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# I Got Naked and Tried to De-Stress in a Sensory Deprivation Tank

What does it feel like to feel nothing at all?



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BY LUKE O'NEIL SEP 13, 2016



**H**ow do you talk about what nothing feels like? Or, more to the point, how do you *feel* what nothing feels like in order to talk about it?

Those were just a few of the thoughts racing through my mind as I floated on a bed of dense epsom salt water inside a lightless, soundless, odorless tank. Under ideal circumstances, I wouldn't have been thinking about anything at all—certainly not the 7.5-foot-long tank's resemblance to a coffin, or how the act of climbing into it was something akin to a robot with severe Oedipal issues crawling, at long last, back into the metal womb. I would have simply given myself over to the calming stillness. And I did, in a way. Or at least, I think I did.

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If I reached senselessness, would I even know?

For many people, sensory deprivation tanks—or flotation therapy, as it's more commonly called now—serve as a sort of wellness treatment for the reduction of stress and anxiety, or for the treatment of a variety of physical ailments, like a bad back. For those of us with a rather, let's say, *overactive* sense of crushing existential dread—not to mention acute claustrophobia—disrobing, showering with bath gels, and then descending into the type of watery mad science machine they boil nascent superheroes in didn't sound like a day at the spa. It sounded like a nightmare. It didn't help matters much, vis-à-vis stress levels, that on the way to FLOAT Boston, I subjected myself to two of the most maddening types of psychological torture ever devised: driving through Boston traffic and listening to sports talk radio. That's probably why I needed it so badly.

About to climb into this. RIP to me. [pic.twitter.com/AYWTfEnPDi](https://pic.twitter.com/AYWTfEnPDi)  
— luke o'neil (@lukeoneil47) September 7, 2016

"Don't worry, the door is very light weight," the woman showing me around the room assured when I asked if it was possible to be trapped. "Is it OK if I come out early?" I asked. "The time is yours," she said. "You can do whatever you want." She left me alone, and I stood there, naked, listening to the light din of water rushing through a series of complicated-looking pipes, and thought what any man would think in this situation: *I wonder if it's possible to have sex in there.* I turned off the lights in the room and stepped gingerly toward the site of my very likely demise. All right, screw it, time to unlock my super powers.

The idea behind sensory deprivation originated in the 1950s when a neuropsychiatrist named John C. Lilly experimented with immersive water tanks, and later with all manner of psychoactive drugs, often taken at the same time, a process dramatized in the 1980 film *Altered States*. In the '70s, Peter Suedfeld, a researcher from the University of British Columbia, began to study its effects in earnest, renaming the practice Restricted Environmental Stimulation Therapy (REST). Over the decades, interest in floating has waxed and waned, with a boom in the early '80s followed by a long lull until recent years, when float centers like the one just outside Boston I visited began multiplying in cities throughout the United States.

## DESCENDING INTO THE TYPE OF WATERY MAD SCIENCE MACHINE THEY BOIL NASCENT SUPERHEROES IN DIDN'T SOUND LIKE A DAY AT THE SPA.



As with any form of alternative medicine or therapy, the actual medical benefits, physically speaking, aren't exactly rock solid, [although that's not from lack of trying](#). Floating is used in the treatment of everything from muscle tension, chronic pain, hypertension, and rheumatoid arthritis to PMS. Few deny that there are clear psychological benefits, however. Some claim it can even serve as a mind-enhancer, a means of unlocking artistic, creative, and athletic potential. Even if that doesn't sound persuasive, there's no denying the thousands of people who swear by it. Think about it: How many times a day do you find yourself assaulted by noise pollution and the oppressive glare of your screens? Wouldn't it be nice to be able to close a door and shut it out, if only for an hour?

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At FLOAT Boston, owner Colin Roald told me their customers come from a broad spectrum. We were seated in a small waiting/decompressing lounge outside of the space's four tank rooms. The space was adorned with artwork from a number of artists who were invited to try floating and then interpret their experiences. Most of the pieces were "Starry Night" purple and blue, with flowing strokes, nocturnal.

I wondered what type of person makes floating in the darkness part of their regular routine. There are the yoga and meditation types, athletes using it for training or recovery, and people with back pain or insomnia, or just general stress. "We hear from a decent number of young parents who say, 'This is the only time I've had to myself in three years,' or elderly folks who just like to take a load off the joints and relax," Roald said.

Does he view it himself as more mental or physical therapy? I asked.



"It starts as a physical therapy, but it's both. People have been working on this for 50 years, but it hasn't been well-funded, and it's kind of obscure," Roald said. "It seems that it triggers the relaxation response, which is the opposite of the fight-or-flight adrenaline response. It's what tells your body that it's OK to slow down, to let the tension go, to let the digestion work. That tends to kick in first, and when your body is totally relaxed, your brain frequently goes with it."

Falling asleep is less common than you might think. Instead, the brain gradually approaches the theta state. "You're sort of half asleep, day dreaming, in kind of a trance state," Roald said. "You can float gently enough in and out of that that it's hard to say if you're asleep or not."

I wondered if I might fall asleep after I situated myself comfortably in the tank. It took a while to get used to the novelty of it. It's amazing how many details you can notice when there aren't any details to notice. The tank was long enough for me to stretch out completely, with my hands over my head in a sort of snow-angel pose, but occasionally I'd drift to the side and brush up against one of the walls, snatching me back from what I was sure was my impending tranquil. The space is so dark, it doesn't matter if your eyes are open or not, but when I did open them, my imagination began to fill in the blanks, forming the dome of a towering, shadowy cathedral, or a distant, starless canopy. The air and water are kept at the same temperature, so there's little to differentiate the spaces where your skin peaks out above—I tried resting my head on a pillow at first, but I was much more comfortable just relaxing my neck back fully into the water—but whenever I touched my own body, now slick with salt, I couldn't help but think of myself as a gross, bobbing fish with a man's penis. (Yes, of course I touched my penis. No, not in that way.)

## "IT'S AMAZING HOW MANY DETAILS YOU CAN NOTICE WHEN THERE AREN'T ANY DETAILS TO NOTICE."



There's a saying in computer science: *Garbage in, garbage out*. Which is to say, if you input nonsensical data, you're going to get a nonsensical output, and believe me, I brought some pretty serious mental garbage into the tank with me. When you have nothing to distract yourself from yourself, it's easy to let your mind race. But with a little effort—they say it takes some people a second time to fully accustom to floating—and focusing on my breathing, I was able to submerge myself—mentally speaking that is.

I remember some thoughts. I thought briefly about my father's final moments in the hospital [earlier this spring](#), and wondered if death is just another sensory deprivation tank we all eventually climb into. I thought about the sound of my wife's laughter. I thought about Tom Brady, and how his laughter would sound if he were my wife. Kidding on that one. Sort of. I thought about a New England summer, floating in the bracing, briny waves. Mostly, I thought about wanting a cigarette.

I thought other things, I'm sure. What, I don't know. I don't have the data anymore. It wasn't saved. Outside in the lounge seating, I felt like something had happened. I needed to sit for a while. I was tired and shaky. I wasn't sure what the emotion was I felt, or even if there was one, but I needed to process it all the same. Maybe something happened to me I wasn't conscious of. That's probably the entire point.

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