

## Overcoming fear of water and swimming

### What is Water Fear?

Known by a number of names - *Hydrophobia* and *Fear of Water* being the most common - the problem often significantly impacts the quality of life. It can cause panic attacks and keep people apart from loved ones and business associates. Symptoms typically include shortness of breath, rapid breathing, irregular heartbeat, sweating, nausea, and overall feelings of dread, although everyone experiences water fear in their own way and may have different symptoms.

For those who know the secret, swimming can be a lifelong form of pleasurable and invigorating exercise. Fortunately, for adults who have spent a lifetime either too afraid to swim or just uncomfortable in the water, this is a secret eager to be shared because it doesn't actually belong to the swimmers but to the water itself. It's simply this: The water wants to hold you up—that is its nature. It should help you in overcoming your fear of swimming to know that no matter what your weight or height, you will find that the water has no problem lifting you. The simple steps below are meant to gradually introduce you to this feeling of the water's support.

There are a few keys to overcoming your fear. You must feel in control, which involves proceeding in small steps. As you go through the process offered here, 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.

Another important key is to find a buddy, someone who will do the drills along with you in the water as often as possible. If you can find a friend at your same level, that's great. Most vital is that your buddy give you support—real support—the rah, rah kind. She cannot tell you your fears are silly. He can encourage you but not push you to go faster than you want. Your buddy should also be someone who helps you feel playful because play is an essential aspect of the water.

Also, you must praise yourself throughout this process, especially when it seems especially tough

### **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. You can use this image at any point that you become too fearful. Eventually get into the water up to whatever depth you like, probably not any deeper than your chest. You may spend your first sessions walking around, getting used to the water. If you and your buddy want to stand there and chat, go ahead.

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. Hopefully doing this with your buddy will keep you from feeling silly. If not, bring a kid. They make great covers for silly behavior.
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. At some point, try bouncing a little higher, bringing your bent legs toward your chest. Keep bouncing and as you continue, see if you can increase the amount of time your legs are off the pool floor.
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. Start bouncing. Eventually, while you are in the up position, press your arms down into the water as you did in 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. Remember to praise yourself!
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. Your legs will need to be more-or-less under your body. This is the big step so relax and take as long as you need to reach it. Remember, this whole process might call for a few months of working on these steps.
9. Congratulations! Once you have mastered the dog paddle, you can add another position that will give you an even fuller sense of floating. While doing the dog paddle, press your chest into the water, arch your back and let your butt rise to the surface. It doesn't matter what order you do the steps in, as long as they work to make you float. You'll find that when you go through these steps, your legs will start to move behind your body. Just as pressing your arms helps your legs to rise, pressing your chest will help your whole body rise. Arching your back adds more pressure onto your chest and your bottom acts as a buoy. The more you exaggerate this position, the more easily you'll float.

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. Join a class or have a trusted friend who loves to swim start you off. Remember; take as long as you need through this process. Once you feel safe enough to swim, reward yourself for your bravery. You deserve a gold medal.