

The healing power of open water swimming



Plunging into cold water produces a mind-body connection that is hard to ignore, says **Sam Milford**

For most of my life in Brighton, the iconic pebbly beach has been no more than a backdrop for a picnic or an occasional jog. Having children rekindled a more playful relationship with the sea - goading the waves on the shoreline or screaming with delight and in protest at the water temperature. But, relatively recently, I discovered first-hand the mental health benefits of a regular sea swim.

Having just finished counselling training, and while struggling through a particularly testing time in my personal life, I was aware of an increasing draw to find connection with the sea. It felt like the most natural place to take my anxieties and, emerging from the usually chilly water, I enjoyed a sense of perspective on my life that was otherwise difficult to find. And I soon discovered that I was not alone in seeking out the sea to help with my mental health. I joined my local swimming club and found a community of daily sea swimmers who showed me that, rain or shine (or snow, for added frostbite), it's always possible to get cold and wet down at the seashore, and then to enjoy warming up again.

I have now been a self-confessed open water fanatic for about five years. Freshwater ponds, lakes, lochs, rivers and even, to my son's bewilderment, in Wales last year, lying in the ankle-deep water of a cold mountain stream just to get my fix. With my counselling training still spinning in my head, I began to notice that my swims often resonated with aspects of what I was hoping my clients might experience during therapy. With some encouragement from swimming club friends, I set about a piece of research to explore some of these ideas.

The sea in Brighton has a reputation for restoring health and vitality that stretches back to the 1600s. A dip in, or even a sip of, the cold coastal water was prescribed for a variety of ills - both physical and psychical - and the

influx of eager patients propelled Brighton's transformation from fishing village to seaside destination. Perhaps it shouldn't have surprised me to find that Brighton Swimming Club, the UK's oldest swimming club, gave me such easy access to key researchers in the area of swimming and mental health, although academic interest in this area is still relatively recent. Fellow club member and consultant anaesthetist Dr Mark Harper is part of a team exploring the physiological impact of cold water immersion, focusing on its capacity to reduce systemic inflammation.¹ Markers of inflammation are often seen in cases of chronic depression, so it could be that finding ways to reduce inflammation will prove a useful approach to working with treatment-resistant depression. Another club member, Hannah Denton, also recently published convincing research into sea swimming and wellbeing, describing the activity as 'transformative, connecting' and 're-orientating'.²

From this starting point, I set about choosing participants for my master's research in order to hear perspectives on open water swimming from a variety of therapeutic leanings - an art therapist, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a play therapist, a psychodynamic counsellor and an EMDR therapist. From these conversations,

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five broad themes emerged that I hoped would say something about the ways in which open water swimming and the therapeutic process resonate.

1 Experiencing relationship

There is strong evidence to suggest that the relationship between client and therapist is an important, if not central, part of the therapeutic process. Although not the focus of every framework of mental health support, most people recognise and emphasise the vitality of the therapist-client relationship.³ We increasingly understand that it is rarely our interpretations, even those that might have felt particularly insightful, that help to bring about the change that clients come seeking. Instead, we see the development of a dynamic client-therapist relationship as a good predictor of the possibility of some kind of shift for the client. We understand the value of a genuine sense of meeting.

Open water swimming provides an opportunity for a feeling of connection on many levels that may go some way towards providing this sense of meeting - from the strength of interpersonal relationships with other swimmers to a depth of connection with the environment. Although this is distinct from the attentive and often profound depth of relationship between client and therapist, swimmers are clear about the importance of these various relationships to them. For those who swim with a group or club, a feeling of trust between members is quickly established. An agreement to meet for a swim carries with it a sense of responsibility - breaking that agreement might leave someone unable to swim or swimming alone. Whether swimming with friends or not, there is also an underlying experience of a strong sense of relationship with the environment - something that is notably absent for pool swimmers. The idea

that a sense of connection is of itself something transformative is beginning to be supported by neuroscience research. A feeling of a safe connection with another has been shown to activate particular areas of the brain leading to neuroplasticity,⁴ preparing the brain for reorganisation and growth.

2 Engaging with creativity and a sense of play

Therapists understand the importance of trying to meet someone where they are, and from there to co-construct a space of safety where we invite clients to take a risk in their relationship with us. We learn that the walls of the consulting room, clear timekeeping, the structure of the sessions and the maintaining of consistent boundaries can all help to provide a sense of safety and open the door for play and creativity. Anthropologists have long understood the vital functions that play serves. Critical for survival, play allows for the mastery and fine-tuning of motor skills, the improvement of physical condition and, perhaps of particular relevance in the therapy room, the increased capacity for co-operation and creativity. Therapists intuitively develop play in their practice, regardless of modality. As Winnicott communicated so beautifully in *Playing and Reality*,⁵ if there is no sense of play with a client, then the work of therapy is often about developing the relationship with a client until play and creativity are possible.

Voluntarily stepping into a cold body of water almost inevitably demands some playfulness. For most of my research participants, the activity of swimming for exercise was of much less importance than the idea of being and moving in the water with a sense of play. A playfulness was even discernible in the interviews themselves: participants lit up with enthusiasm at being asked to describe their morning swim, and there was always a lightness to the conversations around the activity. The shoreline feels like a wholly appropriate place to scream, laugh and fool around, enjoying the safety of a rewarding relationship with others and the environment.

3 Attending to the unconscious

With the restrictions placed on in-person meetings over the past year or so, the world of therapy has undergone something of an online revolution,⁶ with most therapists having quickly adapted their

practice to incorporate online sessions. This increasing reliance on virtual connection over real-life meeting may strengthen the argument for finding ways to incorporate engagement with the natural environment into the work of therapy.

As a species, we are well adapted to survey and be curious about the ever-changing natural environment, and research suggests that there is a significant cost to removing this environmental backdrop.⁷ Some of the concerning costs of shutting the door to nature include a reduced capacity for problem solving, a reduced ability to regulate expression of feelings, impairment of perception and an impact on conscious thought and feelings. It turns out that the way we direct our attention could be central to the way we process information, which may help to explain, for example, why we naturally gravitate to green and blue space for a sense of calm.

Open water swimmers consistently talk about an inner peacefulness that can be found when swimming and is particularly apparent in relatively unchallenging water conditions. The relaxed, trance-like state - possibly, in part, created by the bilateral movement of alternately swinging arms - was seen to open the door to unconscious material, in much the same way as a hypnotherapy session might help reveal connections that are otherwise hard to find. With obvious connections to meditation and daydreaming, this calm space can often give rise to fresh insights and connections where emotions could more readily surface. Just as we might encourage our clients to take an interest in their dreams, or to risk voicing associations that they might make during a session, the combination of engagement with nature and the often rhythmical motion of open water swimming may offer a useful doorway to unconscious material.

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4 Integrating mind and body

Submersion in cold water produces a mind-body connection that is hard to ignore. The shocking sensation of cold water on the skin provokes an unavoidable, involuntary refocusing of the mind onto the body. Some swimmers prefer to take their time getting into the water, feeling the sharp sensation of the water as it creeps up the body. Others choose to jump straight in. But whichever method of entry, there is an unavoidable, unintentional redirection of attention to bodily sensations. Unhelpful ruminations become impossible to maintain when there is such an acute awareness of the water temperature on the skin. Whatever your distressing or difficult thoughts or feelings, at the moment of entry, and often for the entirety of the swim, there is a requirement to attune to the body, to notice rising excitement or sensations of anxiety and to work with those feelings. A cold swim also seems to have some obvious parallels with the way in which a mindfulness meditation aims to bring about connection with the body, the breath and the present moment. It helps create an understanding that an uncomfortable sensation of cold is just that - a sensation. That there continues to be a choice about how we respond to that sensation can be a revelation.

This improved connection between mind and body also seems to lead to an improved body image as swimmers are required to bare their flesh - often in public spaces. The body can no longer be considered just an unsatisfying reflection in a mirror, tainted with cultural expectations of shape and size. Instead, it may become possible to see one’s body as something that can be cherished for its ability to safely and repeatedly deliver the self through potentially life-threatening circumstances.

5 Accepting self and the world

Helping clients to find self-acceptance and self-forgiveness, to understand and express their needs and desires and to tolerate their shortcomings is often central to the therapeutic process. Moving towards a genuine acceptance of self and the world can be a liberating, even spiritual experience, and can lead to the very change that clients often seek from therapy. A letting go of an attempt to control (the other, the situation, life etc) can itself make things more manageable and - subsequently - there may be less desire to exert control.

For those who choose open water swimming in service of their mental health, there is something of this dual quality of acceptance. There is a need to meet the swimming conditions as they are and there is a meaningful choice to be made on how or whether to engage with the water. That choice is based on an understanding of the world as it is and a realistic view of one's own ability and shortcomings as a swimmer. If there are strong currents, an injured swimmer might choose not to go in, or to play in the shallows. If the water is calm, swimming further out is the challenge. There is always an appropriate response to what becomes a manageable challenge. Even when the choice is to stay dry, there is a sense of knowing oneself in that decision and being able to look after oneself.

Participants spoke about recognising the need to take care of themselves in order to face the challenge of the environment, and themes of self-care, self-protection and self-regulation ran through the interviews. These ranged from organising a warm drink for themselves after the swim through to taking the decision not to swim based on their assessment of the conditions. The seasons, the tides, currents and weather conditions are understood to be beyond control - and, with that acceptance, there is a sense of peace. Knowing that there are things beyond our influence means that we can stop trying to control them. We accept that a stormy sea may be too difficult to swim in and perhaps instead allow time to appreciate the storm for what it is and to know that it will pass.

Cold water as healer

To date, much of the established public health policy around open water swimming has been focused on risk mitigation. While this will undoubtedly have saved lives as people are made more aware of the dangers associated with open water swimming, it is also sure to have resulted in a drop in take-up of the activity, with a corresponding cost to mental health.

We are only just beginning to understand the broad impact of the pandemic on mental health. Access to life-saving talking therapies plunged during 2020,⁸ with medication increasingly being prescribed without any accompanying mental health care offered. The pandemic restrictions have provoked a huge surge in interest in open water swimming and it seems wholly appropriate

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for us to help clients capitalise on this swing back to the idea of nature as healer. There is undoubtedly a price to pay for our growing distance from nature and there is enormous value in finding ways to reconnect with our bodies - a subject on which trauma therapists are increasingly vocal.

The suggestion is not that finding some cold water to plunge into will be universally helpful, nor that open water swimming might be a good replacement for therapy. Cold water immersion is evidently not suitable or appealing to everyone, and for some people the cost outweighs the benefits. Rapid temperature change creates its own physical stress, and research exploring the potential use of cold water swimming in treating chronic depression also found that a state of anxiety can prevent physiological adaptation to the cold.⁹ For those who can't or would rather not access open water there is good news from research being undertaken at Exeter University, in conjunction with the BBC, suggesting that even sound and images of nature can be of benefit to our mental health.¹⁰

It is clear that open water swimming has never been as popular as it is at this moment. All around the country, boundaries between urban life and nature are being redrawn. The pandemic that has pushed us to reconsider so much in our lives forced the closure of swimming pools and gyms and provoked a search for novel outdoor exercise. As 2021 unfolded, spare patches of grass by Brighton beach were increasingly being transformed into outdoor gyms, runners jostled for space along the promenade and the sea was alive with kayaks, paddleboards and hardy winter swimmers. For those who have rediscovered the sea, there is an enthusiastic understanding of the positive impact on their mental health. For those able and open to a challenge, open water swimming may form a useful part of an embodied response to trauma, anxiety and depression. ■

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