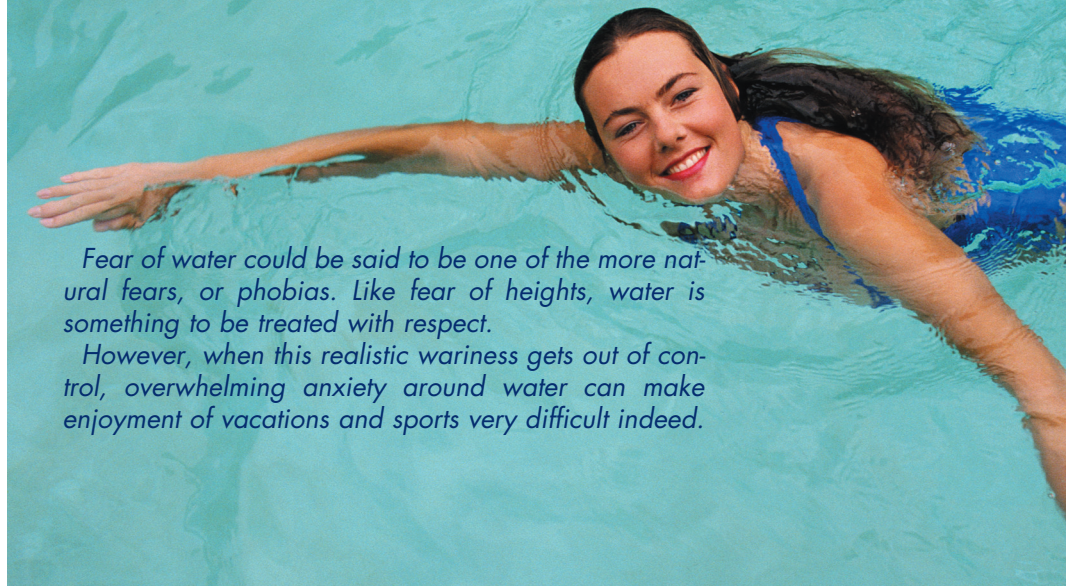


# Fear of water and swimming



*Fear of water could be said to be one of the more natural fears, or phobias. Like fear of heights, water is something to be treated with respect.*

*However, when this realistic wariness gets out of control, overwhelming anxiety around water can make enjoyment of vacations and sports very difficult indeed.*

There are a few keys to overcoming your fear. You must feel in control, which involves proceeding in small steps. Move at your own individual pace. Whenever you feel too afraid, return to the point at which you are comfortable. This is crucial.

It's perfectly fine if it takes you months to feel safe in the water; after all, it's taken your whole life to get to this point.

If we were asked to jump from an airplane with a parachute most of us would say no. We would think of it very dangerous. Those who do it all the time would say that it is safer than walking on the streets.

You have to know an environment before it feels safe. Of course it is the same with water. The best way to get to know water is a warm and shallow pool where you can safely play and test your skills with a trusted teacher

## How to overcome this fear?

Basically the formula is very easy: the learners have to learn that water is not dangerous and that it can be a lot of fun.

They also have to learn skills by which they can conquer the water.

First of all it means that the environment must be pleasant: warm water, a shallow pool and a teacher the learner can trust.

2nd the person should be allowed to use goggles or a mask and floating device if he wants to. If these conditions are met the real work can start. It is called desensitization.

It usually takes time: perhaps ten to twenty lessons or even more. Desensitization in practice means starting with easy and non-frightening exercises in which the person can succeed. After the first exercises we choose tasks which need a little bit more courage but still keeping in mind that the person has to have a good chance of success.

It is usually also a good idea to have other persons around so that the fearful person can observe the enjoyment of the skilful ones and play with them and so fears will be washed away with victories and happy moments. If we can not offer these opportunities we are unlikely to succeed.

## The actual practice (by Sheri Stein)

### Before starting:

At first you can just sit on the side of pool, dangling your feet or sitting on steps, just breathing and trying to relax. You may want to close your eyes and imagine a place or situation that you find safe.

Whenever you feel ready, you'll begin these extremely simple steps. Your goal is just to reach the level of a good solid dog paddle, which despite its name is a terrific exercise. At the dog-paddle level, you can stay afloat comfortably, move around and get a great 20 minutes of aerobic activity.

- 1) Stand facing the pool wall; hold on to the side and stay in that position throughout this step. All you are going to do is lift one leg behind you, bending comfortably at the knee, and let it drift down-kind of slow-motion kicking. The point is to feel how once you give that leg the chance, it starts floating. Close your eyes and feel how the water supports your leg. Play around with this feeling and then try your other leg.
- 2) In the next step, you'll do a similar motion with your arms. Turn now to face the water. With elbows bent, hold your arms so that they're facing forward, resting on the surface of the water. Your arms should not be pressed against the sides of your body but at a comfortable distance. Now, simply press your arms into the water and release them. Gently, as you did the kick. Press and release, press and release. Feel that when you press down in the water, your arms spring back up. The harder you press, the more your arms want to float to the surface.
- 3) In the next two steps, use your arms in whatever way you like. In this drill, just remain standing at the same depth and take small, gentle jumps in the water. Again, do this as long as you like, just concentrating on how your body feels in the water.
- 4) You will now need to move a bit deeper into the water but not deeper than shoulder level-just so that your body is submerged when you comfortably bend your

knees. If at any time you feel too out of control, just go back to whatever step feels safe and proceed from there. In this step, you continue to jump, but with your body under water, the jump feels more like a bounce. You're going to bounce as long as you like in this position

- 5) This step should feel very playful and give you the strongest sense so far of the water's ability to support you. You're going to combine the bounce with Step 2. The two movements must be in opposition, arms down, and legs up. What do you notice? Pressing your arms down seems to push your legs up. Stay with this step until you feel really secure with it.
- 6) Once you feel in control with Step 5, you're going to move your hands in the dog paddle motion but with your legs stationary. All you do is make circles with your arms. They should be relaxed and in front of you, with elbows bent and hands slightly cupped so that you're moving water toward yourself.
- 7) This step may feel a little awkward and combining it with Step 8 might actually be easier. You're going to bounce while your arms dog paddle. Keep extending the length of time your legs are off the pool floor. Play around with this step till you feel as comfortable as possible.
- 8) This is it! Now you're going on to the complete dog paddle, with legs fully off the pool floor. While dog paddling with your arms, jump up and begin making similar circular motions with your legs, as if you're working a bicycle wheel.

Remember, this whole process might call for a few months of working on these steps.

Now that you have mastered these drills and feel secure in the water, you be ready to learn techniques for the basic swimming strokes, probably starting with freestyle.

### Citations:

- Fear of the water and how to overcome it by Ilkka Keskinen
- Overcoming fear of water and swimming by Sheri Stein - Pagewise