

By Simon Edds



[Woman floating in water, Weeki Wachee spring, Florida.](#)

It sounds like the opening line of a traveling medicine man's big sell: "In just one hour, the debilitating symptoms of your anxiety, insomnia, depression, stress and even jet lag can be greatly improved!"

Hordes of eager customers gather round, hands raised in the air, each stuffed full of cash, wanting to buy this mystery man's mystery tonic.

As implausible as this sounds, such a remedy may be closer than you might expect. Lotions and potions might not be the answer if you are suffering from one (or all) of the above-listed chronic illnesses, but there is one invention that stands a good chance of helping you feel better, inside and out – and far from being the new kid on the block, it's celebrating its 60th anniversary next year.

This invention is the humble, but very efficient, floatation tank. It's a simple idea, really. Get a thick plastic tank, roughly 2.5m long, 1.5m wide and 1.5m high. Fill it with 25cm of water, heat it to 35°C, then add a heap of Epsom salt (magnesium sulphate, which has been used for centuries to soften the skin). This is what keeps you floating effortlessly inside the tank.

Next up, strip naked, have a quick shower, then jump inside the tank and close the lid. You're able to relax entirely, knowing that the lid won't lock and can be opened at any time during the float. It's pretty black inside the tank, but the idea is to give your mind a chance to switch off. Usually, for the first 10 minutes you'll hear a little meditative music played in the background, giving yourself the opportunity to slow down your thoughts.

Lying in the warm, salty liquid, which feels silky smooth against your skin, your body is completely weightless and beginning to feel perfectly relaxed. Inside the tank, you feel very safe. It's almost womb-like.

After a short time, all you'll hear is the steady slowing of your heartbeat. After this, the journey is different for everybody. You may experience feelings of profound joy and begin to laugh; creative thoughts and sudden insights may find you in the dark; you may even begin to hallucinate and experience quite vivid imagery; or you may enjoy the most peaceful sleep of your life.

The widespread benefits are succinctly summed up by Dr. Rene Mateos from the NSW Department of Mental Health. "The logical-rational mind (left side) is allowed to relax and is bypassed, enabling the right brain activities of creativity and intuition to emerge to more conscious levels of understanding," Dr Mateos said. "This reinforces not only motivation and drive, but also clarifies deeper understandings related to genuine interests, vocation, and sense of purpose in life."

The feel good benefits can stay with you for days after the experience, sometimes lasting up to a month. During this time, you'll feel the weight of life lifted from your head and chest, you'll be smiling at strangers, you'll feel blissful and happy, and you'll be quick to recommend the experience to your nearest and dearest.

Many people have heard of floatation before, but few have ever tried it, which is a surprise, considering the many benefits it can offer.

Since the mid-1950s, universities and hospitals around the world have conducted studies and research into the physical and mental benefits of spending just one hour inside a floatation tank. These include faster recovery from injuries and post-operative surgery, reduced blood pressure, increased self-confidence, and reduced symptoms for various ailments including asthma, arthritis, multiple sclerosis, migraines and insomnia.

But perhaps its most interesting application, and the use for which it is best-known, is in the arena of sensory deprivation. The tank's creator, Dr. John Lilly, a student of the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, was curious to test the effects of sensory deprivation on the brain and mind.

Would it switch off, or create its own stimuli? To find out, he took hallucinogenic drugs ketamine and LSD, crawled inside his dark, makeshift, water-filled tank and rode it out over the next 10

hours.

Emerging from the tank, he said: "You can create a sense of wellbeing, or you can create a sense of fear out of the operation of your own bio-computer. That's the most important message we have in regard to self-metaprogramming. I saw that in the tank." The year was 1954 and certain psychedelic drugs were still legal then.

These days, the general line of thinking on the subject remains the same, but instead of transcendental stoners spending hours in the tank, many athletes, writers and artists, including the likes of John Lennon and Michael Jackson, have utilised the enormous, creative benefits of sensory deprivation and floatation therapy.

Psychologists at the Australian Institute of Sport recommend athletes use floatation tanks for three main purposes: recuperation and rejuvenation, injury rehabilitation, and neuro-muscular programming.

If all of this sounds appealing, there are plenty of options for the enterprising Sydneysider to engage in a spot of floatation. One option is Bondi Junction Massage and Float Centre, which has been operating for 20 years and has established itself as Sydney's premier floatation centre. Carol, owner of Bondi Junction Massage and Float Centre, has seen many different people come through her doors during this time.

"Sometimes they come in and they're a bit stressed, but they go and have their float and their massage and (when) they come out, you can see a change," she said.

A regular client of the centre is Adrian, 32, of Maroubra, who works in the film and television industry and has been using floatation therapy for a year and a half. He likes to visit "every couple of months", and finds floatation the best way to meditate and unwind. "If you don't like the state you're in, you'll definitely be in a different state when you come out," he said. "I always

come out feeling good."

In the ocean, or in a pool, some people just don't have the ability to float, but the water inside the floatation tank is five times denser than the ocean, so everybody is able to float.

As Carol says: "Just lay back and let the salty water do the work."