



Anxious Swimmer Lesson 4

Lesson 4: Gear and Swimming with Crowds

If you need to, review the [first lesson](#), [second lesson](#), and the [third lesson](#) before moving on to this lesson.

After a brief warmup, this lesson covers some other issues unique to swimming in open water:

1. Goggle failure
2. Swimming in a crowd/contact swimming, and drafting
3. If possible: Swimming in chop and waves
4. Increasing distance

Dealing with leaking or fogged up goggles.

Not being able to see well while swimming in open water not only impairs the ability to swim straight, but it can be anxiety provoking if you cannot see where you are going. One way to lessen the risk of fogged up goggles is to have new pair of goggles set aside for the event, since newer goggles are less likely to fog up, and are less likely to leak. Alternately, using an anti-fog product may work as well, but practice this first. Some swimmers say spit works the best! A short warm up swim can help confirm if your goggles are fitting properly. Sometimes goggles can leak if part of their gasket is on the lower edge of your swim cap, something that can easily be fixed by adjusting the cap away from the goggles.

Lesson

Drill #1: the Open Water Fix of Leaky Goggles

Lift your goggles off your face and put them back... badly. Now swim a few strokes, to confirm how irritating and hard to see it is with water in your goggles. To fix this issue, roll onto your back while kicking lightly, lift the goggles off your face to clear the water out of them, and then reseal them to your face with light pressure securely over your eyes. Then adjust the strap behind your head if necessary.

Drill #2: Swim without goggles!

Occasionally, you may lose your goggles in open water, or the strap may break, or

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your cap peels off (because it was riding too high on your head) and your goggles go with it. Can you swim without goggles? Of course you can! And practicing commando swimming is just a simple way to reduce your anxiety if this should happen. Remember that goggles were not used in the Olympics until 1976 (Mark Spitz won seven gold medals in Munich in 1972 without using goggles)! Surfers never wear goggles, and some of them are in the water all day. There are a few people every year who prefer to do the ATLS without goggles on. So try this: Put your goggles around your neck, and swim 25-50 meters (or more) without your goggles on. You may not like it, but you should be able to do it.

Swimming in a crowd

Unlike pool swimming, most open water swim events have mass starts, with hundreds or even thousands of competitors, raising the anxiety of swimmers who are not used to swimming in very crowded water. Although contact is inevitable, there are ways to minimize this, such as lining up off to one side, or just hanging back long enough to let faster swimmers get ahead. This is called “self-seeding”—knowing where to place yourself in the beginning of a mass start. The goal here is to lessen the risk of body contact and being overtaken from behind. The following drill can only be done with a group of other willing participants:

Drill #3: Getting used to swimming in a crowd.

In this group setting, we first confirm that “We are all friends out here!” Then we split the group into two halves, perhaps by numbering the group alternating ones and twos, then have all the ones line up tightly in a space about 10 m wide at the 0m buoy, and the twos line up just a few meters behind them. The ones are asked to start swimming very slowly, methodically, toward the 50 m buoy. As soon as they have started, have the twos start right behind them at a strong pace, and ask them to try to swim through the first group. There will be contact, but hopefully everyone can stay on top of their breathing. If you need to, you can stand up anytime.

Besides creating anxiety, being overtaken from behind creates at least two major risks: Being partly or mostly swum over and thereby pushed downward, deeper in the water; and second, having your breathing rhythm impaired if an arm-stroke strikes you in the face as you are turning to breathe. In crowded swim situations, one way to protect your breathing somewhat is to swim using a “catch-up” style whenever there is a swimmer closely beside you. This stroke rhythm uses your arms to establish a protective zone around your head and therefore protects your head turn to breathe.

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Once you get a bit more comfortable swimming in traffic, you can actually take advantage of swimmers who are passing you—by drafting. You will discover that being within a few feet of a faster swimmer, slightly behind them and off to one side, is an easy way to get pulled along without much effort. For an ideal location, think of the formation of Canada geese in flight.

Drill #4: Sighting and breathing challenges in chop, waves, and swells (This lesson is dependent on suitable conditions)

With mild chop or wavy conditions, or when needing to see over a swimmer in front of you, you may need to lift your head slightly higher out of the water than normal to find your sighting target. Since sighting gets harder in wavy water or when there are swells, you will need to learn to sight and breathe at the top of a wave. This is where breathing flexibility becomes critically important—you cannot maintain a regimented stroke (like breathe-every-two, or breathe-every-three strokes) in these conditions. You will also have to learn to feel where you are in the water, such as if you are in a trough or on the crest of a wave or swell, so that you can time your sighting to the top of a wave, to maximize your ability to see what you need to see. Otherwise, you will only see water.

When there is a lot of water movement, you may need to determine if the waves are with you, against you, or aside of you. For waves that are coming at you from one side, you may need to consider breathing on just one side (the opposite side of the wave activity); you may also need to be ready to ride (body surf) waves that are following you (increasing your arm cadence as each wave overtakes you), or dive through waves that you are swimming into head on.

Drill #5: More distance practice

To put your sighting and breathing techniques to the test in choppy conditions, swim buoy to buoy for the 800m loop, alternating your breathing cadence and rhythm as the waves dictate. Don't avoid going out on your own on choppy or wavy days to practice these techniques.