

**Ocean Swimming
Skills You Can
Practice in the Pool
for
Trainee Surf Lifesavers**



Graham Dietrich

Ocean Swimming Skills You Can Practice in the Pool for Trainee Surf Lifesavers

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Ocean Swimming Skills You Can Practice in the Pool

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Warning:

This booklet is meant as a guide only and may not suit the development stage of the reader. Surf swimming has risks and can be unpredictable. It is the readers responsibility to take all due care when practicing in the surf. The safety guide in this booklet should be followed to help to reduce the chance of any mishaps. The author does not accept any liability for any situations that the reader may experience when swimming in the surf. If the reader has any concerns, then they should seek professional and personal surf swimming training.

Introduction

Welcome to a new and innovative program to help pool swimmers quickly learn some of the skills required for safer ocean swimming.

Swimming laps in the pool will make you fitter, stronger and able to swim further. What if you can fast-track what most people learn by trial and error in the ocean by using some of those laps to practice skills that will directly benefit you when you swim in the ocean?

This is not a complete guide to ocean swimming. It does not cover aspects such as rips and surf conditions. It is for exercises you can do in the pool to help you become a more capable and confident open water swimmer.

Remember, swim to your ability, swim where safe and don't push yourself in unfamiliar environments.

2 Ways to Use This Manual

The best time to use this is as the first water session of a Bronze or SRC course.

As an individual you can do this by reading the following material and then following the Pool Practice Set at the end of this booklet.

As a workshop, the instructor follows the guide at the end of the booklet and explains the ocean swimming value of each activity before getting the participants to do it. Depending on the number of trainees this will run for 1 to 2 hours.

Rather than just a one-off session, trainees should continue to practice the activities when they swim in a pool until they are comfortable with them.



How this Practice is Valuable to You

If you are not an experienced ocean swimmer this practice will help you both mentally and physically when you swim in the ocean.

What you will learn is the best way to:

Control your breathing and get used to breathing irregularly.

See where you are going.

Tread water effortlessly.

Avoid swallowing salty water.

Swim under waves.

Work with the water, not fight against it.

On top of that, you can practice:

What you can do if you get into trouble.

Exercising some less-used muscles so you don't tire as quickly if you need to use them.

Getting used to being underwater.

Sidestroke, so you can catch your breath and see where you are going.

Safety First

If you have any medical issues, please consult your doctor before commencing any of the activities in this booklet.

No prolonged breath-holding should ever be done in water. Any short breath-holding exercises must be done with a swimming partner or in a pool with a lifeguard where you have notified the lifeguard what you will be doing. If any breathing or neck muscles start to spasm this is the last step before you blackout so you must stop the breath-holding **immediately**.

While you are learning ocean swimming always swim where lifeguards or lifesavers are present. If you are going into deeper water let them know first. Never swim alone on unpatrolled beaches.

The mind is very good at handling situations it has experienced before. When it is in a different environment and something happens that it is not familiar with, fear can set in. This can lead to confusion, panic and maybe even cause the mind to 'freeze'. With some new skills and by creating some situations you may experience in the ocean your mind is much more likely to handle the situation if something does happen.

When you do go into the ocean, start practicing with small waves for short periods of time. The ocean is very different to the pool because if you get out of breath diving under waves you will quickly notice that there is no side of the pool to grab onto.



Home Practice

Breath-Holding Practice - out of the water

When we hold our breath, our body immediately knows something isn't right. To help the body to accept breath-holding you can practice holding your breath at home. Knowing you can hold your breath for a minute gives your mind some comfort if you end up underwater.

You may only be able to hold your breath for a few seconds at first, but over time, with practice, you should be able to increase this to a minute.

A few safety tips:

- Don't breath-hold if you have any medical conditions, seek medical advice first.
- Take a deeper breath or two before starting but **don't** hyperventilate (too many **rapid deep breaths**).
- If any breathing or neck muscles start to spasm, stop the breath-holding **immediately**.
- Make sure other people are around to help if needed.

Practice: The first time you do this time how long you can comfortably hold your breath. Over the next few days, hold your breath for this time. When you feel ready, add 10 seconds to the time and use this as your base number until you are ready to increase it again. Aim to get to one minute after a few sessions.



Strength Test

When ocean swimming, with its mix of swimming out through waves and against currents, and possibly rescuing someone, a bit more strength is useful. Push-ups help to strengthen your upper body, core and upper legs.

Men and Women 40 and under should aim for at least 20 push-ups and people over 40 should aim for at least 15.

Why do we get into Trouble?

Many have the misbelief that because they are an okay swimmer in a pool, they be okay in open water, even if they don't have the experience.

A nice open water swim can quickly change to fear and panic by:

- A feeling of helplessness and loss of control of the situation. Eg caught in a rip or caught in a big swell
- Physical exhaustion:
 - Swimming too far and the shore is still far away
 - Lactic acid build-up
 - Cold water muscle fatigue
- Adrenaline and exhaustion trying to rescue someone
- Medical issues from cramps to heart attack
- A fear of getting hurt or worse by big waves near the shore
- Creatures that bite and sting in the ocean
- Difficulty in breathing:
 - In choppy water
 - Swallowing water and coughing
 - Having to dive under multiple waves
- An event that activates a past trauma
- Fear of being washed onto rocks
- Being hit by watercraft
- Cold water shock that takes the breath away
- Fear of deep dark water

These can create a fear for your life.

Panic - Fight or Flight

Panic and exhaustion are the two things that drown you. The water is the environment, but your state of mind is what you need to address.

When a person panics in the surf the nervous system kicks in the fight or flight mode and floods the body with adrenaline. The body increases its physical effort to save itself and the heart rate and oxygen consumption dramatically increase. Fatigue sets in as lactic acid floods the body and causes muscle shutdown. The lack of oxygen decreases brain function and there is a loss of good decision-making. The intense effort as muscles are failing, along with low oxygen leads to total exhaustion.

It is possible to drown in sixty seconds if you panic.

(Courtesy: When Water Kills: Rip-Current Heroes documentary)

How to Create the Gap between Trouble and Panic

To help avoid fight, flight or freeze when you are in the ocean:

- ⇒ Acknowledge you are worried or are heading towards fight, flight or freeze mode. This is an important step.
- ⇒ **STOP** swimming and use the Float to Survive - back float scull position. This is essential to avoid exhaustion.
- ⇒ Take a couple of deep breaths.
- ⇒ Take time to calm down and reassess. What is your next step?
- ⇒ Signal for help by waving your arm above your head.
- ⇒ Repeat to yourself, “I can float, I am okay”.

It is not enough to read this once; you need to do some form of practice so when it is needed it is the first thing you think of, rather than your mind going blank and panic taking over.

Simulation Practice- avoiding fight, flight and freezing

Even when we are sensible and planning on swimming safely, trouble sometimes finds us. If this happens the main thing that will help is the preparation we have done in advance.

When the mind faces a problem, the first thing it does is review all the memories to see what the solution was the last time. If it is a new experience, it looks for an old experience that might be similar. If it finds neither it may not know what to do so fear is generated and the mind may freeze or panic. To help avoid this we can imagine / simulate situations and solutions so if a problem does arise the mind has something to work with.

Practice – In the pool close your eyes and imagine situations in the ocean that would generate fear. Then think through solutions. By solving the problems it gives the mind some memories it can access if a situation arises.

Scenario 1

You are playing in the surf, bodysurfing waves from a sandbank. Suddenly your feet are no longer touching the ground and you are moving swiftly out to sea.

Your first response is to start swimming hard to get back to the safety of the beach. Very quickly you are running out of breath and your arms and legs are getting heavy. You hold your breath just in time as a small wave rolls over your head. Now you are getting very worried.

You remember the get-out-of-trouble principles.

- Acknowledge you are worried.
- **STOP** swimming and use the back float scull position.
- Take a couple of deep breaths.
- Take time to calm down and reassess. What is your next step?
- Repeat to yourself, “Relax, I am okay”.

Visualise the scenario to the point where you are safely back on the beach.

Scenario 2

You saw a swimmer struggling in deep water and swam out to help them. Without a floatation device, you are getting very tired trying to get them back to shore and you still have to get through the breaking waves. What do you do?

Real Scenario 3

You are having a training swim with 10 other trainee lifesavers. The conditions are rough with some quite strong waves coming through from time to time. The surf rescue boat is doing water safety for the swim.

As you near the swim turning buoy a set of larger waves comes through and you decide to swim further out to sea to help get over them. Once they pass you find yourself alone in the deep water as the rest of the swimmers managed to get around the buoy and head in.

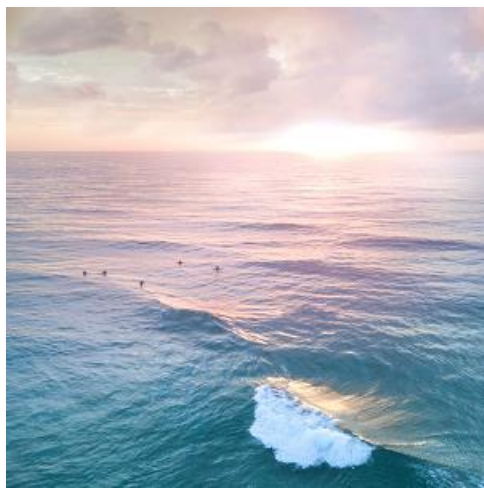
As you start to head in you notice that you are in a current and being swept along the beach. The problem is that the beach is a bay and because of the curve of the bay you are getting further and further from shore. As your morale drops, your legs get heavy and start feeling very tired. You look for the rescue boat and see that they thought the swimmers were all safe and are now a long way away.

You remember the get-out-of-trouble principles.

- Acknowledge you are worried.
- **STOP** swimming and use the back float scull position.
- Take a couple of deep breaths.
- Take time to calm down and reassess. What is your next step?
- Repeat to yourself, "Relax, I am okay".

You have options. 1) Rest, and then if ready, attempt to swim to shore. 2) Head out to sea to the calmer water and wait for the other trainees to realise you are not in and for them to send help. 3) Swim to the buoy and hang on knowing you are safe and the rescue boat will pick it up. Depending on the situation and how you feel there will be other options.

Visualise the scenario to the point where you are safely back on the beach.



Breathing & Sighting

Swimming is the most efficient when you have continuous forward motion. If you stop swimming to have a look around, your legs will sink and you will have to start moving your body again from a stationary position, which is slower and more tiring.

Pool breathing is all about taking quick breaths. Ocean breathing is about not taking in a mouthful of seawater.

The type of breathing you need to do depends on the ocean conditions and where you are in the ocean. This is why you need a range of breathing techniques. You need to be comfortable breathing looking forward, behind you, and on both sides. Each time checking it is clear to breathe in.

A few tips:

- When you turn to breathe, don't expect it to be clear like in the pool. Keep breathing out until you can see that it is clear to take an inbreath.
- Sometimes you need to roll a little more and take a little longer to get a proper breath in.
- When your face is in the water you should be gently blowing out some air. This helps make the breath faster.

Swimming along the beach

You need to be able to breathe comfortably on both your left and right sides.

As you go to breathe have a quick glance before you breathe in to make sure you are not about to be hit by a face full of water. You may think you can just breathe away from the breaking water but if you do this every time, you may be hit by a wave you didn't see coming. The trick is to be able to breathe on both sides and to look before breathing in.

A second reason to be able to breathe on both sides is that if the sun is low, you can avoid looking into it.

Practice – Swim one lap breathing to the left side and then the next lap breathing to the right side, repeat.

Swim some laps glancing that it is clear before you breathe in.

Heading out into the ocean

You need to be looking forward to see the incoming waves so you can tie your breath in with looking forward and then turning your head to breathe. Your swimming is also disrupted because you may need to dive under a wave which means holding your breath and a bigger breath may be required when you surface.

If you are going to have to dive under waves then breathe on every second stroke. This allows you to see what waves are coming and should allow you to have plenty of oxygen if you need to quickly dive under a few waves.

Practice – Swim a few strokes then duck-dive to the bottom, surface and swim a few more strokes. Repeat.

Heading to the Beach

With the waves coming up behind you when you take a breath you need to be looking behind you (over your shoulder) rather than out to the side.

Even when you can stand keep checking the waves coming up behind you to avoid getting slammed from behind.

Practice – Instead of looking out to the side when you breathe look back over your shoulder.

Sighting Practice Breathing

In the ocean, you need to keep looking for landmarks to keep your bearings. Incorporating a breath when you are looking forward helps keep your momentum, uses less energy than stopping and looking and keeps your breathing pattern regular.

Practice – Incorporate your looking with the breath. Without stopping your stroke raise your head and look forward, now turn your face to the side and take a breath before returning your face into the water. Do not breathe in while you are looking forward as there is too big an opportunity for water to enter your mouth.

Salt Water in the Eyes

In the pool with goggles on you keep your eyes open all the time. When swimming in the ocean without goggles your eyes will quickly get sore if you keep your eyes open the whole time. By closing your eyes when your face is in the water and opening them as you turn to breathe you will find it much easier on the eyes.

If you are diving under waves then keep your eyes open so you can see the bottom and the wave rolling over you.

Practice – Closing your eyes when your face is in the water.

Direction Changes

Pool swimming is mostly up a lane and back. Ocean swimming involves a lot more direction changes. It is quite a different feeling when you don't have a wall to push off.

Practice – In a pool with no lane ropes, swim a few strokes and then change direction 90 degrees. Swim a few more strokes then change direction again. Repeat.

Head-Up Freestyle

Swimming with your head out of the water the whole time is also called the Tarzan stroke. Whereas you can see everything and breathe freely it is a very inefficient and tiring stroke. This is because when your head is up high, your legs are down low and you are dragging your body through the water. Competitive swimmers use this stroke for training purposes because it is much harder.

Practice – Swim a couple of laps of Head-Up Freestyle. This will help your fitness and you will experience how this is much more tiring.



Being Underwater

Being underwater is something you may do in the pool in a controlled manner on turns but when swimming in the ocean it is to avoid a wave or you are getting dumped. Both can be practiced in the pool.

The practice for a possible dumping is underwater play where you do somersaults and various twists and turns underwater then swim a couple of strokes underwater. Only stay under for as long as you feel comfortable, when you feel the need to take a breath, stop the exercise. This practice is to get the mind and body used to being upside down and twisted around so it is not a shock when it happens in the ocean.

The swimming underwater practice will teach you that moving in a relaxed manner is more effective than panicky, tense, flailing arms and legs swimming that use up much more oxygen and cause you to tire quickly.

Do **not** do prolonged breath-holding under water.

Practice – Underwater play. Somersault, twist, turn and swim a couple of strokes.



Getting Out Through the Waves

Practice with small waves

Go over or under waves and avoid having them smack into you.

In shallow water don't dive under waves, glide through them. There have been too many head and neck injuries from people trying to dive under waves in shallow water. If you can't go over the wave then glide through the wave in a streamline position with your body parallel to the ocean floor. In deeper water where you are swimming, you can duck dive under the waves and dig your hands into the sand at the bottom if required. Push off the bottom, not straight up but forward. With bigger waves the more streamline you are the less likely that the wave will push you back.

The bigger the wave, the thicker or wider it is. If you come up too soon, you will be dragged backwards by the pull of the wave. You can often see the main body of the wave pass over you, so you know when to surface.

When surfacing have one arm out in front and the other behind so you can start the stroke as soon as you break the surface.

Breathe on every second stroke so you can see the waves and have plenty of oxygen in your lungs.

Timing is everything. Don't wait until the last minute to dive under a wave. Give yourself plenty of time to get near the bottom so the wave passes over you rather than running into you.

If you get pummelled by a wave. Don't resist, try to relax, protect your head and neck and know you will be okay.

Practice – Duck under water and push off the end of the pool and see how far you can go with a streamline body position. Then try with your arms and legs sticking out so you are not streamlined.

Swim a few laps duck diving and touching the bottom of the pool every few strokes.

Returning to Shore

If you are in deeper water heading to shore and an unbroken swell is moving past you, kick a little harder and/or pull a little stronger and the swell will give you an extra push towards the beach.

Bodysurf the waves if you feel comfortable doing so. Always have a least one arm out in front of you so if you get dumped your arm/s will hit the bottom first and possibly save your head and neck from injury.

If you have enough water in front of you and a wave is too big and it is picking you up, you can do a somersault and it can put you behind the wave, or at least in a better position. Practice on small waves in water that is deep enough to safely somersault in (at least chest deep)

Sometimes you have to swim back out and dive under an incoming wave.

Always watch the incoming waves. They will sneak up on you.

Practice – Swim a few strokes and then do a somersault, surface and keep swimming. Repeat.



Float to Survive – the Back Float Scull Position

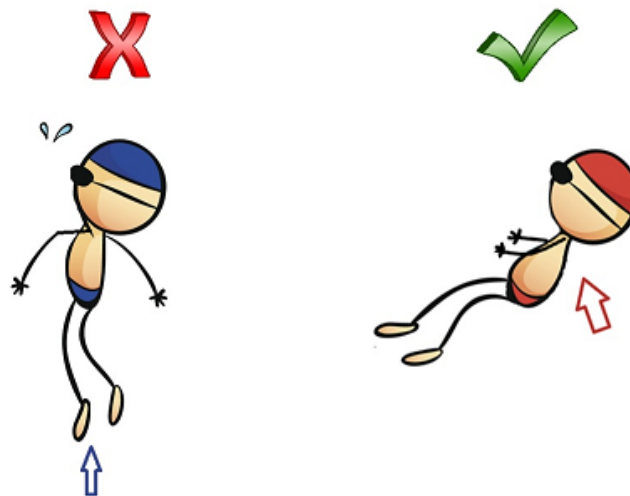
If you need to stop for a rest then rather than treading water in a vertical position do it in a back sculling type position. The reason for this is that vertical treading water is the most tiring position. This is because buoyancy is affected by how much body surface it has to push up on.

If you feel you are in trouble in any water situation stop swimming, adopt this position and plan your next course of action.

Relax, the more you relax the easier it is to float. Take a couple of deep breaths to relax and to fill your lungs with air to help you float.

Gently move your arms and hands back and forth in a circular motion under the water. A gentle kick can also help keep your legs up.

The secret is moving the arms and legs at a steady pace, not a fast frantic one. The more frantic, the more it disturbs the water, the harder it is to stay above water and the more tired you get.



Ideally, practice this every time you swim until it feels natural.

Practice – Back Float Scull Position.

- 1) Swim a couple of laps in this position.
- 2) Swim one or two laps freestyle as hard and fast as you can and then immediately swim one lap in the back float scull position as you catch your breath.
- 3) Try waving for help with one arm.

The Lost Skill of Sidestroke Swimming

This is a very useful stroke as you can swim in a relaxed manner, get plenty of oxygen and you can see everything that is going on.

To swim this style:

- Start off in a side float with one arm extended past your head.
- Keep your face out of the water.
- Your aim is to be streamline on your side



- Your extended arm does a small stroke (not moving past your shoulder) while your other arm and legs are getting ready for the next stroke and kick.
- The non-extended arm moves forward near your chest and then does a strong stroke from front to back, the kick occurs at the same time. Glide forward for a second or two then repeat.



- As you are on your side your kicking will be more of a scissor action. Bending your knees, splay your legs a bit wider than a normal kick and the propulsion of the kick comes as you straighten your legs and they come together. Like in freestyle kicking your toes should be pointed towards the end of the pool as the legs come together. The non-extended arm does the stroke as the legs come together.



- With the propulsions from your legs and the arm stroke you will be able to glide a short distance before kicking and stroking again.
- Both arms stay in the water the whole time. The front arm will help keep your head out of the water.



Sidestroke training video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WN0eGhrfEs0>

Interesting Information

You need to be able to swim 400 metres without stopping to be considered a competent swimmer in Australia.

Normally in salt water you float more easily because the water is denser. If you are in the white water where it is churned and has lots of bubbles the water is not as dense and it feels harder to swim.

Breaststroke (for underwater swimming / sighting), sidestroke and backstroke (for sighting / relaxing) can come in handy. If your muscles aren't trained for these strokes then you will tire easily if you have to use them.

If you are swimming against a current you need to be as streamline as possible on the surface of the water. This gives the current the smallest amount of your body to push against.

Optical illusions. What looks like a small wave from the shore grows in size as you swim to it. Biggish-looking waves can become huge when you are face-to-face with them. When you are in deep water, everything looks twice as far away as it is.

Soft and hard waves. The power behind each wave makes a large difference to how you tackle the waves both heading out to sea and returning to the beach. Soft waves don't have much energy behind them and are relatively safe and quite easy to manage. The trouble with hard or strong waves is that it is likely most of the waves will be strong and you find yourself being knocked around by each one. Once you decide the waves are strong, treat each one with respect and increase your level of focus on how to handle each one.

If you need to put in a bit more effort when you are tired, it is better to swim harder with your arms than to kick harder as kicking uses a lot more energy.

Leave your troubles on the beach. If your mind is active trying to solve problems, take a few deep breaths and then focus on the ocean. The mind only likes to focus on one thing at a time and the best thing to focus on is what is happening in the surf.



Videos

For some good tips visit:

<https://oceanfit.com.au/category/technique/>

How To Swim Through Big Waves

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZt3W-XPSB8>

Surf Swimmers Diving under Waves

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oT0An0H5LnQ&t=70s>

How to be Wave Safe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBpnuvzPN9g>

How To Survive the Wave Impact Zone!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6PqW8QnE9c>

Sidestroke training video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WN0eGhrfEs0>

Back float scull training video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3TUZRQ2WEk>

When Water Kills: Rip-Current Heroes (Rescue & Survival Documentary)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rV0u4cdm8c8>

Workshop Leader Notes

Safety

Ask if anyone has any medical conditions you should be aware of.

Let them know not to push their breath-holding. Any real discomfort, spasms of the neck or breathing muscles they must stop immediately.

This is a skill learning session, not a physical test so they don't need to push themselves physically.

General Notes

After giving the participants a summary of the workshop, start the workshop by talking about the importance of being able to control their breathing, which in the ocean is very often irregular. In the ocean, running out of air is one of the most common causes of panic. Follow this with the one-minute timed breath-holding exercise (give them the time in 15 second increments).

The 400-metre swim can be timed and the swimmers all stopped at 9 minutes so anyone who does not make the 400-metre mark knows what work they need to do to pass. This will also tire a few which is good as practicing the ocean skills are even more valuable when you get tired.

Before starting each drill explain to the swimmers the value of the drill for ocean swimming.

Workshops should be in warm water. If the pool water is too cold people find it hard to concentrate and may suffer body cooling.

Remind participants that the value in learning these skills is so that they can practice them a few times in the pool as well as when they get in the ocean.

They should only practice these skills in the presence of other people and if at a pool with a lifeguard, let them know what they are doing.



Ocean Swimming Skills You Can Practice in the Pool

Workshop Practice Set



On land - time breath holding ability for one minute.

Swim 400 metres without stopping. (competent pool swimmer level)

Back Float Sculling Skills / Floating when out of breath

Breathing / Sighting practice. Freestyle swimming with –

Breathing on both sides. Up on the right and back on the left (2 laps)

Breathing out until you can see it is clear to take a breath (2 laps)

Forward Sighting practice – Look forward then side breath (2 laps)

Back viewing – Look back over your shoulder on the breath (2 laps)

Dolphin Dives – Push off the bottom, shallow dive, repeat (2 laps)

Swim normally for 4 strokes, duck dive to the bottom, push off forward from the bottom, surface, repeat. (2 laps)

Breathe on 3 then 5 then 7 strokes, repeat. (2 laps)

Practice closing your eyes when your face is in the water (2 laps)

Push off wall, swim underwater for 3 breaststrokes then surface, take a breath, and then dive under for 3 more strokes, repeat (2 laps)

Head-up freestyle (2 laps)

Simulation Practice – In trouble - avoiding fight, flight and freeze mode

Underwater swimming – relaxed, somersaults and various twists and turns – take a breath as required – 1 minute.

Held Underwater Simulation – 3 times

Streamline Practice – streamline underwater push off the end of the pool

Underwater swimming – Try fast and frantic then slower, longer, stronger and smoother. Just a few strokes each time.

Side-stroke swimming with your face out of the water

Warm down laps

www.swimbettertoday.com

Ocean Swimming Skills You Can Practice in the Pool

Junior Workshop Practice Set



On land - time breath holding ability for one minute.

Swim 200 metres without stopping. (competent swimmer level)

Out of Breath / Back Float Sculling Skills / Floating / Practice waving

Breathing / Sighting practice. Freestyle swimming with –

Breathing on both sides. Up on the right and back on the left (2 laps)

Breathing out until you can see it is clear to take a breath (2 laps)

Forward Sighting practice – Look forward then side breath (2 laps)

Back viewing – Look back over your shoulder on the breath (2 laps)

Swim normally for 4 strokes, duck dive to the bottom, push off forward from the bottom, surface, repeat. (2 laps)

Breathe on 2 then 3 then 4 then 5 strokes, repeat. (2 laps)

Practice closing your eyes when your face is in the water (2 laps)

At the start and on each turn swim underwater for 3 or 4 breaststrokes then surface and keep swimming normally (4 laps)

Head-up freestyle (2 laps)

Simulation Practice – In trouble - avoiding fight, flight and freeze mode

Underwater swimming – relaxed, somersaults and various twists and turns – take a breath as required – 1 minute.

Streamline Practice – streamline underwater push off the end of the pool

Underwater swimming – Try fast and frantic then slower, stronger and smoother. Just a few strokes each time.

Side-stroke swimming with your face out of the water

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