

How to Overcome a Panic Attack in Open Water Tri Swim

Less than five minutes into a triathlon swim leg your mind freaks out. You feel your survival is threatened. Adrenaline is mainlined into your bloodstream with other hormones. You start breathing uncontrollably. Your heart rate surges. And your blood pressure spikes. Next your lungs OD on oxygen. You panic. You want to get out of the water immediately and quit.

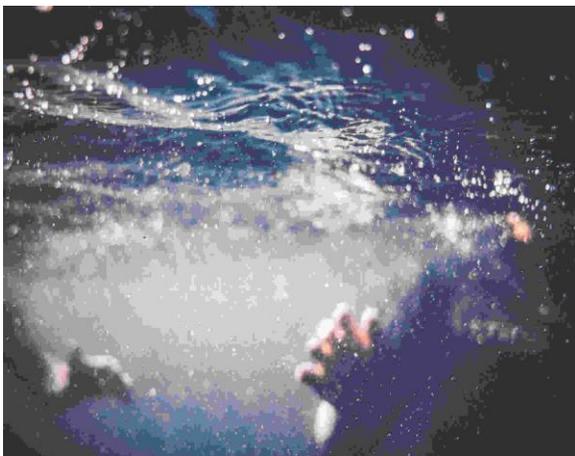
You're experiencing a panic attack. Do you really want to throw away all that training and miss out on an opportunity to set a PR, earn a KQ, or beat your training partners? No? Then read on.

Think of the panic attack in the water as a flight or fight situation for your body. Your mind and body respond to acute stress with the drama exaggeration of a bad reality show.

The fright doesn't last as long as you think and you can reduce the duration of a panic attack. You can even minimize the risk of occurrence on the swim leg of your triathlons. Here's how.

Before race day get comfortable with a properly fitted wetsuit. It should be a chest, arms and legs hugging outfit which provides full range of motion for your arms, shoulders, and legs. Accept as a given the neoprene wetsuit will keep you afloat while deflecting any arm blows or leg kicks to the body. Think of it like a thunder jacket for triathletes. It reduces stress and calms you down without drugs.

If a competitor strokes right over the top of you and you get pushed down in the water, don't get pissed or panicked. In your thunder wetsuit you'll stay relaxed and float back up to the water line again. You won't bark either. Oh the comfort and safety of this racing technology breakthrough.



On race days, warm-up with swimming if offered but be flexible. Some races there is no swim warm-up or it's so cold (water or air) the warm-up doesn't really boost the core temps either high enough or long enough. A bike option warm-up may not exist if your bike is racked and not accessible. Running is the best option for establishing your personal routine warm-up before a tri. Run 5-10 minutes time for warm-up followed by specific speed builds and strides to get the heart pumping and the lungs expanded.

Beyond the warm-up and once in the water don't over swim the first 100 or so meters to get swim-start remorse, especially in the longer races of half or full distance triathlon. Position yourself at the side or behind the pack if you want less hectic conditions at the start of your race wave. You can lose the race in the first couple of minutes but never win it.

Other options to prevent panic attacks are to extend your breathing pattern to use up the oxygen already in the body instead of overloading on it and increasing your hyperventilation chances. On this one, instead of breathing every right (or left) breath every other right (or left) stroke or every 3rd or 4th stroke, one beyond your normal pattern. Again, this is for a short period of time until you are settled into your race plan. You could also choose to kick a little harder for a brief period to balance out the O₂/CO₂ as the quads are oxygen sucking muscles. These latter two options are similar to you changing to backstroke or breaststroke and getting re-oriented but will get your gases re-balanced without giving up time or impair your self-confidence for dropping back to your competitors on the swim.

If you still panic in the race there are other specific things you can choose to prevent or minimize swim issues. First, cool out. You can't remove yourself immediately from the water but you can bob, switch over to breaststroke, or float on your back. Think to clear your mind. Acknowledge there is no real event threatening you other than what you thought up in your own mind. Accepting this as fact will provide almost immediate relief by shutting down what your body initially triggered to perceived and not real danger. Repeat this thinking and rationalize that the current danger situation is overstated. Think of something funny like the poor bastards who went all out at the start, only to end up in the middle of the pack with their goggles astray after incurring multiple hand smacks and leg kicks. Next, breathe focusing on deep gut busting breaths. Much like what you should do when getting a side stitch. Think of Jimmy Buffett's *Breathe in, Breathe Out, Move On* song. Breathe in slowly and relaxed, pause, then breath out. Swim on.

It's all a bit unnerving but figure out the in-race solutions to finish relaxed and respectable. Try in practice to be race ready.

Visualize in your mind before the race all tactics to stay relaxed and recover from a panic attack if it occurs. Adopt what works for you.