



The Benefits of Open Water Swimming

Report and analysis into four surveys circulated among open water swimmers October 2020-February 2021.

SUMMARY

The results are undeniable. Here is overwhelming evidence that open water swimming provides substantial benefits to our mental health, wellbeing and confidence.

Within these pages are survey results, testimony and analysis from three surveys by the social enterprise Swim for Good and one from Lewis-based Immerse Hebrides. All were undertaken between October 2020 and February 2021.

Combined, they offer insight into the benefits of open water swimming from 835 unique responses.

For many of us, open water swimming is a salve, a means of recuperation, therapy, pain relief, a source of joy, stillness and pleasure. The rewards from wild swimming are as unique as the swimmers themselves, but some common themes emerge.

Due to a combination of factors, open water swimming

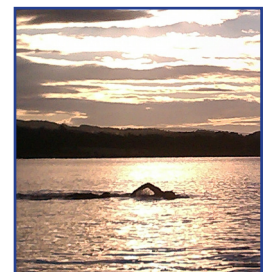
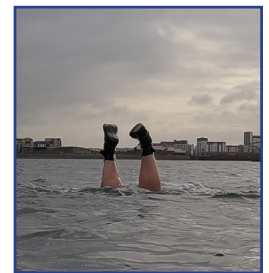
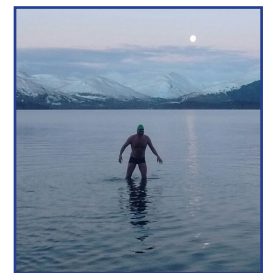
has benefited participants' general wellbeing (85%), mental health (82%), confidence (69%), social interactions (65%), and physical health (69%). Few swimmers will be surprised.

What we now need is a greater understanding of why these benefits occur, and meaningful consideration (and protection!) of our marine environment as a source of healing and happiness.



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Acknowledgements and thanks

A heartfelt thank you to everyone who took the time to fill in one (or more) of these surveys. Safe to say, I couldn't have done it without you!

Thank you, too, to the 250 or so swimmers I've had the privilege to coach, with a special nod of respect to the Magnificent Seven.

Huge gratitude to Firstport for the funding, support and friendship. Finally, thanks to George for the belief, and to Caroline for everything.

INTRODUCTION

Much like open water swimming, I never foresaw how this report would take over when I emailed out a short survey to some swimmers back in October 2020.

At the time, I was looking for constructive feedback following several months of open water swim coaching that took me to some beautiful beaches and reservoirs in Edinburgh, East Lothian and Fife. I met some fantastic people, many of whom are now friends; but at the time I sought an understanding of how I was performing as a coach. The idea of gauging the mental and physical benefits of open water swimming was something of an afterthought, a nod to the social enterprise business agency Firstport that had awarded me start-up funding.

An idea took hold (much like it did five years ago when I thought of becoming an open water swimming coach) and I ran with it. I looked for research into the benefits of open water swimming and found it lacking. We all know that wild or open water swimming is great for us ... but where is all the hard evidence?

This report is not that evidence! More work is required, particularly from the scientific and medical communities. Is open water swimming beneficial to us in the way that joining a gym is, or climbing a mountain, or a walk in a forest? Or is there something more? (I'd argue there's something more.)

People report many benefits, but are they primed for these rewards as a result of their participation? Perhaps, but I suspect those who face barriers to participation in open water swimming would experience similar benefits. It's one of the reasons Swim for Good was set up: to tackle the physical, mental and social barriers to open water swimming. It's early days for this social enterprise, but I hope this report and any impact it has will be a significant step towards achieving its social aims, and if it contributes to a wider body of evidence, so much the better.

Happy and safe swimming everyone!

Colin Campbell,
Founder and Lead Coach,
Swim for Good



THE BENEFITS OF OPEN WATER SWIMMING

There are times I've forced myself, but the benefits after are great and make me feel so much better physically and mentally ... once I've recovered from the afterdrop!

After conducting a feedback survey involving swimmers who'd received coaching and a follow-up series of case studies, this third mass survey was conducted in late January, early February of this year (30/1/2021-9/2/21).

It's presented first because of its far-reaching scope but also because its results help to better frame the case studies and some of the detail in the initial feedback survey. It's also the one that had the broadest reach. Some 736 people responded after the Google Survey was shared on a few Facebook Group pages, including

the Wardie Bay Wild Ones, The Wild Ones, Wild Swimming Scotland, and the Outdoor Swimming Society.

The survey was also shared on other social media platforms, including Twitter and Instagram, albeit with a much smaller engagement.

Although some comments revealed participants came from overseas (USA, New Zealand and Denmark were mentioned) we can assume the bulk of participants were from the UK. The questions are detailed below while the analysis continues on Page 6. Edited comments from the survey are scattered throughout this report.

Survey Questions

1. When did you start regularly open water swimming?

- Past few months
- Last year during lockdown
- 2018-2019
- Have been doing it for 3+ years.
- Long-term open water swimmer (15 years or more)

2. What motivated you to start open water swimming?

- Friends introduced it/persuaded me
- Heard it was good for mental health
- Physical fitness
- Pools were shut
- Sense of wellbeing and adventure, and being close to nature

3. On average, how often do you go open water swimming?

- Four or more times a week
- One to three times a week
- One to two times a month
- Less than once a month

4. On a scale of 1 to 5, to what degree would you agree or disagree with the following statements about open water swimming?

“Open water swimming has benefited my ...”

- Mental health
- Physical health
- Fitness
- Wellbeing
- Confidence
- Social connections/friendships

(1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree)

5. Please only answer this if you have received formal/professional coaching or tuition in open water swimming. On a scale of 1 to 5, to what degree would you agree or disagree with the following statements about the delivery of the swimming session.

“Open water swim coaching has enabled me to swim ...”

- Safer and aware of risks
- More often
- With better technique
- With greater confidence
- With friends/form new ones

(1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree)

6. Are there any reasons or barriers preventing you from participating in open water swimming more frequently?

- Lack of time (perhaps due to caring or work commitments)
- Too far away to walk or cycle (lack of car, bus, public transport, etc)
- Not strong enough swimmer
- Lack of swim buddy/group/club/coach
- The weather! (Tides, frozen over, storms, too cold, etc.)
- Lockdown restrictions
- Other

7. Please feel free to share more detail about your open water swimming journey and how it has enhanced your life.

As well as the option for respondents to leave comments - and several hundred did! - there was also the option for respondents to leave their email address for the purpose of having the survey results emailed to them. This final field was removed at the first opportunity and has had no bearing on the survey results.

Absolutely love it.
Makes me buzz every time.
Fabulous for the ups and downs of working in a hospital during a pandemic - keeps me sane

I absolutely love the feeling of rejuvenation, joy and inner peace that comes with a sea swim

The results from this survey are fascinating, and support the picture portrayed by another similar survey undertaken by Outdoor Swimmer magazine that observed trends in open water swimming.

1 When did you start regularly open water swimming?

Asked when did they started regularly open water swimming, it was clear that there had been an enormous surge of people taking the plunge in the past year. While 69 swimmers (9%) reported they'd been life-long swimmers, 358 swimmers (49%) said they had taken it up in the past year, specifically during lockdown. Bearing in mind this survey was shared in late January, early February, it's worth noting that of those 358, 103 swimmers (14%) had taken it up in the past few months! Of the remainder, 155 (21%) had started in 2018/19 while 154 (21%) had been doing it for three or more years.

2 What motivated you to start open water swimming?

There are so many factors why people take up swimming, it was impossible to list them all, and many respondents also provided their own. However, some clear themes emerged.

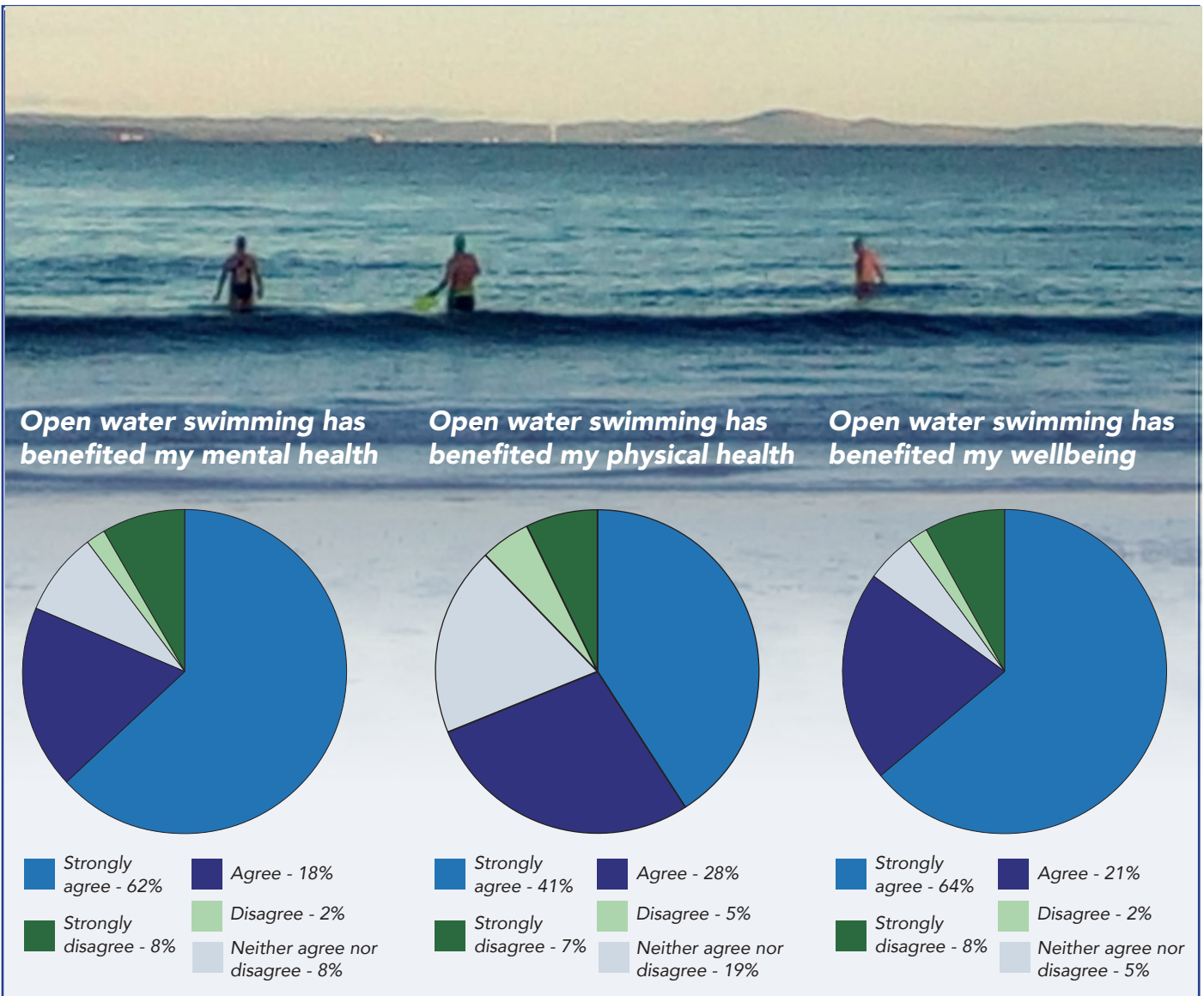
By far the majority of people (71%) swim because of the "sense of wellbeing and adventure, and being

close to nature". Other reasons included "heard it was good for mental health" (28%) and "friends introduced it/persuaded me" (28%). Physical fitness (23%) and the closure of pools (10%) were also factors, while other common answers included pain relief, alleviation of menopause symptoms, a means to treat grief, and training for triathlon or some other event. What was clear is that for all the different reasons for taking up swimming, and the enormous differences among the community, there were huge commonalities in what we as a community receive.

3 On average, how often do you go open water swimming?

Being a survey that was predominately answered by British residents it was inevitable the weather would play a part in the answers. Some responses stated that a person swam regularly during the summer and not at all during winter, or daily during summer or weekly during winter. Lockdown had an impact too, with some respondents saying they weren't able to swim due to travel restrictions. Some of these answers have been grouped, but 53 responses (7%) have been omitted. Of the remainder, it's clear that open water swimmers are habitual people whose craving for a swim often dominates their weekly, or even their daily, diary!

Of the 736 respondents a whopping 116 swam four or more times a week (17%) while 61% of people reported they swam a more modest one to three times a week. Of the remainder, 89 (12%) said they



Note: Percentages do not always add up to 100% due to rounding

swam once or twice a month, while just 3% said they managed less than once a month.

4 On a scale of 1 to 5, to what degree would you agree or disagree with the following statements about open water swimming.

“Open water swimming has benefited my mental health.”

The background into why people swim and how often give us

It's totally changed my life. My mental health is the best it's ever been!

additional perspectives when we start considering the benefits that swimmers gain from open water swimming. While a relatively small amount (28%) said they took up OWS for mental health reasons, a massive 600 swimmers (80%) said they agreed or strongly agreed that “Open water swimming has benefited my mental health”. Of those, 459 (62%) said they strongly agreed.

Of the remainder, 58 (8%) said they neither agreed nor disagreed, 16 (2%) said they disagreed and 62 (8%) strongly disagreed.

I am 78 years old, was brought up practically living on a beach and am more at home in water than on land. It's keeping me alive and enjoying a good quality of life

"Open water swimming has benefited my physical health."

The benefits for physical health while clearly demonstrable were not quite so overwhelming as the gains for mental health. For many "dippers", the social element and the cold water immersion is simply enough. Still, 507 swimmers strongly agreeing (41%) or agreeing (28%) that they had physical health gains remains a significantly positive result. Of the remainder, 142 swimmers (19%) neither agreed nor disagreed, while 37 (5%) disagreed and 50 (7%) strongly disagreed.

"Open water swimming has benefited my fitness."

When asked about fitness, it was clear that for many open water swimmers this was less of a reward than, say, the benefits to mental health. Having said that, more than half of respondents said they strongly agreed (179, 24%) or agreed (197, 27%) that OWS had benefited their fitness. Of the rest, 257 (35%) neither agreed nor disagreed while 62 (8%) and 41 (6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

"Open water swimming has benefited my wellbeing."

While OWS may not be a panacea for fitness, it is certainly hugely beneficial to people's wellbeing. Some 625 of the 736 respondents strongly agreed (64%) or agreed (21%) that OWS had benefited their wellbeing. Some 35 (5%) people neither agreed nor disagreed, while 16 (2%) and 60 (8%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.



"Open water swimming has benefited my confidence."

When it came to confidence, there were still significant rewards from participation, with more than two-thirds of respondents saying that OWS had benefited their confidence. Interestingly, and much like the fitness question, there was a little bit less certainty about whether they strongly agreed (271, 37%) or simply agreed (229, 31%). One in five (154, 21%) neither agreed nor disagreed, while 72 people actively disagreed (53 of those, or 7%, strongly).

"Open water swimming has benefited my social connections/ friendships."



I believe that I am now more confident and capable doing things that, before starting open water swimming, would have caused me stress and anxiety

For many open water swimmers, the friendships that form are forged out of misty dawns, errant swans, broken ice, numb fingers, scares, shares and shivers. Of the 736 respondents, 478 strongly agreed (39%) or agreed (25%) that social connections and/or friendships had been one of the gains of OWS. Some 139 (19%) neither agreed nor disagreed, while 56 (8%) disagreed and 63 (9%) disagreed.

Modern media is awash with stories about the mental health benefits of open water swimming. These results show with certainty that for four out of five swimmers this is the case.

Interestingly, it is not the main reason for participating. Immersing in

nature, socialising, the challenge, are a few of the major draws, too. Why we swim is of course important, but it's what we find in the water that is the major focus and finding of this report.

As mentioned, 80% agreed or strongly agreed that OWS benefited their mental health; 69% their physical health; 51% their fitness; 85% their wellbeing; 68% their confidence; and 64% their social connections. These results are echoed, if not magnified, in the case studies and surveys that follow.

Without discounting the benefits for our physical health, fitness and confidence, it is clear that when it comes to looking after our mental health and wellbeing, OWS offers a phenomenally successful solution.

I usually get antsy if I don't get in the water once a week. It keeps me balanced and calm and also washes away the physical aches and pains. Other people meditate; I swim and dunk and splash my worries away

COACHING

For many swimmers, particularly those who've been doing it a long while, there was little, if any support to get into the water. Nowadays, with the rise and subsequent boom in open water swimming, there is a plethora of websites, blogs, books, Facebook groups, gifs, memes, online training courses, YouTube channels and more imparting advice and encouragement to those who want to safely enter the water or to improve their swimming ability.

While much of this advice is helpful and welcome, some of it is not. It is therefore reassuring that amid the growth in popularity in open water swimming there has also been a rise in the number of experienced and qualified open water swim coaches establishing themselves, and in some cases collaborating for a common purpose. This is one of the aims of Swim for Good.

Not everyone who goes open water swimming needs a coach, although all but a few would benefit from one (or at least the right one!). The fifth question in this survey sought to find out what benefits, if any, swimmers gained from working with a coach.

This was an optional answer and although 192 people (26% of the 736 respondents) answered the first question, not everyone answered all five questions.

5 Please only answer this if you have received formal/professional coaching or tuition in open water swimming. On a scale of 1 to 5, to what degree would



you agree or disagree with the following statements about the delivery of the swimming session.

"Open water swim coaching has enabled me to swim safer and aware of risks."

It can't be too much of a surprise that almost three-quarters of people (73%) who received formal open water swim coaching found that it enabled them to swim safer and be more aware of risks. Breaking this figure down a bit further, 95 (out of 192) strongly agreed (50%) and 44 agreed. Some 25 respondents (13%) neither agreed nor disagreed, whereas 28 (14%) disagreed (8, 4%) or strongly disagreed (20, 10%).

"Open water swim coaching has enabled me to swim more often."

One of the purposes of coaching is to enable safer, and therefore more frequent, participation. One



consequence of coaching is that a large minority of people who start open water swimming and undergo some form of professional support also increase the frequency of their open water swims. This is a welcome bonus, albeit not one that everyone experienced. More than two-fifths said they swam more due to coaching, with 39 strongly agreeing (21%) and 42 agreeing (23%). The largest minority were ambivalent, with 62 (34%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing. On the other side, just over one in five disagreed, with 19 (10%) disagreeing and 23 (12%) strongly disagreeing.

“Open water swim coaching has enabled me to swim with better technique.”

Perhaps it's surprising only 61% of people who received coaching said it had helped them to swim with better technique. It must, however, be taken into consideration that a lot of coaching sessions are Introduction

Had no idea when I started this how much it would benefit me. I feel so at peace in the water and it keeps your head clear

to Open Water Swimming, where the focus is on risk management and safety, rather than stroke development. Bearing this in mind, it's encouraging so many swimmers felt their stroke improve due to coaching, with 59 (31%) strongly agreeing and 57 (30%) agreeing. Just over one-quarter (26%) said they neither agreed nor disagreed, although very few (13%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

“Open water swim coaching has enabled me to swim with greater confidence.”

Almost three-quarters of those who received coaching said it gave them greater confidence, a deeply encouraging figure demonstrating the value of coaching as a means to enable greater participation in open water swimming. Some 69 swimmers both strongly agreed (37%) and agreed (37%). By comparison, 9 disagreed (5%) and 14 disagreed (7%), with 27 (14%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

“Open water swim coaching has enabled me to swim with friends/form new friendships.”

One of the great rewards of open water swimming is the friendships formed on the shore and forged in the water. Again, for many of the 188 respondents to this question, coaching was a contributing factor. More than 50% strongly agreed (51, 27%) or agreed (47, 25%). On the other side, 19 swimmers (10%) disagreed and 17 strongly disagreed. Of the rest, 54 swimmers (29%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

I have struggled with depression for over 20 years. Open water swimming helps me cope with life! It is like pressing a reset button

I got into the sea because it was the only place that could cool the scorch of my grief

6 Are there any reasons or barriers preventing you from participating in open water swimming more frequently?

The penultimate question looked at the reasons preventing people from swimming as much as they wished. Lockdown, unsurprisingly, was a considerable factor preventing swimming (250, 34%), although the biggest two reasons were in fact lack of time (386, 52%) and the weather (304, 41%)!

Concerns about lack of finances being a barrier proved reassuringly untrue for most, with only 12 swimmers (2%) stating that being unable to pay for travel costs, entry fees, etc, was a barrier. Eleven swimmers (1%) said physical impairments were a barrier, while 21 swimmers (3%) said being mentally unable to had been a barrier for them. Distance from a venue was a problem for 87 people, or 13%, of respondents, while lack of a swim buddy group or coach was a bigger concern for 128 people, or 17%. Lacking swimming ability, or perhaps confidence, was an issue for 55 people (7%). Happily, for a lucky 88 (12%) there were no reasons preventing swimming - a minority many of us would surely like to belong to!

The final question invited respondents to offer a comment, with more than 200 giving a testimony about their love of open water swimming. Some were deeply personal, talking of bereavement, illness, mental or physical pain and the salve they found in the water. Others spoke of the joy of companionship, of self-discovery and challenges overcome. The comments make great reading. A few are shared within this report; all of the comments, plus the survey data, can be found online at www.swimforgood.org/survey

"Undoubtedly, swimming has enriched my life; I experience the endorphins highs and feeling of calm and wellbeing immediately. Equally, I have enjoyed the connection with nature; the appreciation of sunrise and sunset, the mist over the loch, wildlife and the geese formations. Lastly, the enrichment of friendships, the laughter and a deeper sense of connection has helped during this difficult time."

"I love the calm swimming outside brings. I had a hip issue and struggled to walk or cycle so with a little encouragement from my swim buddies I overcame my fears and haven't looked back."

"I received coaching, which not only improved my technique and confidence to get in the water safely but helped my body confidence. Joining this community was the best decision I made last year, I have met so many fantastic, friendly and supportive individuals."

"I was swimming before pregnancy but can honestly say open water swimming helped me get through so many early pregnancy issues. It stopped morning sickness. Helped with vein pain. Has kept me pain-free longer than my previous pregnancy and even in the cold temperatures I felt incredible."



"Helped my headaches. Massive boost for my mental health."

"Being in the sea makes me feel calm. I'm more resilient, if I can swim in the sea in winter I can cope with anything."

"Swimming once or twice a week gives me such a positive mental boost and the strength to juggle work/homeschooling/pandemic anxiety."

"I have passive remittant MS. Stress is the main trigger to a relapse. This has changed me completely. Any stress is ebbed away in the sea."

"Wild swimming has allowed me to stop taking anti-depressants and has improved my mental and physical wellbeing."

"Open water swimming has played a big part in helping me to cope with the loss of my husband. It helps me to deal with the anxiety and stress that comes with grief. The friendships that you form through swimming are invaluable."

"The mental health benefits I have found through cold water swimming have been immeasurable. The focus on your breathing, the peace, the tranquillity, the tingle of

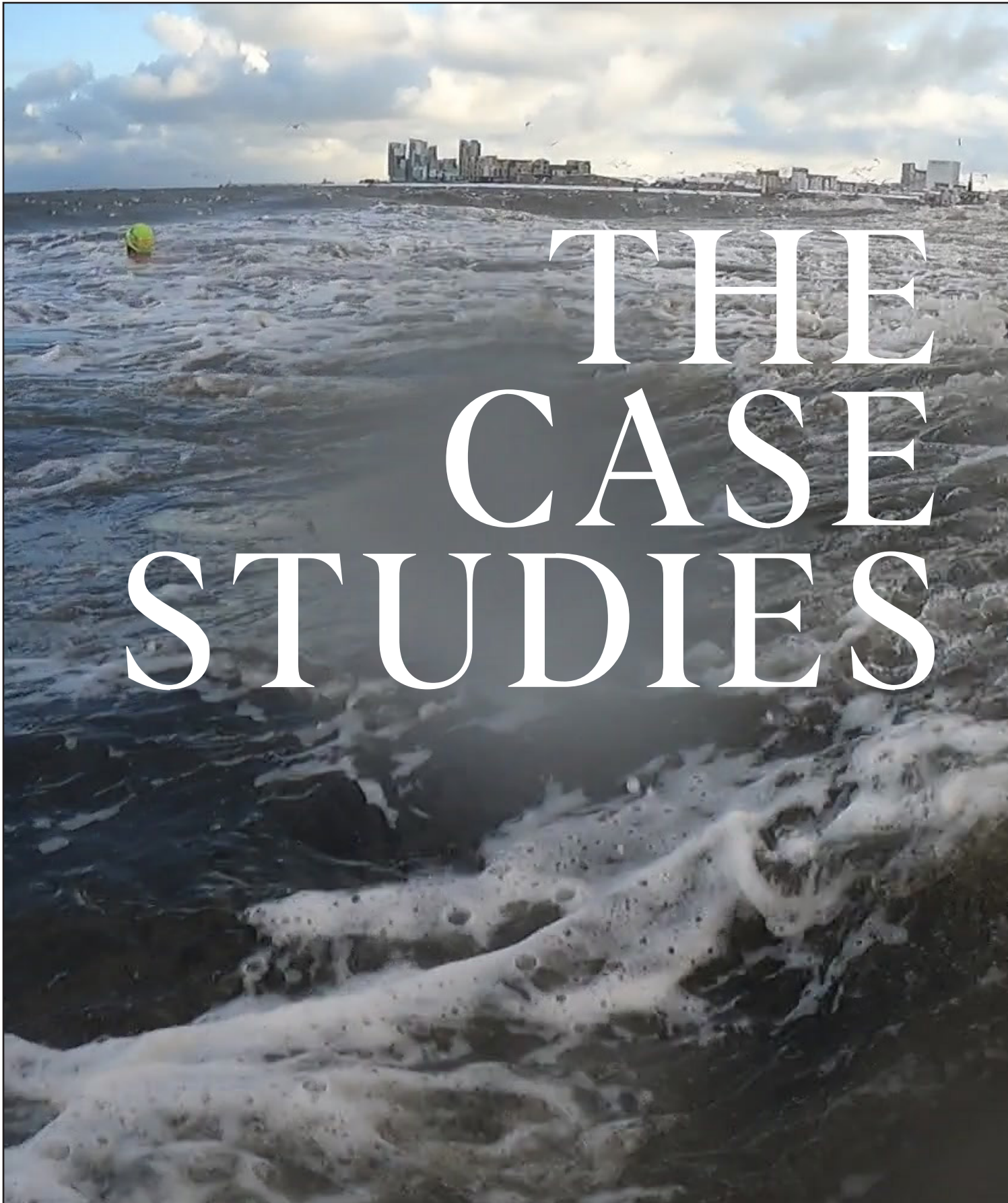
the cold all combine for a sense of bliss that I've not felt with any other activity. It's magical and I hope that sometime soon I will get to swim in the sea rather than rivers to experience the power and majesty that will bring. Thoroughly hooked."

"I feel open water swimming resets my brain and body ready for another week. It has been a lifesaver during lockdown to have this to look forward to each week. Totally addictive!"

"I came to open water swimming when I was going through a rather difficult period. It was crucial to maintaining my mental health at the time. There is no greater boost to the mood than getting into the cold water."

"The swimming community is the most open, welcoming and non-judgemental group of people I have ever come across and open water swimming has hugely boosted my confidence. I'm not sure how I would have coped with this year without it."

"I suffer from complex PTSD. For the first time in many, many years I feel free. When I swim, I am just me. I feel! I feel happy, and peaceful and free. I am not my mental health condition."



THE CASE STUDIES



I was becoming very frustrated at not having an outlet for stress

CASE STUDY TESTIMONIES

The next section focuses on testimony from seven swimmers in Edinburgh. Each of these swimmers had taken up the sport during lockdown, swam at least twice a month (in a couple of cases three or more times a week) and had received two or more coaching sessions with Scottish Swimmer/Swim for Good.

Like the individuals themselves, each response is completely unique, offering different reasons for participation and different perspectives on the benefits of open water swimming and coaching. In spite

of the different answers there is a clear trend: that open water swimming has brought benefits to mental health and general wellbeing; and that coaching helped enable participation.

In a few cases there has been substantial and transformational benefits as a direct result of coaching and participation in open water swimming, an encouraging response echoed in many of the comments provided in the previous survey of the open water swimming community.

All the names have been changed. The questions ran as follows:

Survey Questions

1. When did you start regularly open water swimming?
2. What motivated you to take up open water swimming? Can you also explain what you hoped to get out of it – for example improved physical health, improved mental health, increased confidence from overcoming challenges, new friendships, etc.
3. Using a scale of “very poor/poor/medium/good/very good”, how would you rate your physical health, mental health and wellbeing prior to taking up open water swimming? Please provide some comments to explain your answer.
4. Using the same rating as above, how would you rate your physical health, mental health and wellbeing since taking up open water swimming? If you have experienced any changes as a result of your involvement in open water swimming, please give some examples.
5. How important was swim coaching in helping you to get started in open water swimming and/or to sustain your involvement in open water swimming?
6. Has your involvement in open water swimming had any other impact on you? As well as the potential changes outlined in Q4 (physical health, mental health and wellbeing), please describe if you have experienced any other changes, such as in your confidence, outlook on life, motivation, friendships, etc?
7. Do you have any additional comments?

Why We Swim

Echoing the previous section that took in the results from a mass survey of open water swimmers, the case studies demonstrate take-up of regular open water swimming during the lockdown of 2020 (although many had had a dip or more before).

And like the previous section, these seven individuals all came to swimming for their own reasons. For Ally (Case Study 1), it was “due to a longstanding back injury, I had to give up all of the activities that I loved such as weight lifting and running. I was becoming very frustrated at not having an outlet for stress”.

Blair (Case Study 2), however, reported that it was a combination of a desire to improve fitness, signing up to a mass participation event and pools closing that proved the catalyst to regular open water swimming. Blair said: “My main motivation to start was to get fitter and lose weight, but also to make some more friends in the city in which I now live. In 2019, I signed up to do an open water swim in loch Lomond, so that I would have a goal to work towards, and would therefore need to start training for it. When the pools closed in March however, I decided I would not be able to do the Loch Lomond swim, and decided to take more opportunities to swim in open water.

“2020 was a difficult year for everyone, but for me it was the first time in my life that I experienced prolonged paranoia and anxiety. As swimming had always given me a sense of calm and relief, I decided it was finally time to commit to open



water swimming regularly, especially as I did not feel confident returning to the swimming pools in the midst of a pandemic.”

Chris (Case Study 3) said it was a desire to gain confidence and skills, while also improving physical health and the immune system; whereas Dale (Case Study 4) said they “liked the idea of the challenge, and also thought it could also be a sociable hobby”.

Ellis (Case Study 5) on the other hand came to the cold water from a very different perspective. Ellis sought a regular routine from coaching to address their OCD as all other activities locked down, adding: “I have a fear of the open water so I thought I could also use this as some exposure therapy.”

It was the sense of “peace - the silence, the calm, the thought of nothing but the swimming strokes, and being outdoors, the freshness” that attracted (Jude) Case Study 6; whereas it was the excitement, the rush of cold water immersion that

I hoped to get improved mental health, bonding with pals, increased mental confidence and body confidence and improved physical health

I spoke to a mental health first aider at Christmas and when I caught up with her again last week she said I sounded much more positive

drew in Sam (Case Study 7), as well as a few other factors such as: "I hoped to get improved mental health, bonding with pals, increased mental confidence and body confidence, improved physical health while I couldn't swim in indoor pools. I also wanted a decrease in stress and time for myself."

The Benefits

While everyone comes to the water for their own (sometimes very) personal reasons, most swimmers would agree that the rewards are more commonly experienced or shared. Echoing the previous mass survey of 736 swimmers (and many of the comments provided), each of the these seven case study swimmers reported similar improvements in health and wellbeing since starting regular open water swimming.

"All aspects of my health have improved tremendously since starting OWS," said Ally. "Initially I found the cold water really helped if I was have a bit of a flare-up with my back and legs, and now the frequency of the flare-ups have dropped considerably. (The home baking after a swim sometimes makes it feel counterproductive from an exercise point of view though!) I feel much calmer as a person, and have something to look forward to every week now, which is especially important in these times."

Stating that their mental health had gone from poor to good and their



wellbeing from medium to good, Blair, said: "As well as the sense of calm and relief that swimming has always given me, open water swimming added excitement and fun to the mix, and my mental health and wellbeing was improved by just the knowledge that I was going, as well as actually doing it."

The fun was increased by the fact that I was able to go to a group coaching session - probably the biggest number of people I had spent time with since February that year. Everyone I have met through open water swimming is so welcoming and non-judgemental that I felt like I was part of a community for the first time in a long time.

"I also get a real sense of satisfaction and contentment after a swim."



As well as the sense of calm and relief that swimming has always given me, open water swimming added excitement and fun to the mix, and my mental health and wellbeing was improved

“My wellbeing has improved,” said Chris. “Sleep is still a problem but less than before. Mentally I am experiencing so much excitement over the now, almost, daily swims that I realise this is a new experience. I was never any good at sport of any kind, and always felt useless at it. I love the challenge of the open water and want to continue learning to swim.”

Dale reported that lockdown and isolation had been taking their toll prior to swimming, but noted a substantial positive change, which was also observed by others.

“My physical health is the same but my mental health and wellbeing have definitely improved to good. I spoke to a mental health first aider at Christmas and when I caught up

with her again last week she said I sounded much more positive.”

Ellis reported poor for physical and mental health, and medium for wellbeing. The disrupted routine and closure of gyms due to lockdown had caused their motivation to decline to the extent that “I wasn’t myself ... I didn’t have a good work-life balance”.

The change since regular swimming is stark. Ellis reported an increase to good for each of mental and physical health and wellbeing. Swimming had provided a focus, a reason to get up in the morning, an “escape tool”.

Physical improvements were also noted: “My stamina has increased, my lung capacity has increased. The exercises I have been provided with have improved my flexibility.

I can be gloomy about stiffness, pain and the ageing process but it really is counter-balanced with daily doses of being in the sea

I have no doubt I will be in peak physical condition later this year."

Although Jude reported good/very good for physical, mental health and wellbeing, Jude did acknowledge the busy and indeed stressful life they lived, and indeed thrived in. But they also acknowledged the benefit that OWS had played in this, reporting, like so many others, the mental "reset" that a cold water swim can provide, adding: "I just wish I could go more frequently to get that buzzy, happy, calm feeling more often. I think I would find stress in other areas of life less impactful if I could swim more. It is certainly a welcome method of de-stressing, centring and refocusing."

Sam said their physical, mental health and wellbeing were generally good, despite reporting they had a lot of stress at home. But they also found that, "Open water swimming has really improved my stress levels. When I was swimming longer distances, my fitness improved; but even now doing shorter winter swims, I still feel the physical and mental benefits and overall wellbeing on the days that I swim."

A follow-up question asked everyone about whether they had experienced other benefits, such as more confidence, a greater pool of friends, and so on. Again, the answers demonstrated each respondent's unique character as well as revealing some important overlaps.

The routine of swimming has, said

Ally, had a bit of a snowball effect in that "I'll now do more yoga, pilates and dry land workouts so that when the sea temperature rises, I'll be in a better condition for longer swims. I'd say it's encouraged me to move more generally, and it's a good outlet for stress. I don't think about work, or bills, or anything else when I'm swimming ... Meeting these new friends with similar interests (not just swimming) has also been incredible."

For Blair, as well as the aforementioned benefits for their mental health and wellbeing, they also said OWS has helped improve how they see themselves: "Open water swimming has improved my body confidence ... Being somewhat overweight (technically obese), I find that swimming is one of the more forgiving exercises. Once you are in the water you forget all about it, the water takes away your weight so it is low impact, and your body is hidden by it. Swimming also reminds me how strong and capable my body is even though it is seen so negatively by society. When swimming in a pool, coming out of the changing rooms in a swimming costume was something I would have to mentally overcome every time I went, and even the thought of it would sometimes prevent me from going at all. Changing on the beach or beside a loch feels more akin to preparing for battle - my body is my armour, my strength and my best asset."

OWS has improved Chris's general outlook on life. In conversation after a swim she once told me that swimming had given her life "new purpose",



and now she is on the beach daily, and has learnt, at a youthful age of 75 how to swim front crawl, going from a complete beginner to someone who can now maintain the stroke for a short distance. In the case study she wrote: "The open water swimming continues to help me feel positive about life. I feel as if, despite all that has happened personally, the pandemic affecting the world and the effects of life under lockdown I have a goal to which I am aiming - to swim some distance, and, hopefully, increase in competence and skill, despite my age! I can be gloomy and despondent about stiffness, pain and the ageing process but it really is counter-balanced with daily doses of being in the sea."

Dale described the "buzz" swimmers get as well as the social boost: "Once I had been a few times I started to get the ReadyBrek glow people talk about – feeling amazing when I come out of the water, and still feeling physically buzzing and kind of

invincible all day ... It has given me motivation, particularly at weekends, and it's also been a great talking point – people are very intrigued."

Ellis laid it out succinctly: "I feel more confident in my abilities. I have made some great friends too, the community is full of such proactive and positive personalities."

Despite their overall good health and wellbeing generally, Jude repeatedly stated the positive difference OWS has had on them, while also raising the question of whether more swimming would have a greater impact in other areas of their life: "When I am swimming, and for the day after, I feel calmer, certainly happier and more relaxed, I feel confident and happy in the improvements in my technique, and love feeling the strength and muscles return. Work and life stresses do recur though, and I think I need to swim more frequently. I hope that if I do something like this more frequently

Open water swimming has improved my body confidence ... it reminds me how strong and capable my body is

Coaching ensured that I was mentally and physically prepared, all whilst ensuring risk was kept at a minimum

it will eventually overcome the other stresses in life?"

Unable to do their regular dryland exercise due to lockdown restrictions, Sam said they found that release in OWS, adding: "I also feel a real sense of peace and tranquillity in the water, as well as time on my own, which is really important as a parent during lockdown."

Impact of Coaching

All of the seven respondents had received three or more open water swimming coaching sessions. For some it was a means into the water, for others a way to improve technique and confidence or just be more aware of safety generally. Each reported that coaching had had a significant impact on their ability to enter the water and safely participate in OWS. Asked how coaching had benefited them, the answers (perhaps with some degree of bias because of personal relationships) clearly demonstrate the value of professional support from a trained and qualified coach, especially when it's to help access an environment our instincts and culture have created barriers to!

Ally said: "I personally wouldn't have gone into the sea by myself. [Coach] was fantastic from the get go at getting me in the water, and every lesson since then has just been better and better. From pushing distances, and playing in some good chop, no two lessons are ever the same and that's the true beauty of OWS for me. It's also been through the lessons that



I have been able to connect with like-minded people who also make the experience so much more enjoyable - I can't imagine life without it now!"

Blair said: "Simply put, I would not have started regularly swimming in open water if it wasn't for the coaching sessions. I find it hard to motivate myself if it is just me doing it, and when I started out I was worried that I didn't know enough to get started on my own. I also was aware that it was a bit unsafe to go alone.

"Now that the coaching sessions have stopped, I am trying to go on my own and find new people to go swimming with but it is very difficult in lockdown, however the coaching sessions have given me more confidence in knowing what to look out for and how to acclimatise in the water ... Before this lockdown I attended one session and was given two tips that instantly improved my stroke, so I can't wait to continue!"

Chris said: "Swim coaching has been crucial. I only started swimming

regularly after the lessons began. The teaching about different aspects related to swimming from basics, ongoing of course, gives me confidence as well as respect for the sea. I have relied on regular feedback and encouragement as I continue what is much harder than I realised when I started. Meeting others in this process has been important too, sharing the learning, seeing how others are progressing too, is such a bonus. In a word, it's great fun."

Dale said: "Very important in starting - I had no idea how to approach it, what kit to take, or about the potential pitfalls, some of which are obviously pretty serious, and don't think I'd have tried it otherwise. The intro session was crucially informative but it was also fun with a welcoming and relaxed feel - I felt encouraged and not intimidated."

Ellis said: "I wouldn't have gone in the water without coaching. Coaching ensured that I was mentally and physically prepared all whilst ensuring risk was kept at a minimum."

Jude said: "I started lessons and feel even after a very few my technique and confidence has improved significantly. The weekly swim lesson and subsequent social swim quickly became a non-negotiable part of my week ... Booking lessons gives me the incentive to swim even in poor weather, and chatting with others in the group is just lovely - everyone seems very like-minded, and it is genuinely really nice to talk to relative

strangers. You don't meet new people much when you get to middle age, so it has been a very welcome bonus to open water swimming. I certainly don't think I would have kept up swimming over the winter if I hadn't started having swimming lessons."

Sam said: "Very important to help me feel confident in the water and improve my stroke to help me reach my goal."

A few last words

The final question invited additional comments. Again, each were as unique as the individuals themselves:

"If you've ever considered trying it, just do it. You won't regret it!"

"Towards the end of 2020, my dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer and died two months later. I found it very difficult to do anything at all in this period, however signing up to the coaching sessions was a way of giving myself the impetus to do something which eased the pain."

"Better late than never! I never regret a swim."

"My fear of the open water has evolved into a respect for the open water. Something that can translate to all aspects of life."

"I absolutely love swimming outdoors. I feel brave and strong, a calmer and better person."

"Thanks for the coaching!"

I also feel a real sense of peace and tranquillity in the water, as well as time on my own, which is really important as a parent during lockdown

THE BENEFITS OF COACHING

As a beginner to open water, [the coach] was an amazing and welcoming swimming instructor and explained how to swim front crawl stroke in open water

This third survey, undertaken in autumn 2020, was issued to two sets of swimmers who had undertaken coaching from the Edinburgh-based Scottish Swimmer or Lewis-based Immerse Hebrides during the period June to October 2020, once Covid lockdown restrictions had begun to ease.

The survey of 92 swimmers had three aims: to invite feedback on the quality of coaching by Scottish Swimmer Open Water Swim Coaching/Immerse Hebrides; to identify areas for improvement or new offerings; and to see what, if any, benefits open water swimming and the coaching had had. This third and final section of the survey (Questions 11-14) is repeated here:

11) On a scale of 1 to 5, to what degree would you agree or disagree with the following statements about the delivery of the swimming session. "Open water swim coaching has enabled me to ..."

- Swim more confidently
- Swim better
- Swim more often

12) On a scale of 1 to 5, to what degree would you agree or disagree with the following statements about the delivery of the swimming session. "Open water swim coaching benefited my ..."

- Mental health
- Physical health
- Overall fitness
- General wellbeing

13) On a scale of 1-5, how likely are you to:

- Recommend Scottish Swimmer/ Immerse Hebrides to a friend?
- Rebook another coaching session?
- Recommend open water swimming to a friend?

14) Any additional comments regarding the coaching sessions or anything else?

While the bulk of these two surveys focused on the quality and delivery of coaching sessions, questions 11-14 presented an insight into the benefits of open water swim coaching on the participants' swimming ability, as well as wider social and health benefits.

The surveys, which were anonymous, also offered respondents the opportunity to provide comment, which also gave unique insight into the benefits of OWS on individuals.

On Q11, 82/92 (89%) agreed or strongly agreed that OWS coaching enabled the participant to swim more confidently; 63/92 (68%) to swim better; and 69/92 (75%) to swim more often.

On Q12, 80/92 (87%) agreed or strongly agreed that OWS coaching benefited their mental health; 79/92 (86%) their physical health; 72/92 (78%) their overall fitness; and 86/92 (93%) their general wellbeing.

The results here clearly echo the mass survey results, discussed earlier, which found that OWS and swim coaching had for the bulk of people contributed to an improvement in mental health, physical health; fitness; and overall wellbeing.



On Q13, 90/92 said they were likely or very likely to recommend Scottish Swimmer/Immerse Hebrides coaching, while 87/92 said they would rebook a session. All but 1 of the 92 respondents said they were likely or very likely to recommend OWS to a friend.

On Q14, respondents were invited to leave comments. While some comments were individual to that person or the coaching they received, there were a few that give additional insight into the benefits received by open water swim coaching. They are repeated below:

“The sessions have been excellent. I am amazed at how much I have learned in such a short space of time. I was so nervous starting out but [the coach] has been such a great coach. Just the right amount of pushing us out of comfort zone without feeling in any danger. I have loved every minute.”

“Brilliant Introduction to Open Water Swimming, which was up-front, honest and safe, there was no ego, just good fun, focus and confidence-building.”

“As a beginner to open water, [the coach] was an amazing and welcoming swimming instructor and explained how to swim front crawl stroke in open water. And how to manage the stroke safely. I would definitely recommend him to friends.”

“Loved my swim coaching sessions but as I said above the mixed abilities in the session restricted the learning a wee bit. I keep meaning to look into the cost of one-on-one coaching, but I think that might be beyond my budget.”

“The sessions changed my life. Open water swimming has given me something I can hardly explain. At 45 I’ve never felt so fit.”

The sessions changed my life. Open water swimming has given me something I can hardly explain



CONCLUSION

There's a joke kicking around my family that if I were dying from a terminal illness, I'd claim a dose of sea swimming would help cure it.

There's a part of me that believes it!

As a lifelong wild swimmer, swim teacher and open water swim coach, I cannot help but see the very many benefits that outdoor swimming provides us.

And while it may not cure a terminal illness it will help us, and our loved ones, cope with it. It also gives us a salve for so many other conditions, issues or concerns. Yet it is also a joy, exciting, fun and thrilling. Our cold water immersions provide a vital reset; the community as supportive and comforting as the water itself.

As is evidenced in all three surveys, we take up wild swimming for many different reasons, but we share so much commonality in the water. The evidence of mental health gains is unequivocal, but it doesn't stop there. Physical health, fitness, confidence are all areas where open water swimming provides easy and accessible rewards (for most of us) and a cheap, if not free, stress-busting, reset. Most of us swimmers also experience an openness, a lack of judgement and

camaraderie that can be difficult to find in such an obvious way in other activities. Of course it happens elsewhere, but there is a raw honesty in wild swimming that is hard to find elsewhere, a vulnerability we all feel going into the cold water, that sense of being minuscule, yet of being part of something mighty ... and not quite sure where the boundary is. On soft sands and riverbanks, beginners and masters mix and no one really cares about ability. Getting in is the win.

And afterwards, with numb fingers, shivering, laughing, we try to get dressed while maintaining some shred of decency, but also looking out for each other despite you not knowing their surname (sometimes even their first name!).

As we undress we strip away so many restrictive societal layers. We stand in front of the water and each other, sharing our vulnerabilities and experiencing a genuine equality in the face of a sea, loch, lake or river that cares not for our differences nor for even who we are. It is profoundly restorative and uplifting. How can you not want to share that with others?!

Hope to see you in the sea soon.

Cheers, Colin

As a lifelong wild swimmer, swim teacher and open water swim coach, I cannot help but see the very many benefits that outdoor swimming provides us

CITING THIS REPORT

This report originated from a desire to demonstrate the value of open water swimming, especially to those outwith our community.

The content, data and analysis contained within this report are freely available for anyone to use for the purposes of promoting open water swimming and its benefits.

Citation or reuse does, however, require an acknowledgement, please.

Email: coach@scottishswimmer.com

Rather than adding as appendices, the main survey and case studies can be downloaded via SwimforGood.org

Please note that names, locations and other identifying markers have been removed.

www.swimforgood.org