

'I fought my aquaphobia'

Cheryl Freedman, 38, was desperate to overcome her lifelong fear of water and learn to swim.

I'm sitting on the side of the central London swimming pool in tears. My swimming instructor, Paul, has just asked what's behind my aquaphobia, and it's unleashed a flood of emotions. In a few moments, I'll be stepping into a pool for the first time in years, and I'm fighting the urge to run back into the changing room.

'For most people, swimming is something they do almost unthinkingly, for fun or fitness. But I never learned. My parents weren't swimmers; as a child I wasn't taken for lessons or even on a trip to the local baths. My first time in a pool was a brutal lesson aged nine or 10 at school. Left to splash around in the shallow end with no instruction, I never progressed.

'As I got older, my fear of water deepened and I began to avoid it – so my anxiety grew as I never had any experiences to disprove it. I became skilled at getting out of situations where I might be exposed, dodging holiday destinations where water sports were a big draw, for example.

'Yet I've often felt sad about being the only person unable to take a dip on a hot day. To me, perpetually on the sidelines, being able to swim looks like the very essence of carefree fun. It impacts on other experiences too: if you can't swim, you can't water-ski, snorkel, canoe... the list goes on.

'I think my fear has always been about letting go: the idea of floating with nothing to hold onto terrifies me. But now in my late 30s, with a four-year-old son having his own lessons, I'd love to conquer my aquaphobia.


'I eventually make it down the steps, although my feet barely touch the bottom before I'm tempted to swiftly climb out again. But I slowly relax, and the rest of the hour is spent simply getting used to being in the water and submerging my face. By the end I'm holding my breath underwater for several seconds, something I never

dreamed I could do. Paul has lots of experience of working with phobics like me, and he understands emotions I haven't even voiced. "Most learners are embarrassed by their situation, so won't say how tough they're finding it," he says. I can certainly relate to this – there's a certain shame that, as a grown adult, I still can't swim.

'By week two, I'm tentatively kicking my legs while Paul guides my hands forwards. But I'm still finding it impossible to let go and just float – panic sets in. It's important to take it slowly, Paul explains. "We're trying to build your confidence through positive experiences in water, so forcing you to move at a pace you're not comfortable with can reinforce negative associations with water – or even create new ones," he says.

'Between lessons two and three I have a three-week gap and my fears return: I'm dreading the next session

and wish I could cancel. But I force myself to go and end up having my greatest breakthrough yet: as Paul leads me across the pool, I'm able to break contact with his hands. Only for five seconds, but for those brief, triumphant moments, I get a sense of what swimming might be like. The tricky part is stopping: pulling my legs down smoothly so I can find the bottom again without flailing about.

'In just three lessons, my confidence in the water has improved massively, thanks largely to Paul, who is patient, positive and reassuring. I've still got a way to go to fully conquer my phobia, but I'm determined to continue. Learning to swim feels like a real possibility now. Hopefully soon I'll also be one of those carefree people in the holiday pool.' 

Swimming Lessons London offers coaching and lessons. See www.swimminglessons.london.co.uk or call 020 8292 8550.

It's true Cheryl didn't take to the pool like, ahem, a duck to water, but we love her grit

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