

Learning to Swim

When I was five years old, my family moved from the desert to the Gulf Coast. Our new town had been devastated by a massive hurricane the year before we moved, so my mother thought that knowing how to swim was a matter of life or death. I loved splashing around in the bathtub and in the backyard wading pool, so swimming lessons sounded fun. On the first day of swimming class, I plopped in the water with the other children, ready to learn. This all changed as soon as my feet hit the bottom of the pool. I was barely over 3 feet tall, so the water came up above my nose and I couldn't breathe. In a panic, I grabbed on to the side of the pool and held on for dear life. I refused to let go of the wall and even tried to bite the instructor, who attempted to pry my fingers loose. After this, I thought I'd won. I was wrong. Day four, I was pulled aside to have a talk with the program director. He told me that he'd had enough of my funny business and told me I was going to learn to swim. Then he tossed me into the middle of the pool. I was so stunned that I didn't have time to panic. When I reoriented myself, I realized that not only could I float, I could swim. I no longer needed to hold on. By day's end, I was diving off the diving board and swimming in the deep end. While I don't advocate this method of swimming instruction, I did learn something about my fear of trying something new.

I think most of us get stuck because we are afraid to take the risk to try something new. Whether it's starting a business, falling in love, having a child, following our dreams, or learning to swim, change is scary. Change puts us face to face with the reality that we can't control everything, and we don't trust that things will work out if we take a risk. While it's true that we face actual physical threats from time to time, the fear that keeps us paralyzed almost always stems from imagined or projected psychological doom. In order to work with fear, we have to break its grip. To do this, we have to breathe -- not the shallow, superficial panting that leads to hyperventilation -- but slow, deep breaths that cause the diaphragm to rise and fall.

Once you've got your breath working for you, ask yourself a few key questions.

1. "What am I actually afraid of?" Here, you need to dig down to the worst case scenario. For example, one of the common worries is, "But what would people think if _____?" Beneath this fear is often the fear of being embarrassed, humiliated, rejected, abandoned, cut off financially, or possibly assaulted. And if we are embarrassed, humiliated, rejected, abandoned, cut off financially, or assaulted, we will die. The key is to figure out the root of your fear that has you holding on to your version of the swimming pool wall for dear life. Remember to breathe deeply while you do this.
2. Once you've figured this out, it's time to do some reality testing. Ask yourself, "What is the likelihood that this feared thing will actually happen?" In most cases, being rejected or feeling embarrassed does not cause death. Keep breathing.
3. Very few choices are actually as black and white as they initially seem. My five-year-old self only saw the options of letting go of the wall or holding on for dear life. More humane swim teachers might have added the possibility of letting me hold on to them in deeper water and/or wearing "floaties" so that I could let go of the wall and yet still trust that I wouldn't drown. So after you have assessed the absolute reality of your fear, it's a good idea to brainstorm a variety of options, including options that sound crazy, and then assess the relative risks of each of these courses of action. Breathing is still important here as well.

4. Finally, given the relative risks, ask yourself, “What is the best strategy that I can think of to deal with this situation in this moment?” What the heck! Keep breathing. You’ll need oxygen to take the step or steps that you need to take.

By going through this process, especially the breathing part, you can be more intentional about responding to danger that is imminent and take a more rational approach to those imagined projections. You can also come up with a back-up plan. For example, if you’ve been wanting to ask someone out but have felt paralyzed by fear that they will reject you, you can have a plan to talk to a friend after you take your first step so that you have someone to listen to your woes or celebrate your good news. If you decide you want to come out to your folks but are afraid that they will disown you and cut you off financially, you can start building up your social support network so that you have a family of friends and saving up money so if they do disown you, you won’t be in dire financial straits.

Whether it’s starting a business, falling in love, having a child, following one’s dreams or learning to swim, the things that matter in life are often a little scary and involve some sort of leap of faith to even try. And it’s a lot easier to jump in if you have “floaties” or some sort of safety plan.

This article originally appeared in Outlook Columbus in 2006

Regina Sewell is a professional counselor licensed in the state of Ohio and is the author of We’re Here! We’re Queer! Get Used to Us! Survival Strategies for a Hostile World. More information can be found at www.ReginaSewell.com.