

Hit the Reset Button: Floatation as a Restorative Practice

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Stop the world, I want to get off!

In the hyper-busy lives many of us lead, it's entirely too easy to get caught up in what Dr. Kenneth Pelletier calls "an intense, overall state of undifferentiated hyperarousal." One way to hit the re-set button is to step out of the world of external stimuli and into a floatation session.



The magical space where nothing – and everything – happens is a dark, quiet, specialized environment designed to greatly reduce sensory input from the outside world. Practitioners rest comfortably, floating in a temperature-maintained pool of Epsom salt solution that provides ideal support for the experience of deep relaxation. The key word is REST: Restricted Environmental Stimulus Therapy.

Behavioral scientist, dolphin researcher and consciousness explorer John Lilly pioneered the use of isolation tanks as a means of experiencing what he called sensory deprivation. "I think that in our culture we need a socially acceptable place where we don't have to answer the telephone or answer questions from our children or argue anything with anybody," said Lilly. "When you get into this box of water, that's it. For an hour . . . you can escape all of the demands and pressures and transactions that are usually required of you. In a sense, the tank is an official permission to just let go."

These days, the term 'sensory enhancement' is considered more descriptive of the experience. In the absence of exterior sensory input, the floater's awareness is drawn inward, toward stimuli originating within the body/mind itself. This increased awareness of internal states, known as interoception, is thought to be responsible for many of the benefits attributed to floatation therapy.

These benefits include a surprisingly wide range of restorative effects, a growing number of which have been documented in peer-reviewed scientific research.

On the physical level, many fibromyalgia sufferers experience significant pain reduction, while athletes and sports teams find floatation effective in supporting recovery. REST researcher Thomas Fine suggests a relationship to endorphin release: "There is a wealth of evidence that floating results not only in an increase in the secretion of healing, pain-relieving biochemical, but also a decrease of biochemical associated with stress and post-game letdown."

Although the mechanisms are not thoroughly understood, a number of studies indicate that floatation can help with a variety of stress-related ailments, including depression, sleep disorders, PTSD, and



substance abuse. In the opinion of Dr. Justin Feinstein, anxiety is pervasive in our society and a contributor to all manner of malady. His preliminary studies at the Laureate Institute for Brain Research in my fair city of Tulsa, Oklahoma, use functional neuroimaging to document reductions in stress, anxiety, cortisol, and blood pressure.

With regard to mental effects, the evidence so far is largely anecdotal – and there's a lot of it around. Artists and problem-solvers of all sorts use the invocative space of a non-distracting environment for creative enhancement. One of my friends whose career is in project management claims that he gets more done in an hour-long float session than in the rest of his week in the office. Performers and competitive athletes find float pools ideal for the use of performance-enhancing visualization techniques.

And then there are the opportunities for consciousness expansion which originally motivated Dr. Lilly. The dark, quiet intimacy of the float chamber invites the temporary release of attachments and preferences, allows a sense of timelessness, and offers space for primordial awareness. For me, the cave-like retreat evokes a sense of the sacred, and I value access to these realms. Since the opening of our float center almost two years ago, I've had the privilege of maintaining a weekly float practice, which I find absolutely invaluable for clearing my path to peace of mind.

Readers of this newsletter will be well aware of the value of practice. Flotation practice in conjunction with ITP is a powerful combination. To those who have the opportunity, I highly recommend regular floatation as means of restorative self-care and exploration.

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