. Some examples of these might be a social director, a nominated leader on the day, a team organiser or team joker – every group has them!

### NORMS

The presence of norms in a group is also associated with increased cohesiveness in a group. A norm is a standard of behaviour that is expected by members of the group. A recently formed group has minimal influence over its members, but as the group develops and becomes more cohesive, adherence to norms for behaviour increases. Establishing positive group norms is important for a greater sense of group unity and can contribute to the group's success.

### COMMUNICATION

If your swimming group meets regularly, you inevitably get to know people better. As conversations about swimming and other social issues increases, the more your swimming group will feel more closely bonded. Group members will feel more open with one another, they will volunteer more, talk more and they will listen better. In short, the exchange of information about swimming and social pleasantries will increase the feeling of togetherness and give you a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging is crucial to our well-being.

### SENSE OF BELONGING

A sense of belonging means being accepted as a member or part of a group. It is about feeling connected and accepted in a community. The need to belong to a group is a fundamental human need. As humans we have the need to form and maintain lasting, positive significant interpersonal relationships. Satisfying this need requires frequent, positive interactions with the same individuals and engaging in these interactions within a framework of long-term, stable care and concern. Many swimming communities, whether it be an open water group or a swimming club can provide this framework. Just by subscribing to Outdoor Swimmer, your monthly interaction of reading,

learning and hearing other swimmers' stories automatically connects you to the open water swimming community and fosters your sense of belonging to that community.

### MOTIVATION ENHANCING

My December 2017 article in Outdoor Swimmer focused on motivation, and explained that one of the key ingredients of motivation is a sense of belonging or 'relatedness'. Studies of swimmers who were participating in individual competitions and relay competitions showed that swimmers performed better (ie, their times were faster) when taking part as a member of a relay team than when swimming in the individual competition. This speed was credited to motivation gains, as perceived indispensability of one's own performance for the group increases from the first to the fourth leg of a relay. As the race reaches its climax, the impact of each leg of the race is seen as greater. This increased feeling of indispensability explains the increase in motivation gains from the first leg to the fourth leg. So swimming as a member of a group can make you faster!

### GROUPS ARE GOOD FOR YOU!

Whatever your reasons for being in your swimming group, your group gives you a sense of who you are from your psychological connection to that group. This, in turn, can positively contribute to your self-worth. The more you identify with your swimming group, the better it can make you feel. You can experience higher levels of social and personal self-esteem, social well-being, vigour (ie, energy) and more frequent positive emotions. In general, you are less likely to experience loneliness, depression, alienation and experiences of negative emotion. So next time you are swimming with your group, however large or small, take a moment to look at those around you and reflect not just on what they give to you, but what you give to them.

## HOW TO ENHANCE YOUR SENSE OF BELONGING

A sense of belonging is crucial to our well-being, but to build it requires active effort and practice. How can you boost it?

- **look for ways you are similar to others**, instead of focusing on ways you are different; eg, remind yourself you love swimming like your teammates, rather than focusing on the fact that some may be faster than you
- **accept other people's views** that are not the same as yours
- **be open** to acknowledging someone else's experience even if you disagree
- **try saying yes** and throwing yourself into whatever the activity is
- **focus on people** – positive connections with others will bring you benefits.

Overall, more positive connections with others relate to higher perceived competence and self-worth, greater enjoyment and less stress, a stronger commitment to continued sport involvement and more autonomous motivation. So swimming in a group can make you happier!



**NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE:**  
MARCH'S ARTICLE WILL SUMMARISE THE BENEFITS THAT WORKING ON YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS CAN BRING TO YOUR SWIMMING

Whatever you're into, there's a group for you!

Photo: Katia Vastiau