

Life, like our swimming, is largely a series of habits.

The way we put on our suit. How many arm swings we do before we jump in. The attitudes and thoughts we have when good and bad things happen.

The sneaky thing about habits is that once they are engrained, they require very little thought.

Do you have to stop to think about how to walk? Or how to brush your teeth? Or how to swim freestyle? This “automation” is both great and lame, because our habits don’t differentiate between the good and bad.

Once you make it a habit to bounce back like a boss after a bad race, you barely need to think about doing it. Similarly, when you hardwire the habit of lifting your head into the finish over and over again in practice, you’re almost guaranteed to do it in competition.

With that in mind, here are 7 things smart swimmers need to stop doing:

**1. Stop being so hard on yourself.** Negativity breeds negativity, and this goes especially for how we talk to ourselves. If you are constantly pounding yourself with negative criticism (“*See? Knew I couldn’t do it!*”) and wallowing in past mistakes and failures you take your eyes off the road ahead. When things don’t go according to plan, refuse to sink into an endless cycle of dwelling, and instead look for cause, a lesson, and move onwards and upwards.

**2. Avoiding the work that needs to be done.** The appeal of shortcuts and miracle supplements and products is that it relinquishes any need for a full-bore commitment. We can have the fruits of success and put in the bare minimum. If only. We can’t have success without the hard work that comes with it, so stop looking around for shortcuts and instead resolve to work intelligently and with unmatched vigor.

**3. Staying in your comfort bubble.** Change is frightening. It’s weird, new, foreign and as we stand on the precipice of growth and change we feel the tug back of familiarity and comfort. “*It’s safe back here,*” your mind will whisper. As a result we stay where we are, even when the place we are in isn’t beneficial or positive. Our bad habits stick around for as long as they do not necessarily because they give us pleasure or make us feel good, but because they are familiar, comfortable.

**4. Rolling with a negative crowd.** They may not be overtly negative, but the effects they have on you are. Successful swimmers hang with those that will further their process, those that are invested in their success, and who support their growth and aspirations. Life is too short to be spent with naysayers who promise to be out for your best interests but only serve to knee-cap your self-belief.

**5. Avoiding accepting full responsibility for your swimming.** We didn't crush our best times at the championship meet over the summer because the lane lines were too skinny. Coach's taper didn't work as well as it should have. The competition has a better team to train with, better facilities, blah blah blah. At the end of the day, it is *your* swimming. Period.

**6. Seeking to only avoid negative outcomes.** When we focus our energy and effort into avoiding something — finishing DFL, getting DQ'd — we pry our effort away from the positive things, the stuff that we want to achieve. You should always be setting goals that are positive, that seek to help you grow and achieve.

**7. Stop allowing setbacks to derail you.** Every successful swimmer on the planet has had their own share of failure. These setbacks (and there were many of them), aren't what we see when they cruise to gold or a new world record. The end product may be shiny, but there were some ugly hiccups and U-turns in the course of its creation. Taking lumps in the process of chasing your goals is part of the process, so refuse to allow temporary setbacks to make for permanent failures.

### **Why Self-Confidence Matters**

Seems obvious, but it is worth quickly going over the advantages that present themselves when we are feeling like a boss—

- You are more likely to chase opportunities that present themselves.
- Gives you greater degrees of certainty when decisions need to be made. Limits second guessing.
- Confidence keeps you moving forward, always looking to increase momentum.
- Swimmers with high levels of confidence chase down their own goals, not those of others, or the dreams that others dictate upon them.
- Self-confidence gives you the courage and enthusiasm to take risks and chase the outer reaches of your limits.

### **Symptoms of Low Self-Confidence**

- Constant need for outside approval or recognition.
- Resentment and jealousy towards competitors and teammates.
- Acute fear of failure, of coming up short.
- Overly critical of personal image.
- Over-reliance on how others perceive you.
- Difficulty in letting go of mistakes and failures.
- Resistant to trying new things.

How do we start turning these thoughts and feelings around so that we can get moving in the right direction again? Just like any other skill, self-confidence is something you can work on, hone, and eventually wield when you need it most.

And here we go:

### **1. Act positive.**

Thinking positive is good stuff, and has been shown to provide a heap of health benefits including lower rates of depression, increased well-being and even increased life span (I'll take two, please!).

Take this a step further and employ positive action. The steps don't have to be massive or life-changing; quite often it is the small actions, the little steps that get the ball rolling, until eventually you've got so much momentum that the big stuff starts to come down with little effort or thought.

When chasing self-confidence, remember that you will only find it at the end of goals that are important to you, and not necessarily those you have to or should do.

### **2. Get to the root of what makes you bursting with confidence.**

Think back to the last time you experienced an episode of gut-busting self-confidence. When you felt in control, your emotions in check, and your swimming was steady and effortless.

If it was a moment where you had a great race, think back to the circumstances that led to that amazing race and focus on emulating those, and not necessarily the race itself. When you identify the things that lead you to feeling confident in yourself it becomes possible to replicate the scenarios in order to get that feeling on demand.

### **3. Stretch yourself.**

The most comfortable place in the world to be is your comfort zone. Within our little sphere of safety we clutch on to our familiar habits and attitudes, even if they are detrimental to our long term success.

Doubt and insecurity are generally what keep us in there, and in order to bust out and gain traction on our goals we have to be willing to stretch our boundaries and seek out challenges.

Nothing grows legitimate confidence and destroys self-imposed limitations faster than doing something you've never done before. The resulting confidence will grow on itself, spurring you on to chase even more challenging limits.

### **4. Stop caring so much about what others think.**

How many times could you have stepped up in practice or a workout but you were too timid or scared? Odds are good the reason you stayed in the shadows has nothing to do with ability, and more about harboring a concern of what others might think of you.

In an age where we are constantly checking our smart phones to see if anyone has texted us, liked our Facebook status update, or retweeted our gem of a comment, it's a refreshing and freeing moment when we stop seeking validation from others.

Putting yourself first, and above the expectations you believe others to have of you, is not selfish or brash. It's empowering, not only for yourself but also the people that surround you. Don't waste a moment chasing someone else's dreams; make your goals completely and uniquely yours and motivation and resulting confidence will pour forth.

Once you stop putting too much stock in what others say about you, or what others think, you liberate yourself to chase the things you truly love.

### **5. Failure will not destroy you.**

Being wrong isn't a game-ender, and neither is failing. No matter what your overactive imagination or others will say, the sky will not fall down if you stumble.

Failure becomes an invaluable learning tool once we decide to use it as such. In the immediate after-math of a stumble, take a breath, and then look around and figure out where the lesson is. (There is *always* a lesson. You just have to open yourself to looking for it.) Not only will tripping up occasionally make you mentally stronger, you're gaining valuable experience that couldn't otherwise be appreciated, while also getting one step closer to your goals.

Once the sting and timidity of stumbling is removed, and you learn to value them for the lesson and direction they provide, you can charge forth after your swimming goals with confidence and purpose.

### **6. Get to know yourself.**

How much do you know about your main competitors? In the age of social media and instant results probably a fair bit. But how much can you say that you truly know about yourself? What motivates you? Where you keep falling short?

When you have a clear idea of who you are, what you want, and what you are capable of, a lot of the extraneous stuff gets filtered out, leaving you centered, focused and confident.

### **7. Don't wait.**

Starting is always the hardest part. The first few steps are always going to be challenging, because to do nothing, to sit on your hands and not act is the path of least resistance. It is also the route that limits your ability to develop a deep and meaningful sense of self-confidence.

At the end of the day you should not be waiting on an outcome or result to give you confidence. Doing so will leave you feeling shortchanged and be anti-climactic. Instead, find confidence in yourself and your abilities within the process, by acting with immediacy and consistency