



Anxious Swimmer Lesson 1

Lesson 1: The Basics

Welcome to the ATLS Anxious Swimmer Lessons! If you have limited experience swimming in open water, or you are simply new to open water swim events in the Okanagan, learning some open water swim basics will be key to having an enjoyable ATLS, which this series of lessons will give you.

To be clear, this lesson series is about **BASICS**, to provide a sequence of **confidence building steps**, and to **increase your exposure to distance** swimming over 5-6 weeks. If you attend these free sessions at Gyro Beach, they will start with 10-15 minutes on land to outline some principles and answer questions before entering the water for some basic drills.

To gauge what your needs are to succeed in the ATLS, here are some common questions we ask of swimmers at the first open water swim clinic every year. If you answered yes to any of these questions, this lesson series will likely help you:

- Are you a first time ATLS swimmer?
- Are you feeling a little anxious about swimming two kilometers across a deep lake?
- Is this your first-time swimming in Okanagan Lake or at Gyro Beach Park?
- Has it been a while since you have done any regular swimming at all?
- Are you more comfortable swimming long distances in a pool than in an open water environment?
- Are you secretly also training for your first triathlon?

So let's first try to better understand anxiety, especially as it relates to swimming in open water. **Anxieties commonly arise from:**

- Significant uncertainties or fear of the unknown
- A feeling of lack of control
- Feeling overwhelmed by too many uncertainties
- A feeling of doom or a fear of drowning
- Previous negative experiences in water



We commonly hear our new participants acknowledge that, while they have no problems swimming in a pool, swimming in open water gives them anxiety. Why is that? What is so different about swimming in open water? Answering this question is key to understanding any anxiety you might have swimming the ATLS. Here is the long list of (15!) differences. Acknowledging which ones affect you is the first step toward eliminating your open water swim anxieties.

- Open water is usually much deeper than a pool
- You often can't see the bottom, and there are no lines to guide you
- You have to figure out a new way to swim straight—called “sighting”
- There are no lifeguards, lane ropes, or pool edges nearby
- Distances look longer
- The taste of the water is different
- You are more likely to collide with other swimmers
- The water is usually colder, a risk for hypothermia
- You may have to wear a wetsuit and swim cap to stay warm
- A wetsuit may feel restrictive, both for breathing and for arm movements
- There are likely things in the water, such as fauna, flora, silt, or pollutants
- There are things on the water—watercraft, floating items
- You need to trust your fitness and your abilities more
- Water conditions are important, such as currents, waves, or tides
- Weather conditions are also important—storms, wind, or lightning

As you can see, this is a list that can feel overwhelming, and one that will affect just about everyone. We will cover them all during these lessons. Be assured that virtually everyone who does our swim sessions has a successful swim. Just like when you first learned how to drive—when you had so many variables to learn thrown at you, like blinkers, mirrors, traffic signs, steering wheel, gears, pedals, etc., you got past the “overwhelmed” feeling with practice. Here is the outline of the first lesson:

Lesson 1 (Equipment, Acclimatizing, The Pop-up Drill, Recovery position)

1. **Your Swim Equipment (Putting on a wetsuit, goggles and cap and personal swim buoy)**

4 benefits to a wetsuit: Thermal protection; floatation; core stability/better

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body position; and faster swim times as a result of sitting higher in the water.

a. **Wetsuit Demo:** Make sure your wetsuit fits you—good size, comfortable around the shoulders, chest and neck. Some tightness is expected. Give your shoulders as much play as possible: Put it on properly, make sure it is right up into the crotch to allow maximal redundancy for your trunk.

b. **Goggles Demo:** You need to make sure your goggles fit your face, they have a good seal, they are comfortable, and they don't leak—Goggles are a personal item based on your face shape-find one that works for you and keeping buying the same one as a replacement.... newer ones are best (the fog up less and they seal better), especially for races and long swims. DEMO: How to seal them with a bit of moisture; understand the split strap, and the suction fit. Goggles for open water should consider tinting, reflective or even polarized lenses to reduce the effect of glare. Some prefer a larger goggle (a monolens) to increase peripheral vision and sighting needs.

c. **Swim Cap:** Keeping your head warm is important in open water, especially a silicone cap, and especially doubled up in cold water. It also makes you more streamline in the water especially if you have long hair. Your cap should be put on properly and should not be too tight. Some put goggle straps under their caps. Consider a neoprene cap if you swim in cold water regularly (less than 15°C).

d. **Personal Swim Buoy:** This is an inflated, brightly-colored float that you tow behind you as you swim. It makes you more visible to people monitoring you, as well as to watercraft. It can also provide you extra floatation and something to hang on to if you need a break—they can easily hold you up no matter what you weigh. Some are made with an inner storage pouch that you can carry stuff in for point-to-point swims. Surprisingly, they do not cause any drag. There are several manufacturers of swim buoys including the [Swim Buddy](#).

2. **Acclimatizing to the water**

a. **Walk in** (don't dive), get your hands and feet wet---that will tell you how much adjustment you will need. When the water is under 15°C, the water may feel painful, especially to your hands, feet, and face, but will ease with time.

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- b. **Get some water in your wetsuit** to ease the shock of the cooler water. A wet suit will hold the water in, that you warm up.
 - c. **Splash water** on your face and neck—reduce the paradox of the cold shock response and mammalian diving reflex.
 - d. **Do a few strokes**, and stop if you need to. Does the wetsuit feel comfortable, and not restrictive anywhere? Are you breathing harder than expected? Goggles leaking? Is your heart pounding faster than expected? Notice any brain freeze? Note the added challenge of finding the right breathing pattern. This will depend on how cold the water is. Your breathing and stroke production need to be in control before restarting. Easing into your swim allows you to maintain breath control easier.
3. **Pop-up drill:** Get comfortable with the floatation ability of the wetsuit (Try the “sit on the bottom drill”—what happens? Your net buoyancy pushes you upward. The water is not out to get you or swallow you up, but rather wants to spit you out!) Remember that scuba divers in wetsuits must wear weights to keep them from floating!
4. **Get comfortable with a rest/recovery position:** Find your “happy place”, a posture or alternative stroke to go to if you need to take a break for any reason. Unlike in a pool, there is no pool edge to hang onto if you want to rest, so you need to rest while in deep water. There are several common strategies for rest or recovery, such as
 - Floating on your back (a wetsuit makes this easy)
 - Sidestroke
 - Breaststroke
 - Treading water
 - Hanging on to a Swim Buddy

What ever your preference, the key is to reclaim the control of your breathing if you have lost it, so that you can restart your swim.

5. **Sustained Swimming:** Try some sustained swimming for 50-200m...or more if you can, taking recovery rests if needed. If you cannot sustain this, try to keep moving, without putting your feet down, and then get back into a stroke.