

Opinion OURS & YOURS

Swimming has lessons that go beyond water

Dive in to make friends, get fit and improve mental health, write Megan Stronach and Fiona Redgrove

October is World Mental Health Month, and we are challenged to reflect on the importance of mental health. This includes celebrating the organisations, individuals and teams that do great work in this space.

We asked members of the Hobart Dolphins Masters Swimming Club why they thought our sport was so good for them. Why, we asked, are you drawn to the water? Why do we choose to spend much of our time wet, sometimes cold, often smelling of chlorine, with our clotheslines adorned with towels, bathers, wetsuits, booties, gloves and more? What do we get from this crazy pursuit anyway?

They reminded us of the simple things needed to maintain mental health and happiness. Someone once said, "Happiness is pretty simple: something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for". Well, we think swimming ticks all these boxes and more.

Researchers have found that swimming promotes both physical and mental wellbeing: this isn't news to anyone who regularly frequents the pool or the ocean. But it was the not-so-obvious benefits that our team mates spoke more about.

Take 75-year-old Bert, for example, a regular swimmer since he was a youngster. He talked of how swimming has added to the quality of his life.

"It teaches us lessons that have

extended far beyond the pool: teamwork, dedication, and willpower to name a few. Through the sport, I have friends who will always have my back. My swimming memories will last a lifetime," Bert said.

This theme of 'having our backs' was repeated often. Another swimmer, 66-year-old Marie put it this way, "There's always someone in the club doing it tough. Maybe they've got a dicky heart, or a dicky knee, or they've fallen out of a tree or they're battling some nasty illness. Or maybe their partner is struggling. That's when the club wraps its arms around us."

Many of our teammates believe that swimming is an effective means of coping with anxiety and other mental illnesses. Beverly, aged 67, described how she managed her depression after the death of her partner eight years ago, although it wasn't easy at first.

"Memories of when I was at my darkest are captured in the words of Olympic champion Amanda Beard, who said, 'If you're in the water, they can't see you cry'. My tears were hidden in the water. But then open water swimming started to do what the tablets were doing for me. It gave me a sense of balance and wellbeing and so I started to wean myself off the medication."

Life often throws up unexpected challenges. For Lauren, aged 63, physical and mental health problems over several years have meant that it has been hard for her to continue in



the pool, but she is now more philosophical and recognises her inner strengths.

"I have learned to accept my new situation as a 'plodder' a bit more (well most of the time anyway), and to pursue realistic self-imposed goals – the actual act of putting this together has made me see that any passion we have in life has extreme highs and lows, and at the end of the day, we rely on our strength to allow our passion to keep going," Lauren said.

People often laugh at swimmers for endlessly following the black line at the bottom of the pool. Jack, aged 58, recalled that his teachers thought he



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next breath. They are 'in the zone'. Fran, aged 64, described this,

"Swimming is for fun, as it's the one time I can switch off from my world outside the water and get some headspace. There's something calming about the sense of space and just being part of the water. I find myself unwinding slowly and relaxing into my strokes. I begin to focus and concentrate on my technique. I like being able to 'feel' the water and the way I can change that feeling by adjusting my technique."

Many stories support the research that shows a correlation between social media/technology and mental health concerns, including insomnia, stress, anxiety, and depression. Our

was wasting his time in the pool.

"But what they did not understand is that you make friends with the black line. It seems to have a personality of its own, and sometimes I would – and still do – talk to it when I get it in. It might seem silly to others, but I think swimmers get comfort from the black line," Jack said.

Swimmers also know the feeling of being 'in the zone', especially when they feel at one with the water. As most strokes require our head and mouth to be submerged, swimming requires control of breathing – bubble, bubble, breathe. Swimmers are focused on the next stroke and the



Dolphins Masters open water swim squad members competing in the annual Eggs and Bacon Bay Swim; and inset Dolphins women's relay team Katherine Daft, Siska Hocking, Pia Peterson and Fiona Redgrove. Pictures: Supplied by the Hobart Dolphins

teammates talked of the ways that swimming helps them to counter these insidious impacts on their mental wellbeing. For Eddie, aged 47,

"Swimming is a distraction from technology and the 'no screen' seems to encourage me to relax. The feeling of water moving over my body is like a massage. For me, a swim is rejuvenating mentally, and I have found greater benefits in outdoor water (pools and sea) than indoors, although winter in Hobart means our choices are limited."

The impact of swimming on sleep patterns enhances mental health, and Christa, aged 62, described higher energy levels as her sleep has improved.

"I've always struggled with

insomnia, and to cope I used to sleep a lot during the day. That meant I would be wide awake all night. Now I find that if I have a good swim, I sleep much better. So, I have heaps more energy and I'm a nicer person to be around. If I get down, I know that a swim will help me cope."

The best thing about swimming, of course, is that it gets you out of the house and mingling with new people. Swimming with a group, such as our Masters club, builds accountability that can make sticking to your training routine a little easier and certainly more enjoyable. Our 62-year-old teammate Hanna's words sum up why being in the water with friends is so good, "Can I say a big thank you to these wonderful people

working so hard behind the scenes to make our club the fantastic one it is!! While I was away the thing I missed the most was swimming training on Saturdays, run by all our passionate and patient coaches. That, teamed with the friendly, fantastic, fun club members, not to forget challenging open water swimming sessions, has had a huge impact on improving my quality of life and general happiness. I'm proud to be a Dolphin!"

Megan Stronach and Fiona Redgrove are keen masters swimmers and long-time members of the Hobart Dolphins.

For information on joining a masters swimming club near you go to: <https://masterswimmingtasmania.com.au/>