

10 Steps to Stay a Happy Swimmer

Back and forth, you slog listlessly down the lane. The black line on the bottom looks endless. Your arms feel like lead, your legs like petrified wood. Your mind is blank, and your heart is heavy. You're not having fun.

Everybody has a bad day in the pool now and then. Not only is it nothing to worry about, but a day when every stroke is a struggle can actually help lift your swimming to the next level –if you push yourself through it. But if every day is a bad pool day, if you have to drag yourself to practice (or your mom or dad do), if you just can't get into a workout and your enthusiasm and excitement have fizzled out, it's time to think about what you're doing, both in and out of the water. And why. You could be headed for burnout. But before you're so sick of swimming you feel like quitting, take these steps:

Bed Check – Americans are stingy with their sleep, and active teens and preteens actually need more than eight hours a night. Not sleeping enough can wreck both your progress in the pool and your enthusiasm for swimming. It can be tough to fit in swimming, school, studying and some fun into a day, but don't trade sleep time for TV watching, computer games or on-line puttering.

Rest Stop -- Overtraining is a major cause of burnout. You've got to give your body time to recover from workouts, so don't do more pool or dryland exercise than your coach advises. Take at least one day a week away from the water altogether, and don't use the time to exercise!

Speak Up -- If your coach or the calendar says it's time to move up to the next level, but you don't think you can handle it, say so. "I think it's essential that young swimmers feel in control of what they're doing," says Laura Cox, a coach with the Alamo Area Aquatic Association in San Antonio, Texas. "Kids want to feel challenged and should be encouraged to seek challenges, but only they can tell when it's too much." A lot of young swimmers who stay at their old level for a few extra months quickly find that they want that new challenge. On the other hand, says Cox, kids who are forced to move up before they feel ready are often the ones who quit swimming altogether.

If you don't feel comfortable talking with your coach alone about this, ask a parent, another adult you trust or even an older swimmer to go with you. The real point is you taking responsibility for your swimming.

Step Up -- On the other hand, maybe you're sick of swimming because you're not challenged enough. It's easy to get into a comfortable rut, but stepping out of your comfort zone regularly makes you grow both as an athlete and a person, says sports psychologist Alan Goldberg, Ph.D. Stretch your limits, he suggests and discover you can do more than you thought you could. You'll get excited about swimming again.

Find the fun -- "I don't think anyone will burn out as long as they remember that swimming is a game, and games are fun," says sports psychologist, writer and coach Keith Bell, Ph.D. "Everyone involved has a responsibility to make sure that swimming is fun, even in intense training." One way to do that is to remember that setting a goal is what makes an activity into a game. "Every time you get in the pool, you can play a game if you set yourself some goals," says Bell. "I think goals are tremendously important in practices and workouts, because a goal is an excuse for a game. And even if you don't reach your goal, it's okay as long as your game was interesting and fun."

Be human – It's great to expect great things from yourself. It's even okay to try to do well partly because it pleases people who matter to you, like your parents, your coach, or your teammates. But sports psychologists say that constantly refusing to accept anything less than perfection from yourself is a sure setup for burnout. And so is measuring your self-worth by how well you do in the pool. Don't beat up on yourself when you fail. You learn more from failure than success.

Remember the Real Rewards – "Swimming is a richly rewarding experience that you can have every day of your life," says Bell. "Swimming does amazing things for your body, and research suggests that those things can help you lead a long, healthy life. Swimming is one of the few sports that people can continue to do well their entire lives. That alone is an enormous incentive to keep it fun."

"Look for the rewards that are less tangible than a medal," he says. "My wife (Sandy Neilsen) won three Olympic golds, and I've never won a race anywhere near that level. But Sandy never got any more out of swimming than I did, and we both still love it, and we both still swim every day. Discover and hold onto all the things that swimming gives you."

Swim for yourself – If you're swimming because someone expects you to, or getting the message that winning races is the only reason to swim, you'll either have to find your own reasons or another sport. Swimming is demanding – of your time, your body, and your spirit – and ultimately if you're not doing it for yourself, and having fun in the process, you'll burn out.

It's a Choice, Not a Sacrifice – Speaking of those demands, it helps if you think of what you do, and don't do, to be a swimmer of choices, not sacrifices. "Don't confuse not getting something good with getting something bad," says Bell. For instance, if you pass up a Friday night out with your friends so you can make an early Saturday practice, that doesn't make practice a bad thing. "Making choices is part of life and growing up. Sooner or later we all have to decide between options," he says. "In my opinion, the choices we make to be swimmers are all good things."

Get a Life – That said, remember that there's a world outside the pool. Swimming may be a big part of your life, but it shouldn't be your life. Don't use swimming as an excuse to neglect schoolwork or your family. Cultivate some other interests. Spending time on an enjoyable hobby refreshes and recharges you. Make some friends who don't swim. They're the folks who will be cheering you on in the stands.