

# “WHAT IF I GET CRAMP OR I PANIC DURING THE SWIM?”

Sport psychology consultant **Helen Davis** looks at how to deal with ‘what...if?’ questions

**W**hat...if?’ questions are tricky. They are tricky as they can trigger lines of thinking that can be unhelpful for swimming performance, if not managed carefully. Are you a ‘what...if?’ thinker?

HERE ARE A FEW EXAMPLES FROM SWIMMERS:

**WHAT IF...** I GET CRAMP AND CAN'T SWIM?

**WHAT IF...** MY BREATHING GETS ALL PANICKY AND I HAVE TO STOP?

**WHAT IF...** I COME LAST?

**WHAT IF...** I CAN'T DO THE DISTANCE AND HAVE TO STOP?

**WHAT IF...** MY GOGGLES GET KNOCKED OFF?

It doesn't really matter what comes after the ‘what if?’ – what counts is where you take your line of thinking, having asked the question. Firstly, ‘what if?’ questions are usually asked before you swim. At this point, you will not know the answers, because you haven't actually swum yet. Secondly, it is easy to repeatedly pose the question and phrase it rhetorically. How easy or difficult is it to keep control over ‘what...if?’ thinking?

## NOTICE YOUR THINKING!

It is easy to fall into the trap of unhelpful ‘what if?’ thinking as there are so many uncertainties in open water swimming. Getting into circular questioning about an issue, such as cramp, can lead to anxiety and use up vital mental energy on worries, rather than the task in hand – your actual swim! This anxiety can lead to feelings of lack of control, where you predict negative outcomes and blow things out of proportion as anxiety levels rise. Uncertainties, such as temperature, weather conditions, other swimmers, mass starts, are all factors that we have to contend with as open water swimmers. How can we go about managing these emotions to help give ourselves the best possible chance to succeed and achieve? Noticing the line of thinking that you take is the first step: do you notice ‘what...if?’ thinking? If so, how do you ensure it helps you rather than hinders you? Here are some tips:

ACCEPT UNCERTAINTY  
How you view your ‘what if?’ thinking is a good step to help yourself. It is important as an open water swimmer to consider the factors that are not in your control, that might impact your performance – such as cramp or panic. A helpful way to deal with your ‘what if?’ questions is to give yourself the best possible chance of them not happening. Can you do anything to prepare yourself in case the situation arises that could ease your concern?

## ACCEPT UNCERTAINTY

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This might be reading articles for advice on cramp or speaking to someone who has experienced panic. However, it is valuable to remember and accept that stressful situations have an element of uncertainty, it's part of what makes those situations stressful.

## PREPARE IN ADVANCE

This is where mental preparation in advance can help. Asking ‘what...if?’ questions just before you swim, is more likely to provoke anxiety, rather than help you with your performance. At these moments it is useful and helpful to focus on what is under your direct control in that moment.

Spending too much time thinking about your cramp or the potential to panic is directing your energy away from the task in hand. When your swim comes along you want to be focusing on the right things at the right moment and directing your focus to what you can achieve. Be strict with yourself, ‘what...if?’ thinking can use up your mental energy and resources on things that you cannot control. Aim to place your focus on what you can control – like your technique, steady breathing, or nutrition. Work on boosting your personal resources in advance of your swim.

## MAKE AN ‘IF...THEN’ PLAN

Having an ‘if...then’ plan is simple, helpful and can be very effective. These are plans that help you prepare for potential challenges,

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such as cramp or panic, and give you direction and control to help you move forwards with your plan. The ‘if’ helps you prepare, the ‘then’ tells you what to do. The ‘then’ part can involve thinking, doing or even ignoring something. If you tend to be a ‘what...if?’ thinker, change your ‘what...ifs?’ to ‘if... then’ plans for your next swim. It is important to know your plan well, practise it and reinforce it.

**IF I GET CRAMP,**

**THEN I WILL...**

**IF I PANIC DURING**

**THE SWIM, THEN I WILL...**

## REMEMBER, YOU ARE IN CONTROL

Remind yourself that it is you who is in charge of your psychological state;

that is, you are in charge of what you say to yourself and when you say it. You can control your thinking by noticing your self-talk. Self-talk is about finding the right words to say to yourself at the right time. This can help control your attention. If you find yourself still worrying about cramp, remind yourself of your ‘if... then’ plan. Tell yourself that now is the time to be positive and think in a helpful way. Positive key phrases are good trigger words to help you cope. Allocate words to specific thoughts, so with a quick reminder you can tell your brain what you want it to think and feel 🧠



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](http://www.thinkbelieveperform.co.uk) @helenDav2245

