

The Third Act: Chill

Author Ellen Waterston's latest column on ageism and ageing

On a recent hot (triple digit) summer evening at Bend's Midtown Yacht Club, my friend and I were thankful for the icy-cold mist spritzed from tiny nozzles suspended above our heads. The only two at a large wooden spool table, we welcomed a middle-aged man and his two teenagers who asked if they could join us. It's one of the unique qualities of al fresco food cart courts—strangers spontaneously sharing a common table for a meal and conversation.

While his kids ran off to place dinner orders, we learned that this young (to us) man had saved enough money to leave a high-powered, non-stop, stress-inducing, sedentary job in California and move with his family to Bend. Gaining that financial freedom took its toll. He said he arrived in Central Oregon a year ago spent, out of shape, allergy-afflicted, depressed. Looking at the fit, energized man seated across from us we had to ask...what was his secret? His answer? Sitting for prolonged periods of time submerged in cold lakes and rivers, breathing through a snorkel. You got that right. His children, who had returned with plates of food, enthusiastically nodded their affirmation, followed by a go-figure shrug.

He explained that after settling in Bend and considering next steps, he stumbled across the website of Wim Hof, a Dutch extreme athlete whose systematic exposure to cold has "enabled him to control his breathing, heartrate and blood circulation." Our inadvertent dinner guest was intrigued by these claims, started following the teachings of this proponent of icy. He did it right, going slowly, paying attention to the dos and don'ts. He told us that, no question, his brain acuity, mood, allergies and metabolism had improved since going cold and, for his next career, he's contemplating opening a Wim Hof branch in Bend.

In recent years cold water therapy has become popular across all age groups. The number of meet-up groups at Mental Health Swims, a British nonprofit, has grown to 80 since 2019. In New England, daily dunks in the winter are a thing. From the United States to the Netherlands, the popularity of New Year's Day Polar Bear Plunges has grown to the tens of thousands including Scotland's "Loony Dook" at which thousands brave the freezing water. Participants parade through South Queensferry acting like "loonies" preceding the "dook." It's claimed a good percentage of the loonies are still inebriated from New Year's Eve celebrations and likely lost a bet.

Similar to using cold water to cure what ails is whole body cryotherapy which involves standing in a sealed container while extremely cold air is circulated around the body. Like the Wim Hof Method, the procedure claims relief from arthritis, anxiety, depression and improved memory function. Unlike the Wim Hof Method, cryotherapy requires an appointment and there is a charge for each session. Hof takes a more DIY approach: start with a warm shower, gradually adjust the temperature colder and colder until you can tolerate the frigid torrent for at least two minutes.

Just mention to anyone 60 and older ways to improve brain and memory function, never mind get rid of the aches and blues, and you have their/my attention. It's sobering to realize the average age of late-onset Alzheimer's is 60. Loss of hearing, living alone, all of which often accompany ageing, contribute to dementia. We're already culturally primed for the latest and greatest, the quick fix, the one and done. Add to that the sense of urgency oldsters feel to find out what will actually make sliding into home base as enjoyable as possible, and it's no wonder the greatest generations are vulnerable to the promises of Prevagen or willing to don a swimsuit when it's below freezing.

Despite the lack of scientific evidence on cold water therapies, in my anecdotal experience the effects of a cold shower or plunge reinforce the claims. And it's a lot more fun than popping AlphaBrain or Neuriva. If staying power is any indication of irrefutable benefits, cold water has been used to improve health for centuries starting with Hippocrates in Ancient Greece. Rolling in the snow after a sauna is a Scandinavian-perfected oldie but goodie. How about when randy young men were dispatched to take a cold shower to cool their, well, jets? Now men and women alike are headed for the frosty to keep synapses and muscles firing.

One of my favorite hikes in the Cascades is the 13-mile Green Lakes Loop. The climb parallels Soda Creek until catching the Broken Top trail to the lakes, just in time for a picnic and an icy dip before descending via the popular Green Lakes Trail back down to the parking lot. My sore feet and tired muscles are always instantly rejuvenated by the cold swim. Everything old feels new again, including me.