

Learning to Chill Out

SWIMMERS RAVE ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF COLD-WATER PLUNGES, BUT DO THEY REALLY DELIVER ANYTHING MORE THAN GOOSEBUMPS?

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PHOTOS BY MAK CRIST

Cold water is everywhere that I live. In Missoula, Montana, you can kayak or surf or swim most days of the year. I have a house near the confluence of two big rivers, and there's no shortage of access to water. But sometime in my thirties my blood grew reluctant to finish its circulation through my extremities, and my hands now turn into floppy, useless clubs every time it rains. My asthmatic lungs wheeze at the very thought of exercising in winter, making cold-weather and cold-water sports increasingly difficult. I started having asthma attacks while kayaking, and after ten seasons up north I stopped guiding whitewater trips in Alaska. I begin every ski tour with a dozen disposable hand warmers stuffed in my mittens and pockets. Cold water, in all its delightful forms, has turned me into something of a liability.

Then I hit forty. Forty sucked: nothing unique, just the standard challenges of being an aging human. Last year, as an attempt to slog out of my inertia and apathy, I bought a wetsuit and swim goggles. The twenty-year-old kid at the surf shop asked if I planned to, you know, surf in my new wetsuit. I said "maybe" and didn't divulge that my actual plan was to train myself to tolerate cold by simply swimming in the river.

That evening, I stood in the living room in my new wetsuit while my boyfriend stared, speechless, at my body stuffed into neoprene, my beluga-white cheeks squished together by compression from a too-small skullcap, my posture that of a third-grader forced to wear her dumpy snowsuit to the bus stop. I rode my bike through the neighborhood like this, undeterred by the absurdity, and then waddled through several feet of snow to the river. The water was paralyzing, even through my neoprene exoskeleton. My goggles fogged immediately and my "swimming" felt like drowning; if anyone had witnessed me, they'd have been negligent not to call for help.

My record was five or six minutes of flailing in the eddy before my body revolted and I hauled myself onto the bank, panting, like an oversized and inelegant seal. Over the next month, I repeated this process a half dozen more times, until I came to hate it. It was not helping me feel any better, and I wondered what that kid at the surf shop would think of my use of his wetsuit.

In late December, my friend Hilary—athlete, writer, and new mother—invited me to try cold-dipping with her, to submerge myself in the river, without a wetsuit. I hesitated, as it was hard enough in neoprene, and I already was feeling resistant to the cold-water evangelism of pro

athletes, mindfulness masters, and social influencers. Proponents cite benefits including reduced inflammation, improved mental fitness, enhanced stress resilience, regulation of nervous systems, stimulation of the vagus nerve, relief from breathing disorders, pain management, and alleviation of depression and anxiety. You can read about it all over the internet, listen to it in podcasts, or overhear it in the locker room at the gym. You can peruse selfies on social media that capture the incongruity of muscle-bound life-optimizers smiling while immersed in ice water. This whole scene was very unappealing to me.

But I actually like Hilary and I don't think she's the type to be brainwashed easily, and that day I desperately needed socialization and movement, so I agreed to go with her. Each Sunday evening, a group of her friends get together, strip down to their swimsuits, wade through the snow, and insert their near-naked bodies into a river. Hilary was in the process of buying a metal trough for cold plunges on her porch. There were t-shirts that read Cold Water Cult. It all started, she said, when she and a friend decided one summer that they wanted to be "the type of people who jump into alpine lakes."

It was the coldest day of the year so far and the sky was a pale, hard blue. In midwinter, the water in the Blackfoot River is dark and deep like the season. It often looks black, in contrast to the brown of spring and blue of late summer. With the rhythm of a ritual, Hilary laid out a pad for her dog, another for herself, neoprene booties, a thermos of hot tea, a bag of pumpkin chocolate chip cookies, and a towel. Rowlf, on cue, nestled into his square of eggshell foam. Hilary took off her fleece and wool and stripped to a bathing suit. She pulled on neoprene booties, took several deep breaths, and then waded into the river, sinking up to her neck. She stayed there and breathed, the water swirling easily around her. Trying not to splash or fall, I stumbled into the water up to my waist, felt my feet and legs go numb, and scurried back out, making strange noises and stuttering something like "okay that's enough wow that's cold ouch."

Hilary was composed and quiet, and when she emerged she barely disturbed the water. I thought I should try again—that I could do better—but the moment had passed. My hands hadn't even touched the water and yet they'd lost sensation. I worried I was too cold and scrambled to put my clothes back on. Hilary calmly sipped some tea and bundled back up, unhurried. She looked great, rosy-cheeked, refreshed; I was shivering spastically and my

lips were very likely cyanotic. But I felt different without my wetsuit, and something ignited in me.

Hilary's invitation launched an experiment. Through exposure and without the awkward wetsuit, might my lungs become less reactive to the cold? Might I become less susceptible to my spiraling emotions and more in touch with my physical body? I have never liked to be naked or in a swimsuit—how different might things be if I were more comfortable with exposure?

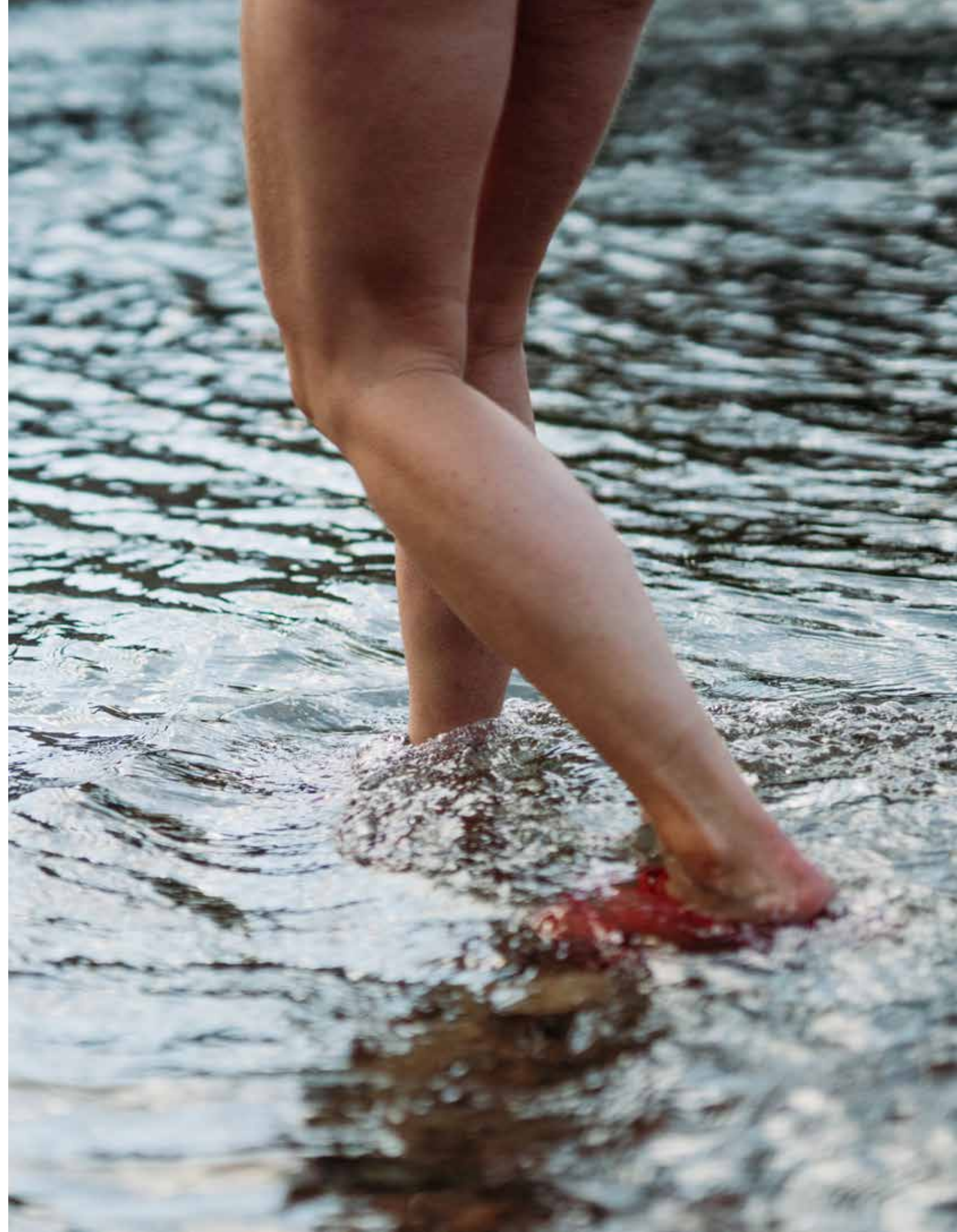
Northerners have been swimming in their seas for generations; many modern Scandinavians claim that winter swimming staves off the seasonal sadness of the dark months at lofty latitudes. Growing up in Alaska, I didn't know anyone who got into the ocean in winter. Nor did I know anyone with a cold plunge tub on their porch. Cold-dipping wasn't part of my Alaskan upbringing.

According to a 2020 narrative in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, the benefits of cold water have been touted since 400 BCE: Hippocrates, who advocated for exercise and a healthy diet as the remedy to most ailments, believed that water-based therapies relieved fatigue. Thomas Jefferson apparently dipped his feet in cold water every morning for six decades in order to stay healthy.

The science, though, is inconclusive. Nearly all the journal articles I studied landed on the same note: While measurable changes in physiology and mental state have been documented in cold-water experiments, more research is needed to support the purported effects of cryotherapy on humans.

There are, though, at least two scientifically accepted impacts of cold water on the body: When you immerse yourself fully in cold water, receptors near the surface of your skin initiate a series of short-term reflexes, collectively called the cold shock response. At first, you gasp, then your breathing becomes fast and uncontrolled, and your heart rate and blood pressure increase. This is a function of your sympathetic nervous system, which elevates your heart rate and prepares you to fight or flee. It offers an undeniably substantial kick to your physical system and also pairs nicely—if counterintuitively—with another physiological response called the mammalian diving reflex.

Oxygen-loving mammals like seals, dolphins, free-divers, and surfers ought to be well-acquainted with this evolutionary adaptation, which is triggered when cold water hits the face. The dive reflex is a function of your





parasympathetic nervous system, which lowers your heart rate and supports rest and homeostasis. In anticipation of submersion (to prepare you to survive underwater), your body undergoes three immediate physiological fluctuations: bradycardia, or reduced heart rate; blood shift, wherein blood fills the lungs and vital organs to stave off collapse upon diving deep; and peripheral vasoconstriction, or the rerouting of blood from extremities to the thoracic cavity. Literally, your system slows down.

You can activate the dive reflex just by putting a cold, wet towel over your face or sticking your head in a bucket of cold water. As a mammal, you can capitalize on your innate biology to chill yourself out anytime you have access to cold water. In theory, by teaching yourself to manage your sympathetic cold shock response and embracing the parasympathetic dive reflex, you might at the same time be able to influence emotional states such as anxiety or panic. In this case, physiology directly influences psychology.

At a family gathering in eastern Montana a few days after that initial dip with Hilary and a few days before Christmas, my mind had grown lethargic and my body gelatinous after many consecutive hours of poker and tequila. Since arriving, I'd been eyeing the little creek behind our Airbnb. Curious and bored and increasingly feeling like a caged wolverine, I put on my Crocs and pink swimsuit, hoped the neighbors weren't looking, then post-holed through old, crusty snow toward the water.

My mom and her husband pressed their faces against the sliding glass doors as I waded past the bank ice and

faced upstream. Braced and breathing, I splashed my face, then plunged my neoprene-mittened hands to the creek bottom, lowered myself down into a pushup, and dipped the whole of my body, horizontally, all at once, into the water, my eyes fixed upstream. The parents stared, shook their heads, and smiled nervously from behind foggy glass, cocktails in hand. This clearly made them uncomfortable—and they do not like to be uncomfortable. My skin went electric, and I managed only three or four breaths before pressing myself up and wobbling to shore, my feet and legs turned to raw drumsticks, untrustworthy and prickly beneath my torso. Back inside the house—with its Cabela's-meets-Target decor, bald eagle bedsheets, and moose-shaped curios gracing every exposed surface—my skin began to burn, but in a very good way. I felt no need to take a hot shower, and I was completely reset, ready to engage in more card games and cocktails, my squirmy mind settled, the complex emotions that churn within family gatherings pacified, at least temporarily. I went into the creek each day I was there, and each day it got easier.

Later, I asked Hilary what lies at the core of her cold-water ritual. "On a pretty superficial level it really just makes me feel sane. It rewires my brain. On a deeper level, it has definitely given me a real, visceral lesson in how things pass. Like discomfort or maybe suffering, but you can breathe through it and come out the other side."

By February I'd committed to getting in the river a few times each week. February was also the month of my childhood best friend's wedding. As her maid of honor, I

organized a multiday bachelorette party in the ski town of Girdwood, Alaska, and also agreed to plan her ceremony. The day before I flew to Alaska, on a casual afternoon ski tour, my ACL popped in half. I took my unstable, swollen knee and unstable, melancholic brain to Girdwood, and while the ladies sipped carefree midday libations and rode chairlifts, I limped down to Glacier Creek. I found my way through the dirty snowbanks and slipped beneath a bridge to the water. Methodically as I could, I set down my backpack, laid out a towel, slipped off everything but my underwear, traded XtraTufs for red Crocs, and laid myself down in the water. For the ten breaths I was in the creek, I recalled, like magic, that from the mountainsides flanking the ocean here you can sometimes see belugas. My lungs did not spasm or seize. I felt I was home.

I recently attended a reading where the author, an outdoor educator and wilderness therapist, suggested people need to sense three things to feel right in the world: beauty, mystery, and connection. I've come to understand that upon entering the water everything that's blurry or distant becomes clarified. Winter birds feel closer, louder, their vocalizations clearer, their downy bodies nearer. My own boundaries seem less certain, more fluid. The physical and spatial melt. My capacity and ambition expand. What I thought was impossible or ill-advised or weird is, in real time, happening. The stark sparkly beauty of water in winter is around me, and I am in it, and perhaps I am part of it, at least for those few breaths.

Despite cold-dipping's popularity in popular culture, it was difficult to find friends who want to sit in cold water in the middle of winter. I cast a wide net, hoping to lure pals or my boyfriend to the river, but caught very few fish. Like writing and making art, cold-dipping, for me, has been a fairly solitary endeavor.

Another friend, Anna, is a writer, artist, and cold-water swimmer who lives on Puget Sound. Her mom is from Sweden, so the Scandinavian love for cold water likely runs in her blood. Over the past several years, she has integrated winter water fully into her creative life. "In the winter months when the water is very cold, there is a resilience that builds up in you. The practice of doing something very difficult and working through it is applicable to all kinds of things, and in particular creative practice. It's a little daily dose of awe."

I asked Anna about the value of cold-water swimming from the perspective of someone in a female body. "One of

the things I consider a lot is how much time women spend thinking about what our body looks like in a swimsuit. Once I am in the water, I don't think about what my body looks like, I think about what it's doing. Also, in that moment of being in the water, I feel I am in my element, that I am in the purest form of myself. This is largely about a moment where you just get to be, and as women, there are so many demands and expectations on how we look or behave that those moments can feel quite rare."

Cold-dipping has offered me a new way of knowing my body: its utility, its composition, and its place in the physical world. It's a way of interacting with my environment that defies patternization, technology, recreation, or work; it's something linked, perhaps, to natural continuity and an elemental ancestry. It's something to do when I come across a swimming hole on a banner summertime adventure. Something to do when I feel trapped by injury, walls, emotion, or limitation. Something to do when I want to remember the reality of being a warm-blooded animal living on a multidimensional planet—to feel at once small and strong, vulnerable and resilient, independent and yet undeniably a part of the lovely, universal enigma.

Looking toward the coming winter season with the awareness that I won't be skiing, but rather rehabbing my knee, I find hope in the prospect of cold-dipping. Although there's not enough data to make substantiated, research-supported claims about the benefits of the practice, and despite my best efforts to dislike it, I know how it makes me feel, and I don't need to put scientific labels to any of it. Mystery is good enough for me.

The day before my knee surgery in mid-August, my friend Tess and I walked to the Blackfoot River—to the same spot where I'd taken my first cold dip so many months before. At my suggestion, we took off our clothes, all of them, and waded into the eddy. "I'm proud of you," Tess offered, knowing well my distaste toward nudity. Baby trout darted and flitted just below the surface, seeking pockets of evening shade between stones. I sank in up to my neck; Tess dove and emerged again, five mermaid-lengths upstream. I settled my gaze downriver and breathed—easily—as the evening sun turned the water to gold and ribbons of emerald implied movement and rhythm. We lingered in the river as cool progressed to cold, dried off in the waning light, and began our walk back home. 📌

