

"I'M SCARED OF SWIMMING IN OPEN WATER AND NOT BEING ABLE TO SEE THE BOTTOM"

In the first article in a new series, sport psychologist **Helen Davis** looks at some common fears and how to overcome them

Fear. It is a common emotion experienced by many swimmers, particularly in the ever-changing environment of open water. Not being able to see the bottom in the sea, lake or river can throw even the most experienced swimmer. Symptoms can vary depending on the level of fear, but can typically include extreme anxiety, dread and feelings of panic such as shortness of breath, rapid breathing, sweating and nausea.

Working on your mind-set can help you overcome the fear of depth. Having a self-awareness of your thoughts is the first important step towards helping yourself. Let's imagine what some of those fears might be:

"I know I'll get stung by a jelly fish and panic!"

"Not being able to see the bottom makes me feel I'm tiny in this huge space, it freaks me out, I can't do it"

"What if it's really dark and murky when I look down?"

"Yes, I know I am a good swimmer, but it's too deep for me"

All of these statements indicate some level of fearful thinking. Take a look at the thoughts below. Can you recognise some of these types of thinking?

'WHAT IF...' THINKING

These are thoughts which make

assumptions predicting negative repercussions for yourself.

'END OF THE WORLD' THINKING

These are thoughts which catastrophise and blow things out of proportion, thinking that the worst has, will or may happen.

'YES, BUT...' THINKING

These are thoughts which take positive events and twist them into negative ones.

'IT CAN'T BE DONE' THINKING

These are thoughts that look into the future and predict a negative outcome.

Notice and aim to avoid these types of thoughts. They can provoke anxiety and maintain your feelings of fear and threat. How we think is important, as it can affect our feelings and our behaviours towards a challenge.

THOUGHTS - FEELINGS - BEHAVIOURS

Fearful thoughts can generate feelings that tell us that we need to get away from something or prevent something from happening in the future. Our behaviours can also be affected by these thoughts and feelings, and we can experience physical symptoms of anxiety, or avoidance behaviours, such as not swimming at all.

The interaction and combination of these thoughts, feelings and behaviours may mean that we never end up giving open water swimming a try, because we view not being able to see the bottom as such a big threat.

It is easy to magnify the demands of swimming in deep water but thinking about the right things at the right time will help keep perspective.

Remember how you think will affect how you feel, which in turn affects your behaviour. So, thinking positively about swimming in deep water will help you to feel more confident about doing it, which in turn will lead to desired behaviour. This could just mean giving it a go 🏊

WHAT CAN YOU DO? PREPARE YOURSELF PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY.

By approaching the depth of open water in the right mental state, it can help you cope with fears and hopefully enable you to feel more relaxed as you swim and enjoy the experience. Alongside some physical preparation (eg, regular practice in deeper water etc), also take the time to prepare mentally. The approach that you take when thinking about the depth is key to being successful. Make a mental preparation plan to work on and view your next swim in deep water as a challenge that you can meet. Consider the following mental strategies to help:

- Acknowledge your fear of not being able to see the bottom and know that it is something that you find difficult, but you are going to work on changing it
- Keep perspective; many people fear deep water, and everyone has a different degree of discomfort with very deep water
- Tell yourself what you can do, eg, "I am an able swimmer and I know I can swim this distance"; "I can enjoy the environment around me while I am swimming"
- Practise positive self-talk, eg, "When I am swimming I am going to focus on my technique and the feeling of the water against my skin"
- Make an 'if...then' plan; "if... I start feeling anxious when I can't see the bottom, then... I will...count upwards to 20 in my head or focus on my hand entry into the water"
- Boost your self confidence - choose phrases to give you a boost; "I can do this" attitude
- Focus on what you can control, eg, your swim speed or your technique
- Remind yourself that you are focusing on what you need to do in order to be successful at swimming in deep water.

Helen Davis is a swimmer and sport psychology consultant who works with individuals, teams and coaches on their sporting performance.



Each month, Helen will suggest psychological techniques to help overcome difficult open water swimming scenarios. www.thinkbelieveperform.co.uk @helenDav2245