

NEW LOOK!

# planet mindful

*The art of  
lucid dreaming*

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# WILD SWIMMING

ANGELA YOUNGMAN EXPLORES THE BENEFITS OF THIS INCREASINGLY POPULAR ACTIVITY

Scenes of people diving into the sea in aid of charity frequently appear on news screens during the winter period. Many viewers immediately wince and think they are crazy, but wild swimming is becoming one of the fastest growing health activities. All year round, whatever the weather, people are seeking out places where they can enjoy swimming in rivers and lakes as well as the open sea. For many people, it is proving to be a vital lifeline.

Jo Gifford is one of those swimmers. "2020 was tough on everyone. My dad died from Covid – he had dementia and was in a care home. I started wild swimming in local rivers and lakes to help deal with the stress and grief, and found that the open water really helped me. I go four or five times a week now. My family think I am crazy but are really supportive – they drive me in our van and always have hot chocolate on standby!" she tells us.

"Rediscovering my wildside is helping me heal and it's amazing to be back in nature as we try to find freedom from Covid restrictions. The cold water swim helps with so

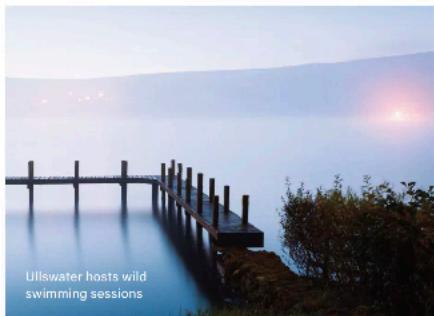
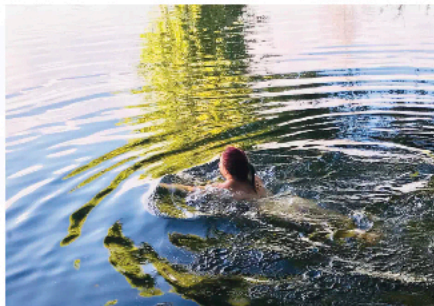
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much – mental wellbeing, grief, stress and it also helps me to cope with the physical symptoms of endometriosis and chronic fatigue, as well as anxiety and stress from 2020."

## Swimming safely

It's worth noting that there are some risks involved with wild swimming. Rivers and lakes can shelve suddenly, creating unexpectedly deep areas with strong currents that can prove dangerous. The risk of slipping on rocks is something to consider too, and underwater obstructions may be present, such as rocks or branches or simply underwater vegetation that can trap unwary swimmers.

Hypothermia can also be an issue, especially in the winter. As the Wild Swimming website ([wildswimming.co.uk](http://wildswimming.co.uk)) points out, 'outdoor swimming in cold water reduces swimming ability/range and impairs judgement. Shivering and teeth-chattering are the first stages of mild hypothermia, so get out of the water and warm up with a combination of warm, dry clothes and activity.' Wearing a wet suit can make a tremendous difference to body temperature rather than just a swimsuit.



Ullswater hosts wild swimming sessions

### Join the club

The best way to decrease such risks is to swim in the company of others, which has the added benefit of enabling you to make new friends (a UK list of wild swim groups can be found at [outdoorswimmingsociety.com](http://outdoorswimmingsociety.com)). Some groups have been in existence a long time, including the Serpentine Swim Club, Hyde Park London, which has been going for over 200 years.

One of the most successful clubs is BlueTits ([thebluetits.co.uk](http://thebluetits.co.uk)). The first BlueTits group began in Pembrokeshire, West Wales and has grown to be a global phenomenon. The first group was set up in 2014, and there are now BlueTits of all genders all over the world. By 2020, there were over 6,000 BlueTits 'joined together by a love of swimming, adventure, and the sense of community that it brings.' They are not an official club, there are no membership fees and anyone is welcome at any of the informal swims arranged in the groups.

Visit Wales ([visitwales.com](http://visitwales.com)) quotes the experience of swimmer Sarah Mullis, "The women we swim with – because although we do welcome men, and love it when they come along, the group is predominantly women – have all sorts of things going on in their lives: cancer treatment, relatives to care for, depression and the menopause to name but a few. But when we get together and go for a swim, our problems seem that little bit smaller and more manageable." While Jan, from North

Pembrokeshire, says simply "I feel like me, the one that had gotten lost under responsibility and chores. I go in the sea and all those worries leave and I emerge as me."

New BlueTits groups are constantly popping up, too. "I founded a local group of the BlueTits Chill Swimmers movement with a friend in Cambridgeshire," says Jo Gifford. "We gained 110 members in two weeks. We go four or five times a week to places in St Ives, Houghton and Cambridge."

Colin Hill leads open water swims at Another Place ([anotherplace](http://anotherplace)), a lake on the shores of Ullswater in the Lake District where all kinds of wild swimming sessions take place, including stargazing night swims. Having completed several two-way Windermere Solo events and taken part in open water races around the world, Colin is very familiar with swimming locations in the UK. He recommends the lakes, rivers and tarns in the Lake District, especially Rydale, Swindale Valley and Wastwater. Elsewhere, he rates the Brighton Swim Club beside the Pier, and the Panama Swim club in Whitely Bay saying "the North Sea is certainly fresh! The Panama Swim Club has a lovely little club house with regular dippers and swimmers, and further up the coast in Northumberland, it's hard to beat the backdrop of Bamburgh Castle from the sea."

So, don your swimming gear, join a group of like-minded swimmers and head out into the water – even if it is just a few minutes. It may just transform your life! 🍷

## Health benefits

### Cold water cures

Still not convinced enough to dive in? Check out some of these positive effects

Whatever the length of swim, health benefits immediately start accruing.

"The advantages of a wild swim range from an increase in metabolism from 25-40 per cent, to boosting your circulation as it stimulates blood flow to the vital organs," says holistic expert and healer Antonia Harman. "That in turn forces your heart to pump faster, pushing blood through your vessels, delivering oxygen and nutrients.

Cold water can also boost your immune system as the lymphatic system gets stagnated, especially if you don't exercise regularly. When you immerse yourself in cold water, the lymph vessels contract, forcing the fluid around the body and flushing out waste. It even triggers white blood cells to attack and destroy unwanted substances in the lymph. This means you are better able to fight off bugs and infections. The cold water triggers mood-enhancing neurotransmitters and makes you feel happy, which helps you to deal with depression and low mood."

Professional athletes frequently use ice baths after exercising as the cold helps deal with any potential muscle strain or inflammation from sore or stiff muscles. The cold water also helps burn calories, since swimmers have to work harder to keep warm while swimming. Some believe that it also helps increase oestrogen and testosterone production, thus improving your libido and self esteem.

#### THE AUTHOR

Angela Youngman is a freelance journalist specialising in wellness. She lives in Norfolk and has written several books including *Dog Walks Norfolk* and *Kiddiwalks Norfolk*.

