



GOLDMINDS

LEARNING HOW TO RELAX

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QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

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After reading “Relax...It’s Only Swimming” in the November issue of *Swimming World*, you know that learning to relax is important. The big question is how do you learn to relax? Here are some answers:

WHEN SHOULD COACHES START TEACHING SWIMMERS MENTAL SKILLS SUCH AS RELAXATION?

Traditionally, the development of psychological skills has been thought to be an advanced coaching concept and, therefore, introduced to swimmers in the latter stages of athletic development.

Yet, recent research indicates that many of the mental skills, core values, virtues, character traits and behaviors conducive to peak performance in mature swimmers are learned and nurtured when the swimmers are 8 years of age and younger. Therefore, coaches are increasingly exposing relatively young swimmers to the basics of psychological skills.

Relaxation is a fundamental swimming skill—as important as any other swimming skill—as it underpins a swimmer’s capacity to feel and apply pressure to the water.

A POWERFUL AND IMPORTANT LEARNING TOOL

Relaxed swimmers can and do learn very well. It is essential that coaches, teachers and even parents all provide young swimmers with the opportunity to experience the water in comforting, supportive situations. That way, they can learn to associate aquatic education with positive thoughts and emotions.

This is paramount when children are learning to swim—for example, when young kids are taught the basics of swimming in fun, friendly and caring learning environments.

The principles of relaxation are just as important—and potentially even more essential—when the swimmers make the transition from learn-to-swim programs into regular team training. The concept of speed could also be introduced simultaneously with the principle of relaxation.

AN OFTEN OVERLOOKED AND UNDERVALUED PERFORMANCE ENHANCEMENT TECHNIQUE FOR COMPETITIVE SWIMMERS

As swimmers progress in their level of competition, relaxation becomes increasingly important.

Learning to relax helps swimmers remain calm, composed and confident. It also helps swimmers focus on the things that matter and stops them from wasting energy and effort worrying about things that don’t—i.e., things that do not directly contribute to performance.

Elite-level swimming performance demands that swimmers are giving their best in all aspects of their preparation and competition. To maintain this rigorous lifestyle, swimmers must learn how to relax and “switch off” so that their body and mind can recover fully between training sessions and competition.

Even world-class swimmers are encouraged to find ways of resting and recovering between training sessions and after major competitions—for example, learning to relax by engaging in active rest activities.

Active rest involves swimmers undertaking activities that they normally would not usually do. For example, following a major swimming event, an elite swimmer may take an extended break during which time he/she might do some mountain biking, surfing, hiking or a team sport rather than simply trying to rest through inactivity.

Learning to relax in and out of the water—and even in and out of the sport of swimming—is an integral aspect of developing successful swimmers.

RELAXATION FOR TEENAGE SWIMMERS

Teenage swimmers can and do experience significant challenges. All at once, they experience physical changes due to growth and maturation; social situations become more complex; study commitments are more demanding and more time-consuming; and the desire increases to earn income, accumulate material possessions and experience all that life offers.

Swimmers should be educated on how to concentrate and focus on the activities and actions directly related to the achievement of their performance goals. They also should be given the opportunity to relax, unwind and enjoy life when the appropriate opportunity is available.

Sometimes the only time teenage swimmers have to relax is when “their head is in the water”—where they can enjoy the feeling of flowing freely and easily through an aquatic environment. The pool can often be the only place in their world where they can experience peace and freedom that may be difficult to find in other aspects of their increasingly busy and frantic lives.

It is in learning to balance the various aspects of their lives—and accept responsibility and accountability for the decisions they make—that swimmers develop the mature thinking processes required of senior athletes.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

Tension is the enemy of performance at all levels of competition and at all stages of athletic development.

“Relax” should be an integral key word and coaching cue throughout all training sessions so that young swimmers learn that 1) relaxation and performance are linked, and that 2) speed is directly related to the swimmer’s ability to relax when racing.

An important, but simple relaxation technique that can be taught to swimmers in this stage of development is called P.M.R.—Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

1. Have a small group of swimmers meet in a small, quiet room.
2. Ask them to sit or lie down and to be as comfortable as possible. Perhaps, lower the lights.

3. Ask the swimmers to breathe deeply and slowly—four seconds to inhale, four seconds to exhale and four seconds of relaxed, quiet non-breathing (that’s 12 seconds per breath cycle...or five breaths per minute).

4. While maintaining a focus on deep, slow, controlled breathing, ask the swimmers to “squeeze” and tense their toes and feet for five seconds.

5. After five seconds, ask them to inhale deeply...then as they exhale, release the tension, relax their feet and lie still and quiet for a moment.

6. Then repeat this process: tensing and relaxing calves, then thighs and hamstrings, then gluteals and so on—for all of the muscle groups of the body.

This process of tensing, deep breathing and relaxation teaches swimmers how to control and manage tension in their bodies that so often limits their capacity to compete to their full potential.

MINDFULNESS: HAND-IN-HAND WITH RELAXATION

Mindfulness is a particularly useful technique for elite-level swimmers to learn and master. It is a psychological technique that teaches athletes how to remain focused on the moment—on what’s happening right here and right now. It provides them with the tools to manage their performance anxiety and to maintain a clear focus on the moment rather than on what’s happened in the past or is about to happen in the future—i.e., both of which are out of their capacity to control or manage.

By staying in the “now,” swimmers can stay relaxed and focus on “this moment” rather than being stressed or worried about what’s “next.”

Mindfulness can be learned relatively quickly and easily, and it is an invaluable mental skill for all competitive swimmers to discover and practice regularly.