

### *One hour in a sensory deprivation tank*

I am floating. But I'm not dreaming, or atop a rubber dinghy, or feeling the effects of some illegal substance. I'm in a sensory deprivation tank in North London, my body weight held up by half a tonne of Epsom salt. Unnerved in total darkness, I think about turning the light back on. But there are two buttons, one for the bulb, and one for the alarm, and try as I might, I can't remember which is which. Stark naked, the thought of being fished out of the tub to the wail of a siren is paralysing. Dark it must stay.

Having been promised relaxation, I feel conned. While increased anxiety levels in the general population have subsided since the country came out of lockdown, they remain almost as high among young people, according to the most recent data from the Office for National Statistics. Forty-two per cent of 16-29 year olds reported high levels of anxiety in the first half of this month compared with 34 per cent on average. Also known as restricted environmental stimulation therapy (REST), floatation is supposed to provide some relief. In a 2014 study, stress, depression, anxiety and pain "significantly decreased" among 65 REST subjects.

The website for Floatworks Angel assures as much. "Free from sensory input, the muscular-skeletal system and sympathetic nervous system wind down into a state of deep relaxation and serenity, in which your body and mind can heal and replenish." I, a 21-year-old riddled with anxiety, booked myself in for an hour-long session to see if it would help.

When I arrive, a disinterested staff member tells me to store my shoes in a cubbyhole, then grace the one and only toilet at the centre. I'm led to a private room, where he gabbles the instructions, glares when asked for clarification, and gestures to a poster where "simple steps for a great float" are bullet-pointed. He scurries away without so much as an "enjoy", leaving me alone with ambient music, all flutes and whale sounds.

I suspiciously scan the ceiling for cameras, then strip off (floating naked is recommended for total sensory deprivation, which a scratchy swimsuit might complicate). After inserting the red ear plugs (like ramming play-doh into your skull), I have a quick shower as the poster commands, then climb into the pod: a giant, glistening-white clam. Pulling the door closed behind me, I lie buoyant on my back and await serenity.

The first sensory deprivation tank was developed by American neuroscientist Dr. John C. Lilley in the 1950s. It was designed to discover whether the brain needed external stimuli to keep its conscious states active. But its potential to enhance wellbeing was realised after early users reported feeling more relaxed.

Not so for me. The experience is at best, boring, and at worst, distressing. I get salt water in my mouth and gag. I get it in my eye and have to blindly push open the hatch and dab at it with a towel, before entombing myself once again. Feeling my toes brush against the side, I try to gently manoeuvre my body back into the centre. My head smacks against the other end. At 5'9" I am hardly abnormally long, so six-footers beware.

*Switch off.* With no distractions, there is nothing to do but obsess over all the tasks I have yet to complete and the deadlines that loom. *Breathe.* I worry about getting home. Where's the closest bus stop? *Relax.* My shoulder throbs from a combination of terrible posture and lugging a heavy bag around all day. My stomach hurts after my jeans, a bit tight at the waist, struggled to accommodate my lunchtime BLT.

To make matters worse, I feel one of the ear plugs dislodge about halfway through. The next day is spent trying to rid my left ear of trapped salt water. This involves rigorous head shaking, putting faith in gravity by hanging off my bed upside down, and finally—at the recommendation of WikiHow—using a hairdryer to try and evaporate it. This does not work.

At the end of my float, the filter switches on and the waters get turbulent—a sign that I have overstayed my welcome in its shiny belly. Unimpressed, I clamber out. The rumour is that your third float is when things get magical, after you've adjusted to the initial strangeness of the experience. At £55 a float (£45 with student discount), this isn't a theory I have the budget to test. I can only imagine a one-off float might be enjoyable if you have the kind of life where you must resort to shutting yourself inside a pitch black pod to get some peace and quiet. For the rest of us, it's not worth it.