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Recovery Trends: Ease Away the Pain with Floatation Therapy



Looking for a moment of pure, quiet, therapeutic bliss? You could try sealing yourself in a dark tank of warm water, effortlessly floating with no lights or sound to distract you, in the hopes of relieving pain, easing stress and clearing the mind.

Sound a little goofy? It's good enough for two-time NBA MVP Stephen Curry. Four-time Super Bowl champion quarterback Tom Brady is a huge fan, too — he even owns his own tank. The Navy SEALs are also regular devotees, inspiring college athletics programs like Ohio State's football team to incorporate it into its recovery program.

That's pretty lofty company. Is it good enough for you? First, a bit of background. Floatation therapy may be trendy, but it's not new at all.

Invented in the 1950s, floatation therapy — also known as restricted environmental stimulation therapy — had a brief period of popularity in the '70s and '80s, and it is experiencing a sort of renaissance moment. In 2015, the New York Post reported there were 267 float centers in the U.S., a significant increase from only 85 centers in 2011.

Here's how it works: Practitioners fill a special tank with warm water and nearly 1,000 pounds of Epsom salts, creating a dense solution that allows for effortless flotation, thereby releasing the body from gravity. This treatment is usually performed in a quiet, lightproof pod, encouraging the brain and body to relax. The temperature of the water and surrounding air are warm enough to be "skin-receptor neutral," making it difficult for the float subject to differentiate where the water ends and where their body begins.

"Your heart rate slows down, your breathing slows down, your blood pressure lowers," explains Allison Walton, owner of The Float Center in Oakland, California. The treatment lasts for approximately one hour and is supposed to help decompress the spine, draw out toxins and release stored tension, while also providing a meditative atmosphere for further relaxation.

Studies have shown that float therapy has the ability to decrease stress, anxiety and severe pain while increasing optimism and sleep quality, the latter being a key factor to the repair and recovery of overworked muscles and overstimulated minds. It's no surprise that this treatment attracts clients with extremely physical jobs, but it can also benefit anyone with chronic pain or stress, regardless of age, size or fitness level.

The price tag isn't outrageous — sessions range anywhere from \$40 intro floats at Just Float in Los Angeles to \$99 at Lift Floats in New York City, with special package pricing available at most float spas. But while there's no denying that most people would benefit from an hour of total relaxation, there has been no significant scientific data that has shown float therapy to be a factor in accelerating healing. And while some studies have claimed that one hour of float therapy can equate to about four to eight hours of restful sleep, that result is hard to measure consistently.

That doesn't mean that all of float therapy's claims don't hold water. Dr. Adolfo Liu, DC, owner of Avanzare Sport Therapy in San Francisco, sees merit in floating for its meditative quality. "I put a high value on Epsom salts, as I

suggest a hot Epsom salt bath for adjunctive treatment for chronic muscle pain and just general muscle recovery," he says.

Epsom salts are chemically known as magnesium sulfate, and an Epsom salt bath allows for the absorption of muscle-relaxing magnesium (in addition to other minerals) through the skin. Epsom salts have also long been credited for relieving pain, muscle cramps and inflammation.

It's worth dipping your toe into the pool, says Heather Anderson, a SoulCycle instructor who incorporates regular float sessions into her fitness lifestyle. She cites a deep muscle release and an increase in the amount of sleep she gets after each session, but most importantly, she adds, "It's also just a great way to have an hour with you and your thoughts."

In a world where we're hyperconnected and moving at warp speed on a daily basis, those moments of solitude and self-care are worth every penny.

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