



HOW SWIMMING IS LIKE MEDITATION

The physical health benefits of swimming are well known. It improves circulation, works the main muscle groups, lowers cholesterol and boosts cardiovascular health. Exercising in water can also be an important proponent of mental health. The rhythmic breathing and repetitive nature of swimming can have a meditative quality that promotes feelings of well being. Even light exercise in a swimming pool can help to decrease anxiety, heal depression and improve your general mood. It's all about the breathing. The rhythmic breathing, synchronized with repetitive strokes and body position in swimming can have a meditative quality.



It's all about the breathing. The rhythmic breathing, synchronized with repetitive strokes and body position in swimming can have a meditative quality. Here is how to make the most of it:

- Inhale when your head is out of the water and exhale when your head is in the water.
- We normally inhale and exhale on a one-to-one ratio, but in the pool, it's better to breathe at a two-to-one ratio, with the exhale lasting twice as long as the inhale.
- Completely exhale while your face is in the water so that when you come up, you'll be ready for air intake.
- Exhale through the nostrils to avoid swallowing water.
- Establish a rhythm, synchronizing your breathing with the movements of your body.

SWIMMING AS MEDITATION

Freestyle lap swimming requires you to focus on your breathing, since your head will be in and out of the water at regular intervals, requiring you to regulate your breathing accordingly. The trick to breathing while swimming is to inhale when your head is out of the water and exhale when your head is in the water. We normally inhale and exhale on a one-to-one ratio, but in the pool, it's better to breathe at a two-to-one ratio, with the exhale lasting twice as long as the inhale, coming up for a breath on every third

stroke. The goal is to completely exhale while your face is in the water so that when you come up, you'll be ready for air intake. If you are holding your breath underwater and then exhaling and inhaling very quickly when your head emerges from the water, you are doing it incorrectly: you will be gasping for air whenever your head emerges from the water, which will disrupt the flow of swimming and reduce your speed.

It is better to exhale through the nostrils to avoid swallowing water, but if you have trouble expelling all the air through just the nostrils, you can exhale through both the nose and the mouth.

GETTING INTO A RHYTHM

Overall, the goal in lap swimming is to get into a rhythm, synchronizing your breathing with the movements of your body. The arm on the side you come up for air on should be extended down beside your body, ready to reach up again as you inhale and then rock your body in the other direction, exhaling while your face is in the water. Once you synchronize these movements – the rocking of the body, movement of the arms, and inhaling and exhaling – you will achieve rhythm. After a while, the breathing and movements become repetitive and you don't have to think about them anymore, which frees your mind to enter a meditative state, resulting in mindfulness.

CONTROLLING YOUR BREATHING

Since a big part of swimming is learning to control your breathing, meditating and swimming are naturally compatible. A common way to achieve mindfulness while meditating is to pay attention to the breath: whenever you encounter a distracting thought, the protocol is to bring yourself back to your breath. Think about how breath is flowing inside the body, the duration and pace of breathing and the breathing pattern. Mindfulness is a state that involves the self-regulation of attention, allowing you to focus on the present moment and experience thoughts and sensations objectively. In a meditative state, you learn to allow any thoughts to enter your consciousness, and then to control your reaction to those thoughts and sensations. Instead of dealing with them in a way that produces anxiety or fear, you process them objectively and then let them pass.

IMPROVING YOUR PERFORMANCE

If improving your stroke is a goal, you can use the meditative state to concentrate on thoughts that enhance your performance. You can think about your breathing and your stroke – and on your position in the pool: you are, after all, sharing the pool with other swimmers; you need to avoid collisions and pay attention to lap-swimming etiquette. Or you can simply meditate in the broader, more general sense, leaving your mind open to whatever thought, sensation or stimuli comes your way, and then objectively observing those thoughts. No action or reaction is required. The goal is to remain in the moment. Mindful swimming can help purge your mind of anxiety and negative thoughts, so when the swim is over, you feel rejuvenated both physically and mentally.

GAINING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH REWARDS

Whenever you engage in physical exercise, your body releases endorphins, a natural opiate that give you a feeling of well being. This adds another benefit to meditative swimming that enhances both the physical and mental health rewards. Best of all, you don't have to swim laps to reap the benefits. All water activities can improve health and reduce anxiety. According to a study published in the medical journal *Pain Research & Management*, being submerged in water dulls the amount of sensory information

that bombards your body, helping to produce feelings of calm. It also increases blood flow to the brain by as much as 14%, which helps to improve concentration. According to a *Journal of Physiology* study, the water's pressure on the chest cavity may have something to do with this increased blood flow.

In case this isn't motivation enough, there is one more aspect to swimming that has the power to make you feel good about yourself: being healthier generates millions of dollars of savings in health care costs, so swimming benefits not only the individual, but society as a whole.

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