

SELF

SPECIAL ISSUE

Mindfulness

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(p.60)

COMING TO YOUR SENSES

Flotation therapy could be the hippest way to achieve bliss. But is it worth its salt (water)?

BY AMY MARTURANA

I don't meditate. As a health editor, that's pretty much like admitting I don't like kale (don't worry, I do). But I just have a really tough time turning my brain off and sitting still. Unless I'm about to go to sleep—then it happens in five minutes flat.

I had heard about sensory-deprivation tanks a few years ago but wrote them off as too extreme. The point of floating in a small, pitch-black tank of saltwater is to be 100 percent in the moment and become centered with zero distractions. Recently, these tanks have become way more mainstream, popping up in hip hoods in Brooklyn and Los Angeles, with the spa-like name "flotation therapy" rather than the ominous "sensory deprivation." So I decided it was time to give one a try.

Some of them look like deep freezers filled with water; others are small

pods that close on you like a tanning bed. The one I tried was a tiny pool stretching from wall to wall.

When I arrived at Floating Lotus in Manhattan, cofounder Joel Granik first led me to his acupuncture room. "When you're floating at the beginning, your mind is going to be racing," Granik told me. "We came up with doing acupuncture before the float to sort of help people through those first minutes when you're in there—it gives you something to focus on." I hate needles. I cry whenever I get my flu shot. But I wanted the full experience.

As Granik poked into the middle of my forehead ("The third eye is a good place to focus your attention, especially when you're floating"), I clenched my fists and sweated uncontrollably. I tried to focus on my breathing and keep it together.

After acupuncture, we walked over to a room with

a changing area, a shower, and a door that opened directly into the flotation chamber. Granik gave me advice: "My first time, it took a good 10 to 15 minutes before I let go. But once you do, it's like time disappears."

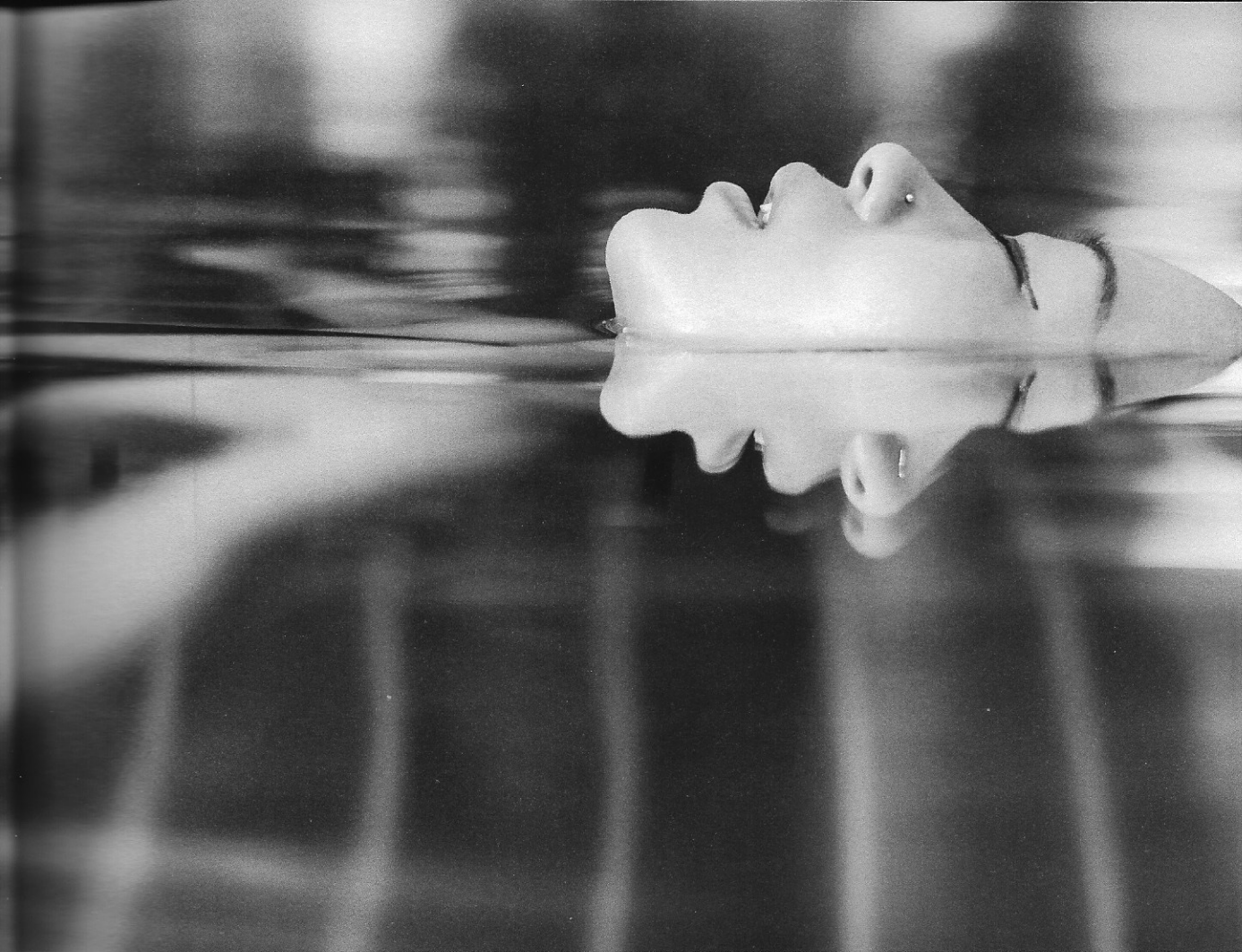
He also told me the most important thing was to not beat myself up when my thoughts strayed and I broke my meditative state. Instead, he suggested I focus on my breath and count each one up to nine, then back down to one, and then repeat. "At some point you lose track. Your mind can't really think so well when you do that, so it short-circuits all of your thinking." If you can let go of the self-criticism and get back to counting, "it's that moment where meditation happens."

Before climbing into the chamber, I popped in earplugs and "showered off the day" in the connected shower stall. Then I climbed into the pool (yes,

“
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naked), got the floating head and neck pillow in place, and turned off the lights.

Then it was just me, complete darkness, and



utter silence. At first, my body was confused. I kept closing my eyes and reopening them expecting to see light. I also couldn't decide if I should keep them open or closed. I was fidgeting, moving my arms and legs around to test how much effort it took to touch the bottom and sides of the pool. I was also concerned about making sure I faced the same direction as I floated. Clearly my brain needed *something* to worry about.

I decided to heed Granik's advice and concentrated on steady breathing and counting. After some time, I found my groove. The neck pillow

was in the perfect spot, my limbs were hanging out doing their thing, and my mind started to drift.

Because I am unable to stay still, I of course had to scratch my face just once and drip saltwater into my eye. I blindly hobbled to the front of the chamber, popped on the light, and found the spray bottle with freshwater that could relieve my pain. Other than this little blip, it was smooth floating.

After some more Zen time, I started to hear a ringing in my ears. Was I hearing things? *Is it normal to hallucinate when you meditate? Is that why people love it so much?* The

answer is no, I was not hallucinating. I was hearing my cell phone going off in the changing room. I came out of my floating bliss about 10 minutes before I should have, but judging by the growling noises my stomach was making, it was time to go home. After showering again, I headed out.

When I reached the street, I realized I was hyperaware of the sounds and lights. Going from zero stimulation to the streets of Midtown Manhattan was a little jarring, but I was still feeling totally relaxed when I got home. I didn't check my email or even pretend I was going to get more work

done. I just rode that calm wave right into bed.

The next day at work, it hit me: I meditated! For the first time ever, I was able to stop my racing thoughts while still being conscious. For more than three seconds. And I finally could understand why mindful meditation is recommended as a simple, effective stress reliever. With a few more floating sessions, maybe I'll be able to train my brain to bliss out for longer. Who knows, doing it regularly might help me finally ease into that 10-minutes-a-day habit I know I'm supposed to have. You've gotta start somewhere, right? ■