

# Deprivation Therapy: Testing the Waters of the Float Tank Experience

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We are all trying to find ways to manage our daily stressors and, essentially, feel better more often. When you combine that with my ongoing curiosity with new techniques related to sport performance and recovery-regeneration, it made me want to find out more about the recent fad of salt-water sensory deprivation chambers. Friends told me that it would be a relaxing experience and mind-expanding journey. Well, how could I pass that type of adventure up? It also helped that my wife bought me a voucher for Father's Day to go out and try the float experience.

## Introduction

The company that we chose in Vancouver is known as Float House, with locations in the neighbourhoods of Kitsilano and Gastown. I chose the Kitsilano location, gave myself adequate time for travel and thought I would enjoy a calm drive to the site on a nice summer day. Of course, road construction season was in full effect and I was delayed in traffic, driving up my heart rate and blood pressure. Needless to say, I was all stressed out from the trip and in need of a relaxing experience to bring me back to earth. Once I finally found a parking space, I was good to go with my float introduction. I had a combination of excitement about the experience, tempered with a mild fear of the unknown.



The Float House lobby environment was very modern and welcoming. I was happy that it didn't resemble the inner workings of a post-WWII Russian submarine. Nathan was the individual that was there to help me with my float experience and had me watch an orientation video on a tablet computer for the first few minutes of my visit. Everything seemed pretty straightforward in the video and I didn't have any questions prior to my session.

Essentially, you are required to shower down prior to entering the float tank, step in, close the hatch and enjoy your float. Nathan just reminded me to wipe all of the drops of water on my face to prevent me from trying to do so once in the tank. The last thing you want to do is introduce high concentrations of salt water into your eyes. Sounded good to me.

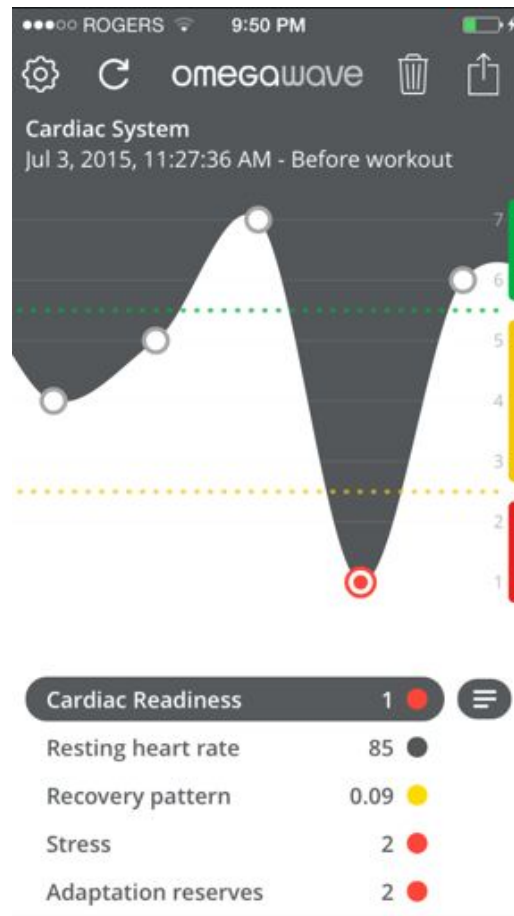
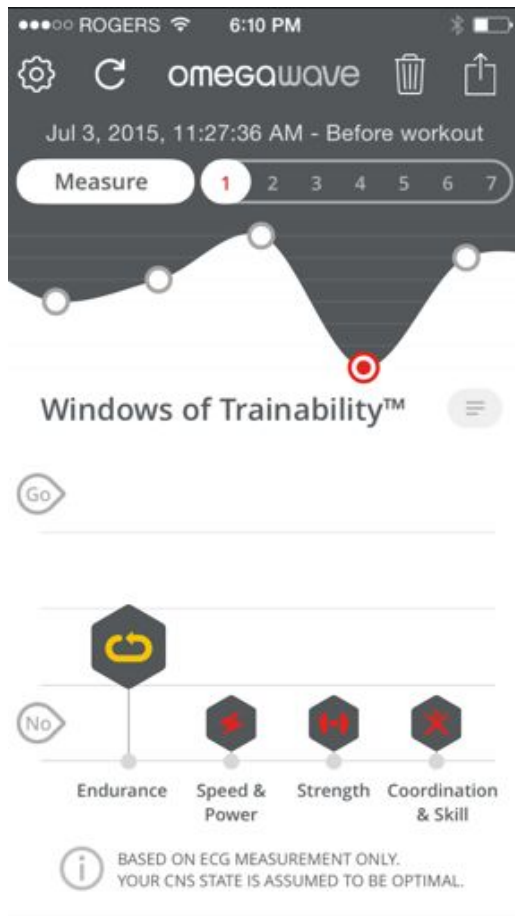
## Initial Preparations

Nathan guided me to the individual room where I would be experiencing my float. It was a self-contained private room, probably about eight feet by twelve feet in size. The float tank itself took up much of the room, with a shower space provided in the near corner. The lighting was dim, but bright enough to see what you were doing and adequately prepare yourself for the float. Once I was ready to go with the session, I closed the door and started in with my preparations. Being a bit of a techno-geek, I wanted to do some sort of pre-test prior to my session,

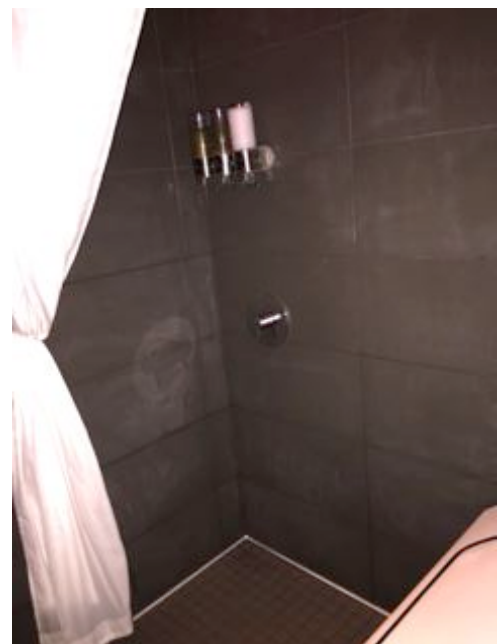


and then compare the results against my status following the session. I brought along my OmegaWave chest ECG chest strap (still waiting on the DC potential upgrade hardware) and did a simple pre-test on a towel laid on the tile floor of the room. It wasn't the most comfortable experience, but I would be doing the same protocol for the post-test.

I wasn't thrilled with my OmegaWave results as it showed that my resting heart rate was high and my overall readiness generally sucked. Not a big surprise given the traffic and the cold, hard tile floor. I had also performed a 25-minute run earlier in the morning, but it was a pretty relaxed pace. It wasn't anything that would deplete me, by any means. I was still pretty shocked at my readings and thought, "Well, hopefully this float session solves some of my problems." I was still skeptical, given the fact that simply floating in water seems like it could only peripherally make a difference to my stress levels. If anything, I was more concerned about my tendency toward claustrophobia and thought I might have a small panic attack in the tank once the hatch closed on me. Needless to say, I would make a horrible astronaut.



Once my pre-test readings were achieved, I jumped into float tank mode. I stripped down to the buff, assuming no surveillance cameras were present, and spent a few minutes scrubbing myself down in the shower. I had also made sure my bladder and bowels were empty, as the last thing you want to do is interrupt your tranquil float session with a potty break. Following my shower, I proceeded to wipe down my face and hairline to make sure no drops of water would distract me from my relaxing float experience. I seemed prepared for entry into the tank after about eight minutes of preparation, including the time to conduct my OmegaWave pre-float test.



## Entering the Tank

The tank itself is quite large. Obviously it has to accommodate adults of various sizes lying lengthwise in the tank. It also cannot be too narrow, as you can tend to drift in the tank and you don't want to be bumping into the sides constantly, or even have the distraction of being close to any edge of the tank. Upon first glance, the tank looked like the space shuttle from the old Star Trek television series from the 1960s. The large hatch on the front of the tank is a bit daunting, as it's a bit like entering a space capsule, deep sea submersible or even a time machine. Although there are visible ventilation pipes for circulation of air in the tank, it still seems a bit unsettling placing yourself in a sealed container. Nevertheless, I was determined to see this experience through and document the benefits.



The water itself is only 10 inches deep, which doesn't seem adequate for floating. However, the 600lbs plus of Epsom salts in the water provide significant floatation to ensure you are nowhere near the bottom of the tank. The water is also set at body temperature to give you the sensation of being supported in a weightless environment. Once you get in the water and eventually lie back, you lose the sensation of the water on your skin and it actually feels like you are suspended in the air. It is an interesting sensation for someone who has never floated in a super concentrated saltwater environment. The Float House gives you the option of using earplugs to not only drown out sound, but also prevent water from entering your ears when you lie back. Nathan advised me that floating without earplugs enhanced the "float experience". So I decided to forgo the use of earplugs and maximize the entire experience being that it was my first float.

# The Float Experience

Once I closed the hatch and settled myself in for the float, with my head at the far end away from the hatch, it became interesting very quickly. First of all, it is pitch black in the tank with the hatch closed. I can't remember the last time I found myself in a pitch black environment anywhere. We are so inundated with light, even the light of a clock radio or LED of a phone charger, that we never experience absolute darkness (until maybe we are dead). Getting over the darkness of the experience was the first hurdle. Secondly, I was hesitant to lie back completely and put my ears in the water. I could feel the tension in the front of my neck because I was unconsciously not lying back completely. Being in a "weightless" environment is completely foreign to me and I didn't know how to relax in such a situation. They had a small pool noodle that you could use to support your neck and I tried using it, but it just felt awkward. Eventually, I just let my head settle back and the water completely covered and entered my ears.

It couldn't have been more than about 10 minutes before I started to feel anxious and wanted to get the hell out of that tank. You are floating naked, it's completely dark, you can only hear your own breathing and other bodily functions, your brain is your only source of entertainment and you have another 75 minutes to go. Perhaps other people are more mindful (or simply mindless) and can just lay back and enjoy the experience. Not me. I'm not obsessive-compulsive or a control freak, but being in that tank was an exceptionally foreign experience for me. Having no control over the nothingness of the experience was initially disturbing. My body felt odd and I could sense tension and odd sensations in different joints and body parts. It was as if I could sense every injury that I ever had, and it wasn't necessarily a good feeling. There was no pain, but definitely a heightened sense of awareness.



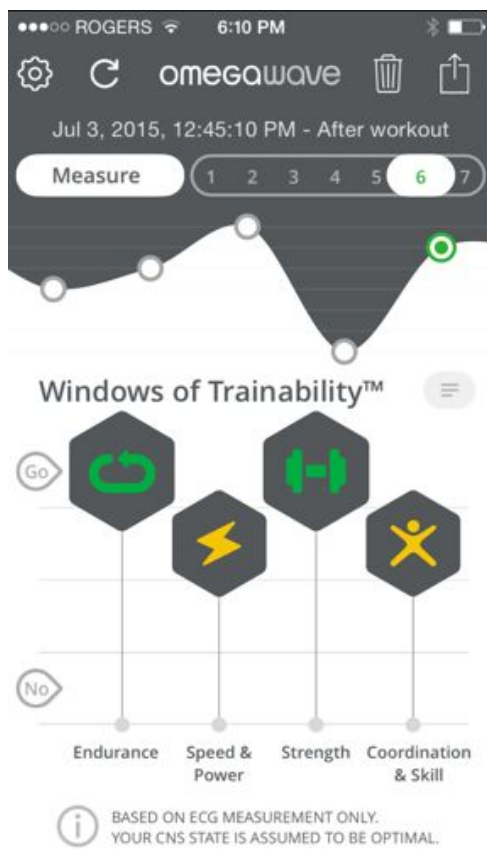
I had no awareness of the passing of time, but I estimate that after about 15 minutes, I had to sit up and open the hatch. Although this seemed like I was breaking the rules of "float club", I had to get some fresh air and freedom from the tank. I opened the hatch but still sat in the tank and did some long easy breaths to collect myself. Pretty quickly I found that I had relaxed and was encouraged to try to float again. I needed about three minutes to recuperate, but I decided that I would float again, but this time with the hatch open. Although it would not be complete sensory deprivation, I need this "crutch" to get me part way through the session until I further adjusted to the environment. As I lay back and closed my eyes, I could feel the cooler air from the outside environment flow over my body. In many ways, this was more reassuring than distracting, as I felt I had a connection to the "outside world" and it made me less anxious about being in the tank. This progression was very helpful as it provided a sensible process for adapting to the float tank environment in a manner that my brain could process easier. It

wasn't a sharp jump from sensory overload (which is what life is like currently for most of us) to absolute sensory deprivation.

My progression included an interval-like process of floating for maybe 20 minutes and taking a short break. Each time, I progressed to greater sensory deprivation. My intervals with the hatch open became floats with the hatch slightly ajar (using the supplied pool noodle). Eventually, I was back in the tank with the hatch completely closed. I tried putting my arms in different positions. Sometimes I felt more comfortable having my arms by my side. Other times I put my arms above my head and even placed my hands behind my head in a lounging sort of position. I also repositioned my legs at different levels of abduction. I found that switching positions kept me more relaxed and just felt better overall. It also gave me something to do. By the end of the full session, I felt at ease and content with the experience.

## Post-Float

Once my float was complete, music entered the room to signal the end of the 90-minute session. I climbed out of the tank gradually, reacquainting myself with gravity and illumination. I showered all of the salt solution off of my body and out of my hair. The shower was also a very relaxing and cleansing experience, unlike a regular shower would normally feel. I got dressed and then performed a final post-float OmegaWave test. Lying on the same tile floor, I used the ECG function and collected some valuable data.



I was shocked at the profound differences from pre-float to post-float. I had not seen such a significant swing in readiness in just 90 minutes, particularly since a portion of my float could have been characterized as anxiety ridden. My resting heart rate had dropped by almost 20 beats per minute and I had shifted from red to green in most measures. I also felt very energized following the session and didn't feel the least bit drowsy or disoriented.

## Conclusions

Following my float session, I definitely noticed a profound change in my overall well-being. Although many of my friends had characterized the sessions as relaxing, I would say it was quite the opposite for me. I felt as though the initial session for me required a good deal of work. And, I would characterize it as hard work. While the session was comprised of me lying relatively motionless for about 80 minutes, I don't feel I benefited from the physical rest component of the float. If anything, the float session encouraged me to "let go" and not dwell on the details of the situation. If I spent my full 90 minutes thinking, "I can't believe I'm lying in a puddle of salt water in an enclosed tank with no light or sound," I would probably go insane. At some point in the session, I made a conscious effort to free my mind of the constraints of the situation and just leave everything behind me. I believe that is where the progress was made.

For someone trying a float session for the first time, I would set some pretty distinct guidelines, depending on their personality type and the amount of baggage they are carrying upstairs. When I showed my photos of the float tank to a bunch of friends, their first comment was, "Oh, I couldn't lock myself in one of those. I'd go crazy!" For those people, I would suggest the gradual approach, including:

- Don't rush to get into your session. Take your time preparing yourself. It's not a race.
- Lie in a way that puts your head close to the hatch opening.
- Leave the hatch open for the first 10 to 15 minutes of your float.
- Gradually close the hatch to a point where it is slightly ajar.
- Don't be afraid to sit-up and open the hatch at any time to re-set your brain and put yourself at ease.
- Incorporate some light stretches when you are sitting up in the tank.
- Eventually re-orient yourself so that your head is away from the hatch.
- Close the hatch completely for the final segment of your session.

These guidelines need not apply to everyone, but I think it can help some anxious people get through their first float and make it a positive experience. It will also encourage you to do future float sessions and work on your brain. As my good friend, Art Horne, explained, "Floating forces you to deal with a lot of the shit going on in your head." I completely agree. It is a productive way to free up your mind and train you to block out the senseless details and be free of all the crap we often struggle with. For athletes, the benefits could be significant in terms of promoting autonomic recovery. I highly recommend that everyone try floating at least once. I think you will be surprised with the experience and the results.