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The Activating Emotional Journey through Embodiment

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**Portfolio Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Professional
Doctorate in Counselling Psychology (DPsych)**

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Preface

Section A: Doctoral research

This section presents the findings of an original piece of empirical research that explored the experiences of individuals who engage in cold-water swimming in nature and who self-identify as living with anxiety and low mood. My interest in this topic stems from both personal and professional engagement with cold-water swimming as a means of supporting mental health. As a psychologist, I am mindful of my ethical responsibility to prioritise my own mental wellbeing and engage in self-care practices. Cold-water swimming in natural environments became one such practice for me, which prompted a deeper curiosity about how others with similar mental health challenges experience this activity. With a strong interest in exploring alternative and holistic approaches to mental health care, I sought to understand how cold-water swimming in nature is experienced by those with anxiety and low mood. I value the exploration of patient-centred approaches and recognise the therapeutic potential of nature-based interventions for mental health. With guidance from my supervisors and tutors, I designed a qualitative study aimed at investigating the lived experiences of individuals who cold-water swim in natural environments and who identify as experiencing anxiety, low mood, or both. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with adult participants, and the data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). From this, three superordinate themes emerged: *The Activating Emotional Journey*, *Finding Myself in the Water*, and *A Psychological Anchorage*. These themes reflected how cold-water swimming in nature provided participants with a rich, emotionally resonant experience offering moments of emotional release, identity formation, and psychological stability during difficult times. By exploring these lived experiences in depth, this research aims to contribute to the field of Counselling Psychology by shedding light on the experience and potential therapeutic aspect of cold-water swimming for individuals with anxiety and low mood.

All three pieces of work gave an overarching theme of an activating emotional journey achieved through embodiment in a therapeutic intervention. Highlighting the importance of incorporating the body in therapeutic work.

Abstract

The impact of mental health distress on the lives of people, interpersonal relationships and the worldwide systems is facing an epidemic. As mental health services are over stretched and the mental health crisis continues to grow, innovative and accessible solutions are needed to meet the needs of those struggling with psychological difficulties. Anxiety and depressive disorders have been found to be the most common mental health difficulty people are struggling with worldwide. Cold water swimming in nature represents swimming outdoors in natural waters mainly occurring during the winter or in the colder or polar places. Blue spaces are increasingly recognised for their therapeutic potential. This study investigates the experience of cold-water swimming in nature for those that self-identify as having anxiety, low mood or both. Eight participants aged between 27 – 71 were recruited through a purposive and snowball sampling. In-depth semi structured interviews were conducted. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, three main themes emerged: (1) the activating emotional journey; (2) finding myself in the water and (3) psychological anchorage. The findings revealed that participants were able to have an emotional experience process unresolved trauma and grief. They prescribed deep meaning making into cold water swimming considering difficult times in their lives and for many a newfound identity was born. Finally, it provided them with stability in life which helped them manage their mental health difficulties. Through an in-depth exploration of these themes, the work aims to add to the field of Counselling Psychology by learning about the therapeutic elements of cold-water swimming in nature for those who experience anxiety and low mood. Overall, this research highlights the importance of embodiment in therapeutic practices, thus enhances the use of somatic interventions for psychological difficulties and the value of ecotherapy.

Chapter 1. Introduction and Literature review

Introduction

**“For whatever we lose (like a you or a me), it’s always ourselves we find in the sea”
(Cummings, 1983).**

The aim of this chapter is to explore existing literature on cold-water swimming in natural settings for individuals experiencing mental health difficulties. It will begin by outlining key components of both cold-water swimming and mental health, before examining the interconnection between the two. Although cold-water swimming has a long historical presence, it has attracted growing interest in recent years. The literature on cold-water swimming in Western contexts dates back approximately two millennia, with ancient Greeks believing that cold-water immersion could have therapeutic effects (Panayotatou, 1919). To date, most of the research has prioritised physical health outcomes, with comparatively little attention paid to qualitative explorations of individuals lived experiences. This research seeks to better understand the subjective, lived experiences of individuals who engage in cold-water swimming in nature and self-identify as experiencing anxiety, low mood, or both. Specifically, it focuses on the experiences of eight women who engage in this practice, exploring how they perceive its impact on their mental health and overall lives. For many, cold-water swimming may represent a unique form of self-care and a novel way to manage anxiety and low mood.

Despite growing interest, existing phenomenological research on this topic is scarce. Most existing studies are case-based or take the form of personal accounts (Oliver, 2021; Van Tulleken et al., 2018; Boocock, 2025). This highlights a significant gap in the literature, particularly given the rising popularity of cold-water swimming in recent years. However, it is important to address the cultural discourses that provide the context for the current research. Western cultural understandings of nature as restorative can be traced to the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which emerged in response to industrialisation and the increasing separation of everyday life from the natural world (Bilgnaut & Aronson, 2020). Industrialisation impacted the pace of everyday life and changed how time was experienced and valued; increased demands for productivity and a lack of leisure contributed to a growing detachment from nature (Szreter, 2004). Romantic writers portrayed nature as a place where people could feel more like themselves—a space for reflection and meaning-making—which was particularly significant given that urban and

industrial work was often experienced as emotionally draining (Garrard, 2004). Nature was understood as a space where people could reconnect with themselves and slow the fast pace of everyday life (Sibthorpe & Brymer, 2020). From a phenomenological perspective, this marked a shift in how nature was lived and felt as a relational space that shaped how people felt, thought, and experienced the world, rather than merely as an external environment (Schroeder, 2021).

In Victorian times, activities such as trips to the ocean and bathing in cold seawater were not solely concerned with health (Day & Roberts, 2021). Instead, they reflected a cultural belief that the body could be strengthened and renewed through direct engagement with nature and its elements, such as air and water (Agnew, 2019). Cold-water bathing was reported to make individuals feel more awake, energetic, and resilient. These experiences disrupted everyday routines and encouraged greater bodily awareness and a deeper sense of connection with the surrounding world.

These historically rooted ways of relating to nature continue to influence how people understand and experience cold-water swimming in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Roger Deakin's *Waterlog* portrays swimming not as a health intervention, but as an existential practice grounded in immersion, belonging, and continuity with both landscape and self (Deakin, 1999). Moreover, recent documentaries, including *The Ponds* (2018), highlight how swimmers at Hampstead Ponds describe finding peace, connection, and a sense of grounding as key motivations for engaging in cold-water swimming (McLennan & Smith, 2018). In addition, the work of Alice Roberts (2021) highlights open-water swimming as a purposeful response to experiences of disconnection, uncertainty, and the impacts of lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, these cultural narratives form part of the interpretative context within which participants in the present study make sense of their experiences. Taking this wider existential and cultural context into account allows the current research to situate individual accounts of mental health within longer-standing practices of seeking grounding, meaning, and embodied presence through interactions with cold-water swimming and nature (Foley, 2017).

Historically, cold water immersion practices were more commonly found in Nordic countries such as Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and Sweden (Soberg, 2022). However, in the 21st century, interest has expanded globally, partly due to the rise of wellness and biohacking movements. Influential figures such as Wim Hof have helped popularise cold water immersion techniques through the development of structured methods contributing to a growing body of research into its potential benefits (Muzik & Diwadkar, 2018).

Social media has also played a role in promoting cold water swimming and cold plunges, as lifestyle practices and forms of self-care (Lindfords & Kinnunen, 2024). This trend was further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many individuals turned to outdoor activities, including cold water swimming to cope with isolation and lockdown restrictions (Christie & Elliot, 2024).

In this chapter I examine the existing literature on cold water swimming in nature and all it encompasses. I put forward major theories that hypothesise what attracts people to engage in cold water swimming in nature and the meaning making they prescribe to it. The aim is to highlight what knowledge, ideas and phenomena already exist in relation to cold water swimming in nature and people's personal unique experience with it.

It is hoped that this research will contribute to the field of mental health by enhancing support for individuals experiencing psychological distress and improving access to alternative mental health interventions. Recognising that mental health is not a one-size-fits-all issue, counselling psychology, being a multifaceted profession, that aims to extend beyond traditional talk therapy. It offers opportunities to integrate a range of therapeutic modalities such as art, nature-based interventions, and mindfulness, in response to the diverse needs of clients (Milton & von Scoyoc, 2010).

In recent years, the landscape of mental health interventions has evolved significantly. New approaches include walk-and-talk therapy, which takes place outdoors while walking in nature; psychedelic-assisted therapy, where controlled substances are used in conjunction with psychotherapy; and AI-driven tools, such as chatbots and virtual therapeutic platforms (Revell & McLeod, 2017; Rucker, Iliff & Nutt, 2018; Fiske, Henningsen & Buyx, 2019). It is important that counselling psychology continues to adapt alongside these emerging practices to provide the best quality care and to better understand the experiences of those who engage with such interventions. Depending on the outcomes of this research, cold water swimming could potentially be incorporated into therapeutic frameworks, particularly in relation to cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques such as graded exposure and behavioural activation.

Reflexivity

In this first reflexive statement, I explain my relationship to the topic of my thesis and highlight the possibility of biases considering my own experience with cold water swimming and subjectivity. My interest in cold water swimming in nature is deeply rooted in both personal and professional experiences. These are important I acknowledge from the offset as they hold

a potential impact on the choices and decisions I have made throughout the research process. I have a positive relationship with cold water swimming in nature; thus, I must hold this in mind not to make this assumption for others. I have taken steps to reduce their influence which are discussed in Chapter 4. My wish is that my transparency will allow the reader to contextualise my research and make critical appraisals in response to statements. Reflexivity enables the research to reflect on their own influence on the research by looking at their own biases, experiences and position within the research (Palaganas et al., 2017). I undertake this doctoral research with my own personal experiences of engaging in cold water swimming as someone that experiences anxiety. I engaged in this activity when COVID-19 hit and my usual self-care and coping strategies were limited (Cullen, Gulati & Kelly, 2020). I sought alternative ways to manage my anxiety and as a result found a newfound love for cold water swimming in nature. I was unsure about how I found this difficult, stress inducing experience so capturing. As a result of my experience and seeing so many others engaging in this difficult task I wanted to delve deeper about individuals unique experience of this phenomenon to try understanding it better.

At the beginning of conducting this research, my attention was primarily focused on mental health, specifically anxiety and low mood. I was initially interested in exploring the experiences of people who engaged in cold-water swimming and self-identified as having mental health difficulties. Given the rise in anxiety and depression since the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fact that many individuals began cold-water swimming during this period, this focus shaped both the material I included in the literature review and what I initially omitted. However, as I engaged more deeply with participants' accounts and listened to their voices, it became evident that their experiences extended far beyond a solely mental health lens. Participants spoke of embodiment, presence, connection to nature, and ways of being in the world—facets that could not be fully captured through a purely clinical perspective. This allowed me to step away from my original positivist and medical framing and align more closely with my qualitative and philosophical position that reality is subjective and experienced differently by everyone.

This shift enabled me to expand my interpretative lens and move towards a more existential and humanistic perspective. The focus evolved from identifying mental health outcomes to exploring how participants made meaning of their experiences and how these experiences shaped their sense of self, agency, and lived experience. This involved attending to participants embodied and relational ways of being that arose through cold-water swimming in nature, as well as returning to the literature to acknowledge the cultural, historical, and environmental contexts that shaped these experiences. In keeping with my reflexivity diary and immersion in the data, I noticed that I was at times drawn towards a positivist framework.

When this occurred, I consciously reoriented my attention towards the rich, nuanced, and co-constructed meanings emerging within the data. Positive psychology emerged as a key component of the research, particularly through concepts such as positive emotions, flow, meaning, purpose, and accomplishment (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

In this way, the research journey reflects both an expansion of my philosophical lens and a deepening alignment with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) principles, privileging lived experience, interpretative engagement, and the exploration of human meaning over purely outcome-focused approaches. This allowed for a deeper engagement with how participants experience and interpret embodiment, presence, and connection within the context of their everyday lives. By attending to the idiographic, interpretative, and embodied dimensions of experience, the research highlights aspects of the phenomenon that are relational, existential, and often pre-reflective, and which may be flattened or overlooked in more descriptive or evaluative qualitative designs. As such, this research contributes a new way of understanding the phenomenon as a way of being in the world, rather than reducing it to a set of psychological effects or mental health outcomes. I acknowledge that my position evolved over the course of the research, and that through genuinely giving voice to participants, the study became positioned within a more experiential and humanistic framework. This is consistent with my counselling psychology ethos, values, and pluralistic epistemological position.

Counselling Psychology has humanistic ethos as it involves being both a scientific and reflective practitioner (Gelso et al., 2021; Hanley, 2017). Counselling psychology adopts a pluralistic framework shedding light that psychological distress can be caused by multiple factors and therefore it is not likely that there is one 'right' intervention to tackle this as people have different needs (Cooper & McLeod, 2007). A pluralistic ontology and epistemology are at the core of counselling psychology in both therapeutic approaches and research (McLeod, 2013). Considering a pluralistic approach, one might hope that counselling psychology will be open and flexible to alternative interventions to support those with anxiety and low mood.

Literature research strategy

To identify the most relevant literature, the electronic databases on City Library Search such as PsycINFO, PsycBooks, PubMed, Google Scholar and EBSCOhost were searched. Relevant literature was identified through a combination of different keywords including mental

health; anxiety; low mood; benefits; risks; neuroscience; physiological experience; cold water swimming; nature; blue therapy; ecotherapy and sports psychology. Abstracts of articles were read to assess their relevance to the review and all clearly nonrelated work was therefore excluded. To broaden the scope of the search, the references of relevant articles were also reviewed and included. Literature was limited to that published in the English language.

Blue Therapy and embodiment

Given that the majority of the Earth's surface is covered by water, and that the human body is composed of approximately 60% water, it makes sense that there is a deep interconnection between water, health, and ecosystems (Britton et al., 2020; WHO, 2012). Ecotherapy, sparked people's interest which was speaking to the use of green spaces to support psychological wellbeing (Burls, 2007). However, more recently, attention has shifted towards blue therapy, which refers to the mental health benefits of the presence of water (Hart, 2019).

Blue spaces such as oceans, lakes, rivers, and ponds are increasingly recognised for their therapeutic potential. They can evoke calming bodily sensations through the movement of water, fostering a sense of stillness and self-awareness in those who swim or spend time near them (Britton et al., 2018). Outdoor environments that incorporate water have been found to improve psychological wellbeing, particularly by reducing symptoms of anxiety, stress, and low mood (Juster-Horesfield & Bell, 2022). One of the appealing aspects of blue therapy is that it often involves a low cost and is accessible, as it often requires nothing more than proximity blue spaces (Hermanski et al., 2022). The experience of swimming in or simply observing blue spaces can enhance embodiment, support mindful breathing, and increase present-moment awareness (Moles, 2021). Many individuals report that looking at blue water is calming, restorative, and emotionally soothing. Bates and Moles (2023) found that individuals who engage in sea swimming reported improvements in their mental capacity and emotional wellbeing. However, despite its low-cost nature, access to blue spaces can still be a challenge, particularly for those living in urban environments or regions with limited natural water sources (Overbury, Conroy & Marks, 2023).

Cold-water swimming in nature enhances the practice of embodiment, as it entails becoming more consciously aware of being in one's body through the sensing of physical sensations, emerging feelings, and presence in the moment (Humberstone, 2015). This heightened

embodiment arises from intensified sensory experiences, such as an increased heartbeat, shortness of breath, and muscle tension, which foster a stronger sense of present-moment bodily awareness. The cold can act as a mirror for the mind–body connection, which may be accessed through cold-water swimming in natural environments (Carruthers, 2008).

Martin Milton's contribution to counselling psychology highlights the often-neglected relationship between humans and nature, despite the well-documented impact of nature on overall wellbeing, given that individuals evolve with and depend on the natural world (Milton, 2016). Owing to the role that connection with nature plays in supporting healing and mental health, this relationship warrants greater attention (Higley & Milton, 2008).

Cheetham (2025) found that embodiment shapes the creation and perception of wild atmospheres in natural environments. His research suggests that embodied and emotional experiences are heightened through interaction with nature, particularly in blue spaces. The body plays a central role in understanding atmospheres, as these are sensed, lived, and experienced through embodied presence. This underscores the importance of embodiment in shaping relational experiences of spatial, social, and affective atmospheres, emphasising that experience is not solely a product of mental representation but is grounded in the lived, bodily encounter with the world. This perspective is supported by Merleau-Ponty's notions of perception and lived experience. Blue therapy may therefore provide embodied forms of healing through both immersion in nature and the cultivation of embodied awareness (Levit, 2018).

Nature

Spending time in nature has been found to be closely associated with improved mental health outcomes (McCormick, 2017). Nature supports psychological wellbeing through the inherent connection humans have with the natural environment (Overbury, Conroy & Marks, 2023). This sense of nature connectedness has been linked to a range of physical and psychological benefits (McCormick, 2017; Bratman, Hamilton & Daily, 2012). Cold water swimming in natural settings offers a unique combination of physical activity and immersion in nature. The release of endorphins during cold water exposure, coupled with the therapeutic effects of being outdoors, contributes to an overall boost in psychological wellbeing (Massey et al., 2022). One study examining sea swimming for mental health purposes found promising results and emphasised the importance of nature-based approaches for supporting psychological health (Burlingham et al., 2022).

In Denmark, the government has shown strong support for innovative mental health interventions. Østergaard et al., (2024) explored the use of cold-water bathing as a therapeutic practice. Their findings support much of the existing literature, highlighting the psychological benefits of cold-water swimming. However, they also identified a significant gap in the research: a lack of qualitative studies that explore the lived experiences of individuals who engage in cold water swimming to support their mental health.

Sense of community and social aspect

Cold water swimming in nature means being in an open space and therefore for many may form a sense of community as there can be a social dimension given the shared interest (Greenwood & Fletcher, 2021). The unique experience and overcoming putting the body and mind through discomfort may provide a shared safe space. It also provides a space to support each other and share the sense of achievement (Moffatt, 2017). It has been well documented the negative impact of isolation and the importance of social connectedness with others for positive mental health (Seppala, Rossomando & Doty, 2013). It is also an activity that many do alone but naturally being in a shared space you get to connect with others and meet likeminded people, while some also prefer to enjoy the solitary element of being in nature (Modani et al., 2014).

Mental health crisis

Mental health can be described as a state of well-being in which individuals understand their capabilities, manage everyday stresses effectively, work in a productive and fulfilling way, and contribute meaningfully to their communities (Michaud & Fombonne, 2005). The impact of mental health distress on the lives of people, interpersonal relationships and the worldwide systems is facing an epidemic. As mental health services are over stretched and the mental health crisis continues to grow, innovative and accessible solutions are needed to meet the needs of those struggling with psychological difficulties (Overbury, Conroy & Marks, 2023). Anxiety and depressive disorders have been found to be the most common mental health difficulty that individuals are struggling with worldwide (Sartorius et al., 1996). While they often present as a comorbid difficulty (Pollack, 2005). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017) depression is affecting 300 million people, with anxiety affecting 284 million. Research on cold-water swimming as a therapeutic intervention is limited and there is a lack

of research into this phenomenon (Hjorth & Rasmussen, 2004). Most of the research focuses on recovery for athletes, physical health benefits and mental health benefits. Therefore, there is a need to further support this possible intervention in its value to the field of therapeutic support.

Anxiety

Anxiety can be described as an emotion that involves an unpleasant state of feeling fear, dread and unease (Craske et al., 2011). Anxiety can cause physical symptoms such as feeling tense, sweaty, increase in heartbeat, upset stomach, overthinking and feeling dizzy (Mc Naughton, 2018). Anxiety can impact a person's day to day functioning due to constant worry and falling into negative thinking patterns (Maloney, Sattizahn & Beliock, 2014). This has a direct impact on mental health as it can cause physical health difficulties such as sleep problems, exhaustion and burn out (Stein et al., 2008). To manage anxiety individuals often avoid triggers for their source of anxiety such as social situations or large crowds (Morrison & Heimberg, 2013). Experiencing anxiety is a normal part of human functioning however it is when anxiety becomes debilitating and difficult to manage, is when anxiety impacts overall functioning (Gordon, Brandish & Baldwin, 2016). To manage anxiety there are several approaches such as therapeutic interventions such as talk therapies, exposure therapy, group therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy and cognitive behaviour therapy (Otte, 2011). There is also the pharmacology route that individuals can take such as antidepressants or benzodiazepines (Kapczinski et al., 2003). Mindfulness and relaxation techniques such as mindfulness, breathing exercises and muscle relaxation can be used to help manage anxiety (Steven, 2024; Hofmann et al., 2010). Breathe work has been found to play a crucial role in managing anxiety as it helps regulate the parasympathetic nervous systems and eases the flight vs fight response that is triggered when anxiety rises (Banushi et al., 2023). This can be directly mirrored in cold water swimming as to manage the cold shock response on immersion you are required to control your breathing to survive the cold shock (Faid, Van Gordon & Taylor, 2022).

Low mood

Experiencing low mood can be described as feeling sad and down which can have a negative impact on your day-to-day life (Broer & Besseling, 2017). Low mood can cause physical difficulties such as trouble sleeping, avoidance, emotional avoidance and struggling to engage in usual activities (Brockmeyer et al., 2012). The result of feeling down may impact individuals

as they feel less desire to connect with others and this can cause isolation which perpetuates the problem (Taylor et al., 2018). Low mood can be so debilitating as it consists of a series of somatic, negative feelings and behaviour difficulties, one being high risk of suicidal ideation (Pompili, 2019). If low mood is not managed adequately this can cause individuals to lean on unhelpful coping mechanisms such as substance misuse, withdrawing and emotional eating which can further magnify low mood (Miller et al., 2017). Depression can be described as a clinical condition that has at least five symptoms which include persistent low mood, loss of interest in pleasure, significant changes in weight or appetite, sleep difficulties, fatigue, feeling worthless and thoughts of death (Moore & Brown, 2012). The World Health Organization (WHO) projected that depression is estimated to be the number one global burden of disease within 2030 (Espeland et al., 2022; Malhi & Mann, 2010). It is estimated that at least 1 in 10 people experience depression in their life and given long waitlists and difficulties accessing mental health support, various approaches are necessary to deal with this (Massey et al., 2023). Since the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO) found that levels of anxiety and depression saw a rise in prevalence by 25% globally (Kupcova et al., 2023). Therapeutic interventions such as CBT are used to support those struggling with their mood and antidepressants and mood stabilizers are another form of treatment prescribed (DeRubeis et al., 2005). Lifestyle factors such as sleep, diet, exercise routine, goals, active lifestyle and social support are all found to be crucial in aiding those struggling with mood (Lopresti, Hood & Drummond, 2013). Cold water swimming speaks to several of the lifestyle factors suggested for positive mental health outcomes such as routine, goals, social support, exercise and active lifestyle (Theodorou & Kabir, 2019).

Cold water swimming in nature

Cold water swimming in nature represents swimming outdoors in natural waters such as (lake, pond, ocean, river) mainly occurring during the winter or in the colder or polar places (Knechtle et al., 2020). Cold water swimming is often used as umbrella term for swimming in cold to icy cold temperatures (Diversi, Franks-Kardum & Climstein, 2016). Ice water swimming is considered to swim in water below 5 degrees (Knechtle et al., 2020). How cold water is defined varies for example, The International Winter Swimming Association define cold water as +5.1degrees to 9 degrees, however in many papers use cold water swimming under the umbrella term for cold water up to 20 degrees throughout the year (Pound et al., 2024). These water conditions are described as water that is less than 15 degrees Celsius, with the human bodies internal temperature being 37 degrees (Wright, Hull & Czeisler, 2002). In Denmark they consider cold swimming when the temperatures are 10 – 15 degrees or lower (Østergaard

et al, 2024). Similarly, Machado et al., (2016) also support this as they believed that cold water swimming between the temperatures of 11 to 15 degrees Celsius for up to 15 minutes was the most adequate length of time to swim for benefits. In the United Kingdom the water is considered cold throughout the year, thus open water swimming in the UK falls under the category of cold-water swimming (Massey et al., 2023). The cold-water shock response can also occur in much warmer water of up to 25C, which means that most of the open water opportunities in the United Kingdom are cold enough to trigger that cold shock response even in the summer months (Shawe et al., 2025). Federation International de Natation (FINA) suggest any water below 16 degrees can pose the risk to hypothermia (Manolis et al., 2019). There has been a compelling interest in the amount of people that are now engaging in cold water swimming due the profound mental and physical health benefits (Tipton et al, 2017).

Effects of cold-water exposure

Cold water swimming has been found to have a positive effect on the human mind and to bring about similar effects of antidepressants (Teleglow, Wrzesniewski & Blecharz, 2025). The health benefits reported include improved mood, energy, libido, improved immune system, improved recovery from muscle training and many more (Knechtle et al., 2020). It has been found to reduce tiredness, boost self-esteem and overall health (Hjorth et al., 2023). Cold swimming results in immediate and sustainable improvements in health and general wellbeing (Huttunen, Kokko & Ylijokuri, 2004). This occurs through reorientation by having a shift in perspective, transformation through a deep change in emotional state and connection through the meaning making process to oneself, others or nature (Bates & Moles, 2023; Kelly & Bird, 2022). Regular cold-water swimming causes the body to progress into productive physiological changes (Lipinska et al., 2024). Those that engage in cold water swimming reported a decrease in chronic pain, improved sleep, feel more engaged and have a more positive outlook on life (Yankouskaya et al., 2023). It also increased autonomy, encourages personal achievement, and means spending more time outdoors which improves wellbeing (Bottley, 2019). Cold water exposure such as showers, plunges, immersion and swimming is more commonly being used to tackle psychological wellbeing (Carona & Marques, 2024). Cold water immersion can improve sleep quality, which has a direct impact on mood as this was found in a trial of cold-water immersion 3 times a week for a month period (Knill-Jones et al., 2025).

Another lens looked at cryotherapy on depressive and anxiety symptoms, and it was found a decrease in both when compared to a control group (Rymaszewska & Ramsey, 2008).

Exposure into cold water is a major stressor psychologically on the body, the body learns to adapt to the stress and cortisol reacts to the cold stress (Oxtoby, 2022). Moreover, it provides people with activity, wellbeing, social connectedness, sense of belonging, an escape and shared interest with like-minded people (Denton & Aranda, 2020). Cold water swimming is considered a health-promoting behaviour to utilise in your free time (Langa et al., 2023). Cold water swimming is beneficial for various reasons such as improved circulation, boosts immune system, aids with chronic pain, help with muscle recovery and improves sleep etc (Flynn et al., 2023). It has been found to have a positive impact on mental health due to the release of endorphins which elevated mood and decrease levels of stress (Leppaluoto et al., 2008).

A systematic review found through the quality-of-life scale that there was a decrease in chronic pain and weight loss (Theodorous, Kabir & Ruskin, 2019). Moreover, it was found that those that cold swim often reported similar themes such as providing an emotional high, helping with a range of emotional difficulties, provided a purpose in life and helps build a community with similar interests (Oliver, 2021). In most recent years there has been more exposure and insight into the benefits of cold-water swimming through an activity that many picked up during COVID-19 due to lockdowns to cope with the psychological distress when being outside in nature (Trylinska-Tekielska et al. 2022). Studies exploring the impact of swimming nature found that it can be a transformative process, a way to connect, a redirection all of which can all have a productive shift for those who swim in relation to mind, body and identity (McDougall et al., 2022). The psychological benefits are unique to each person as it is not a universal experience, for example, some people find the cold water shock a distress inducing process, while others can tolerate this better and have a different experience (Mc Dougall et al., 2022). This highlights that there are individual differences for facing this phenomenon such as personality type, gender, mental health condition, all of which can influence resilience, toleration and outcomes (Knechtle et al., 2020).

Risks

It is important to address the risks that present in cold water swimming which include the potential risk for cardiac arrest triggered by 'cold shock', hypothermia is also a potential threat if estimating body temperature is not adequately managed which can result in not exiting the water before hypothermia kicks in (Pound et al., 2024). There is also a risk of drowning present in cold water swimming in nature alongside the possibility of cardiac arrest due to the cold shock response (Christie & Elliott, 2024).

Physiological response and neuroscience

Cold water swimming involves the intentional use of cold exposure for its potential physical and psychological health benefits (Tipton et al., 2017). Immersion in cold water activates the sympathetic nervous system, triggering the body's fight vs flight response due to the shock of the cold (Foley, 2015). This response leads to the release of adrenaline and noradrenaline, which are associated with mood enhancement and feelings of euphoria (Datta & Tipton, 2006). Cold water swimming has been found to reduce pain and inflammation, cognitive difficulties such as brain fog, memory problems, and difficulty concentrating (Kulphal, Fibuch & Taylor, 2007). By exposing the brain and body to a controlled stressor, cold water swimming may help build both physical and psychological resilience, as the brain learns to adapt to stress over time (Yankouskaya et al., 2023).

A key mechanism involved in this process is the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, which plays an important role in stress management. Cold exposure stimulates this system, helping the brain develop more regulated responses to stressors in daily life (Seta et al., 2001; Broz et al., 2017). Exposure to cold water provides a way to train the mind and body by building resistance.

Additional physiological benefits have also been reported. Cold water immersion activates thermogenesis the process by which the body produces heat, which can aid in fat burning and weight loss (Rahmani et al., 2024). Animal studies have further shown that cold exposure in obese mice reduced obesity markers and improved gut health (Men et al., 2025). When cold receptors in the skin detect low temperatures, they then send signals to the hypothalamus, triggering a chain reaction of hormonal and neurological responses that directly affect mood (McCarty, 2016). This pathway illustrates the strong connection between cold exposure, hormonal regulation, and the central nervous system (Eshkevari, Permaul & Mulroney, 2013; LeBlanc et al., 1975; Hingley et al., 2011).

Submersion in cold water not only activates the sympathetic nervous system but also leads to the release of endorphins such as serotonin, and noradrenaline (Knechtle et al., 2009). Noradrenaline is known to enhance well-being and suppress pain through the activation of opioid receptors (Elser et al., 1985). Moreover, cold exposure sends a high volume of electrical impulses to the brain, which may produce antidepressant-like effects (Shevchuk, 2008). These neurophysiological changes are believed to modulate mood and increase pain thresholds (Washington, Gibson & Helme, 2000).

Physiological adaptation to cold water immersion is closely linked to psychological stress responses. Engaging in such a challenging and stressful activity can lead to a heightened sense of achievement and personal accomplishment (Van Tulleken et al., 2018). When considering the biological connections to positive mental wellbeing, cold water swimming appears to stimulate the release of several positive hormones that support emotional health. For example, dopamine, often associated with goal achievement, task completion, and self-care behaviours, is released during cold exposure (Baixauli, 2017). Endorphins, often linked to the high experienced during physical activity are also experienced (Leuenberger, 2006). In addition, oxytocin may be released when cold water swimming is done in a group, enhancing social connection (Barraza & Zak, 2009). Finally, serotonin, which is related to mood regulation, can be boosted through immersion in natural environments (Summers & Vivian, 2018; Ghosh, 2018).

The combination of these physiological and psychological effects makes cold water swimming as a tool for enhancing mental health. By engaging in controlled discomfort, this helps individuals develop psychological adaptations who experience anxiety or low mood, this process of emotional regulation training of the mind and body to tolerate stress may contribute to improved long-term resilience and greater stress tolerance.

Miller and Gabitova (2024) explored blue therapy for physical and mental health among adults in the UK, aiming to better understand the mechanisms underlying its benefits. They employed a qualitative design using IPA. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and participants were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling. The study identified several key themes, including psychosocial benefits, nature connection, and both physical and mental health improvements. Their findings have potential implications for developing ecotherapy-based interventions to support individuals with chronic health conditions and improve psychological wellbeing. However, a methodological concern arises regarding the suitability of IPA for investigating underlying mechanisms. IPA aim is to explore lived experiences and meaning making, not causal or mechanistic explanations. As such, the themes related to mechanisms may lack sufficient depth and resonance within an IPA framework, therefore lacked reliability. A more appropriate approach for exploring mechanisms would have been grounded theory, which is better suited for theory development.

A quantitative study by Huttunen, Kokko, and Ylijukuri (2004) investigated the effects of regular cold-water swimming on mood by using questionnaires. These included the Profile of Mood States (POMS) and the OIRE questionnaire, administered during the winter months from

October to January. The questionnaires assessed participants' mood, memory function, sleep quality, and alertness. The study found that regular cold-water swimming was associated with reduced tension and fatigue, improved mood, enhanced memory, and increased alertness. Participants reported feeling more energy and their mood improved. Notably, 50% of older participants reported a 40% decrease in chronic pain, suggesting a possible therapeutic effect of cold-water swimming on chronic pain. The study sample included 36 Finnish winter swimmers and a control group of 23 non-swimmers. Majority of participants were female and aged between 30 and 68. The control group, composed of individuals who did not engage in cold water swimming, this allowed for a point of comparison to evaluate the effects of the activity. Questionnaires were administered at the beginning and at the end of the swimming season to measure changes over time. While the inclusion of a control group and the use of validated instruments such as the POMS questionnaire enhanced the study's reliability and validity, the research had several limitations. The small sample size and high attrition rate (13 swimmers and 10 controls dropped out) reduced the power and generalisability of the findings. The gender imbalance due to a predominantly female sample may also introduce bias and limit generalizability. Although the study included a follow-up period, the four-month duration was relatively short and may not have captured the long-term effects of cold-water swimming. Therefore, a longitudinal design would produce more insightful findings.

Similarly, a more recent quantitative study by Mullooky and Colbert (2024) explored the relationship between cold water immersion, mental health, resilience, and mental strength. The study included 164 participants 120 of whom regularly engaged in cold water immersion, and 44 non immersion engagements. Findings indicated that those who participated in cold water swimming had lower levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and greater sense of self.

A case study by Van Tulleken et al. (2018) explored the use of open cold-water swimming as a possible intervention for treating major depressive disorder (MDD). The study focused on a 24-year-old woman diagnosed with MDD, who had previously tried various interventions including medication and talk therapy. Her strong desire to be medication-free, allowed her to participate in weekly open-water swimming sessions over a six-month period. Following the intervention, she experienced significant improvements in mood and reduced depressive symptoms. At a one-year follow-up, she remained medication-free and continued to use cold-water swimming as a method of managing her mental health. The participant reported having struggled with her mental health, expressing that swimming gave her a sense of relief, this case study offers valuable insight into non-pharmacological and alternative approaches to managing depression and highlights the potential for nature-based, embodied interventions. A strength of this study was the follow-up, which highlighted positive outcomes. However,

methodological limitations were present given they did not use standardised clinical measures, such as the PHQ-9, to monitor changes in depressive symptoms. This makes it more difficult to provide evidence that her depression had clinically resolved. Furthermore, the study did not account for her post-partum status and how this life stage might have independently influenced her mental health recovery. As a single-participant case study, it also lacks generalisability and limits the robustness of the findings. However, it sheds light on a promising step toward exploring novel interventions for mental health. Recruitment is already underway for a randomised controlled trial that explores open water swimming as a treatment for depression (Greenspan, 2024). The case study supports the current researcher's rationale to explore the lived experiences of individuals who engage in cold-water swimming to manage anxiety and low mood. In line with this, the present study will employ an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of eight individuals who engage in cold-water swimming in nature.

Another relevant case study by Christie and Elliot (2024) involved two participants with histories of severe mental health struggles, including multiple suicide attempts. Both individuals engaged in open water swimming in water temperatures around 14°C. The researchers used thematic analysis to interpret the data, providing rich, detailed participant profiles, including background information on their mental health, education, family dynamics and previous interactions with mental health services. One participant, Kathleen, described the sea as an escape from prison which she used to represent her home environment. She found open water swimming to offer a sense of freedom and independence, noting that immersion in nature helped her cope with difficult feelings.

The second participant was a male with two previous suicide attempts; he described open water swimming with friends, as a way to feel healed and uplifted stating it helped him feel "plugged back into life." He referred to nature-based swimming as a natural mental health service highlighting its significance in healing. Both participants reported that since taking up open water swimming, they no longer experienced suicidal ideation. Their engagement with cold-water swimming contributed to personal growth, and what motivated them to start their new career in healthcare. The study found that swimming in nature helped those connect with nature, which in turn supported psychological wellbeing. Overarching themes included hope, brightness, identity, purpose, and a renewed appreciation for life.

Several studies on cold water swimming have consisted of predominantly female samples. This gender imbalance may reflect broader trends in mental health help-seeking behaviours. Research indicates that men are generally more reluctant to seek support for mental health

issues (Lynch, Long & Moorhead, 2018). It is notable that men are reported to be 50% less likely to access mental health services, often masking their struggles to avoid appearing vulnerable (Christie & Elliott, 2024). A recurring theme in the literature is that males tend to avoid seeking help due to societal expectations around masculinity and the desire not to be perceived as weak (Galdas, Cheater & Marshall, 2005).

Hjorth et al. (2023) investigated the effectiveness of cold-water swimming in natural settings as an add-on intervention for individuals experiencing depression. Their findings showed improvements in participants' wellbeing from pre- to post-swimming sessions. In addition to enhanced mood, regular cold-water swimming was associated with better sleep and overall psychological wellbeing. Østergaard et al. (2024) further build on this as they conducted a qualitative study in Denmark exploring the impact of cold-water swimming on mental health, aiming to inform healthcare practitioners about the value of novel, nature-based interventions. Through interviews with regular cold-water swimmers during the winter months, the researchers found that participants reported improvements in mental health, emotional shift and resilience. Participants also described a stronger sense of connection to both them and nature. The blue therapy aspect of the activity was highlighted as contributing to feelings of calm, safety, and emotional grounding. Long-term engagement in cold water swimming was linked to increased psychological resilience and enhanced meaning-making.

A study protocol by Massey et al. (2023) outlined a feasibility randomised controlled trial (RCT) investigating the effects of outdoor swimming for individuals experiencing depression. A total of 88 participants were randomly assigned to an eight-session, nature-based swimming course. Standardised and validated measures were used, including the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) for depression, the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) scale for anxiety, and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) for overall wellbeing. A qualitative element using thematic analysis was also included. The study aimed to contribute to the development of evidence-based practice for using nature-based interventions to support mental health. Results indicated that the intervention group experienced a reduction in both depression and anxiety. While the findings support the potential benefits of cold-water swimming for individuals with depression, the study was limited by a small sample size. However, it offers important insight into alternative, low-cost mental health interventions and highlights the need for further large-scale research.

To build on this research carried out in Scotland by Mc Dougall et al., (2022) utilised a qualitative design using thematic analysis to investigate the relationship between swimming in nature and its impact on health and wellbeing. They used semi structured interviews to

interview 12 swimmers, where they found that swimming in nature led to improved mood, stronger mental resilience and reduced stress levels. They also found that many participants used loch swimming to assist with their physical and mental health difficulties.

Pound et al. (2024) explored how cold-water swimming impacted menstrual and perimenopausal symptoms among women. The study involved 1,114 female participants who completed a survey reporting that cold water swimming helped reduce symptoms such as anxiety, mood swings, and irritability. Many participants attributed these improvements to both the physical shock and the psychological effects of cold-water immersion. The qualitative component of the study identified several recurring themes, including a calming effect, mood enhancement, a sense of community, improvements in menstrual symptoms, and relief from hot flushes. The study utilised a mixed-methods approach, consisting of a quantitative survey with qualitative aspect to help understand participants' experiences. This methodological combination allowed the researchers to identify both measurable outcomes and subjective benefits of cold-water swimming that may not have been revealed through a single method alone.

Similarly, Christie and Elliott (2023) used a rapid ethnographic approach to explore the experiences of individuals engaging in cold water swimming in winter temperatures ranging between 5 – 10 degrees Celsius. The study involved 17 participants six male and eleven female who participated in regular cold-water swimming over a six-month period. Through thematic analysis, the researchers identified several key themes, being in nature, and the social element to it. Participants reported that the natural lake environment contributed reduced stress levels and offered a personal challenge that improved their resilience.

Oliver (2021) wrote a reflective paper detailing her personal experience of open cold-water swimming, which she began following the loss of her daughter to suicide. She described the activity as symbol of her grief, comparing the ebb and flow of the sea to the unpredictable waves of bereavement sometimes calm and manageable, other times overwhelming and sudden. She reported that cold water swimming helped to quiet her mind, ease the physical sensations of anxiety, and provide a sense of survival and accomplishment. It became a therapeutic outlet through which she could process complexities of grief. Despite the paper being based only on her individual experience and therefore lacking applicability to a wider audience, it offers a powerful and emotive narrative that contributes to the understanding of cold-water swimming. It sheds light to the potential coping mechanism for grief and psychological distress. This personal account serves as a meaningful foundation for further

research into the therapeutic potential of cold-water swimming in nature, particularly for mental health and emotional regulation.

Christie, Elliott and Wilbraham (2025) found that approximately 65% of individuals who engage in cold water swimming in natural environments are women, which highlights it being a predominantly female-led activity. Their qualitative study explored women's experiences of open water swimming, using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. One central theme that was found was the transformative impact of open water swimming on personal agency. Participants described how the activity helped build their confidence, resilience, and discipline, and it provided a safe space to express themselves or explore new aspects of their identity. Another theme focused on overall health benefits, as those reported improvements in their skin, better mental clarity, emotional healing, and a valuable sense of time to prioritise themselves. Many described the experience as producing a heightened emotional state. The social aspect of open water swimming was also valued. Participants spoke of a strong sense of belonging, a supportive environment and an ease of communication within this group. The community aspect was particularly meaningful as this enabled connection and shared purpose. Overall, open water swimming was experienced as empowering, emotionally uplifting, and having positive social aspect to it. The non-judgemental, playful environment allowed women to express themselves more freely and build self-confidence. The study offers valuable insight for healthcare practitioners by illustrating the diverse ways in which open water swimming supports mental and emotional wellbeing.

Theories

Several theoretical frameworks can help explain the impact of cold-water swimming in nature. One particularly relevant perspective is the phenomenology of perception proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which emphasises a holistic understanding of the individual as an integrated mind-body whole. According to Merleau-Ponty (2002), the body is not merely a passive vessel but a central anchor for experience, presence, and mindfulness. This view contrasts with Cartesian dualism, a philosophical stance that has significantly influenced western thought and continues to underpin many contemporary medical and psychological models. Cartesian dualism maintains a strict division between the mind as the realm of thought and the body as a mechanical entity. This conceptual split has contributed to a compartmentalised understanding of health, evident in the structural separation between disciplines such as psychiatry, psychology, and medicine (Wade & Halligan, 2017).

In practice, this divide often manifests in conventional therapeutic interventions, particularly in medicalised settings. Mental health treatments may prioritise cognitive restructuring or pharmacological solutions while neglecting the embodied experience of emotional distress (Pally, 1998). Similarly, physical health is frequently addressed through biomedical approaches that overlook psychological and emotional dimensions (Johns, 2005). Such disembodied models pose a risk of missing the therapeutic value of holistic, experiential practices like cold water immersion in nature. These practices may offer a more integrative approach to wellbeing by reconnecting the physical, emotional, and psychological aspects of the self that are often treated in isolation within standardised healthcare systems.

Thus, cold water swimming in nature challenges the dualistic paradigm by foregrounding the embodied nature of well-being (Kupers, 2005). This makes it a deeply immersive, embodied experience where all aspects of being are invited such as physical, cognitive and environmental that are all intertwined into a single lived experience. From a Merleau-Pontian perspective where the world is encountered through lived, bodily experience such practices may offer a more integrated form of therapy. This approach acknowledges the inseparability of body and mind, as well as the healing potential found in embodied interactions with the natural world (Hung, 2008). The experience of cold-water swimming exemplifies this interconnectedness, where both mind and body are actively engaged and mutually influencing one another.

Biophilia theory, introduced by Wilson and expanded by Kellert, also offers valuable insight into the psychological impact of connecting with nature. It suggests that humans possess an innate tendency to seek affiliation with nature, which can enhance mental health, creativity, and emotional resilience (Kellert, 2003; Simaika & Samways, 2010). Similarly, nature-based practices such as cold-water swimming have been found to offer therapeutic and restorative benefits (Heerwagen, 2009). Another fitting theory is the stress reduction theory further supports this, proposing that natural environments can reduce the negative effects of stress (Ulrich, 1991). Activities that include exposure to nature, physical exercise, social connection, and mindfulness, all core components of cold-water swimming that are all linked to reduced physiological and psychological stress. Additionally, attention restoration theory posits that nature can help the brain recover after being overworked. Kaplan argues that being in calming, immersive outdoor spaces especially those featuring elements like trees or the sound of waves can improve focus, mental clarity, and reduce stress (Kaplan, 1995). Crucially, he suggests that restorative environments should foster a sense of being part of something larger, while also offering a safe and comfortable space away from everyday demands. This aligns closely with the experience of cold-water swimming in natural settings, where participants often

describe a sense of escape, immersion, and psychological renewal. These theoretical frameworks provide a multidimensional understanding of how cold-water swimming in nature can support mental health, wellbeing, and personal growth through embodied, social, and environmental engagement.

Another theoretical lens relevant to understanding cold water swimming is self-determination theory which focuses on human motivation and psychological flourishing (Ryan & Deci, 2024). This theory identifies three core psychological needs essential for well-being: autonomy, meaning the sense of living according to one's values and making self-directed choices (Ng et al., 2021); relatedness which means feeling connected to others and having a sense of community; and competence which speaks to feeling capable, effective, and able to achieve meaningful goals (Deci & Ryan, 2012). These components align closely with the reported experiences of cold-water swimmers, who often describe enhanced self-agency, social belonging, and a sense of accomplishment. When these needs are met, individuals are more likely to thrive and experience psychological well-being (Ryan & Patrick, 2009). Cold water swimming in nature aids those with feeling competent as this is a mentally enduring task which aids their self-efficacy (Waddington, 2023). This positive feedback loop, recognition of progress builds their confidence and therefore provides a sense of achievement.

Diversity, Inclusivity and inequality

It is important to recognise that nature is a racialised space, as individuals' experiences of natural environments are shaped by race, culture, and power (Brown & Garver, 2009). Within Westernised contexts, natural and aquatic spaces have historically been constructed as predominantly white spaces, contributing to the exclusion and marginalisation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC). As a result, many BIPOC individuals experience reduced feelings of safety, belonging, and accessibility in these environments (Gutierrez et al., 2025). Collier's research highlights how dominant ecotherapy frameworks often overlook the role of culture, power relations, accessibility, and meaning making, thereby reinforcing environmental privilege. Structural inequalities and socioeconomic disadvantage continue to produce clear disparities in access to swimming and aquatic environments, which are closely linked to racial inequality (Arguelles, 2021). Long-standing barriers, including limited access to swimming facilities, clean water sources, and inclusive recreational spaces, contribute to lower rates of engagement with nature among BIPOC communities compared to white populations (McDougall et al., 2022).

Historically, swimming has been inaccessible to many people from ethnic minority backgrounds due to racial segregation, which was legally enforced and maintained through violence and intimidation (Ross et al., 2014). Although this is no longer legally sanctioned, the legacy of exclusion continues to impact participation today, despite ongoing efforts to bridge the gap. The ability to swim and to have access clean, safe swimming environments is a privilege often shaped by one's socioeconomic and racial background. Many individuals face barriers such as the cost of swimming lessons, lack of nearby facilities, and exclusionary practices that limit inclusivity (Whiltse, 2014). The contexts in which people learn to swim are shaped by intersecting factors, including social, economic, racial, and cultural influences (Waller & Bemiller, 2018). These factors contribute to a broader narrative of privilege, access, and exclusion, particularly in relation to cold water swimming. Cold water swimming has historically been a predominantly white space. For example, in the United States, 66% of Asian Americans reported not knowing how to swim, compared to 40% of white Americans (Waller & Norwood, 2011). This disparity reflects not only cultural and historical differences but also the financial and logistical barriers that can prevent individuals from engaging in swimming as a recreational or therapeutic activity.

Swimming is more than a leisure activity; it is a vital life skill that contributes to personal safety and survival. Drowning remains one of the leading causes of accidental death globally (Peden & McGee, 2003). Despite this, many individuals do not learn to swim due to a range of factors, including limited access, the high cost of lessons, and cultural fears or stigmas associated with swimming. These barriers highlight the need for more inclusive and accessible approaches to water-based interventions, such as cold-water swimming.

Relevance to Counselling Psychology

The framework of therapy is continually evolving, as the traditional model of two people in a room for 50 minutes may not meet the diverse needs of all individuals (Dutta & Mishra, 2024). Mental health difficulties are experienced in various ways, which means that support must be applicable to a wider range of individuals. It is therefore essential to develop and adapt therapeutic approaches with openness, curiosity, and innovation, acknowledging individual differences and the need for flexibility (Cloitre, 2015).

There has been significant growth in alternative and emerging approaches to mental health support, including digital tools such as therapy apps and AI-driven chatbots (Casu et al., 2024). The integration of artificial intelligence in mental health care is expanding, with potential to

support various aspects of psychological practice (Alhuwaydi, 2024). In addition to these, experiential therapies such as art, movement-based practices, and nature-based interventions are gaining attention as valid alternatives to standardized talk therapy (Liang & Bryant, 2024; Wang & Abdullah, 2024). Other innovative approaches include psychedelic-assisted therapy, where substances like psilocybin are used in controlled, therapeutic settings and the increasing availability of drug-assisted treatments for trauma, such as ketamine therapy clinics (Wolfson & Vaid, 2024; Olivia et al., 2024). These approaches are currently being studied in clinical trials for their potential to treat conditions such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance misuse (Korkmaz et al., 2024). Parallel to this is the rise of biohacking a movement rooted in life sciences that adopts unconventional methods to enhance health and performance (Bennett et al., 2009). Biohacking often follows a do-it-yourself method, encouraging individuals to take autonomy over their wellbeing through experimental practices (Meyer & Vergnaud, 2020). In this rapidly evolving landscape, it is vital that counselling psychology maintains a flexible and open to change approach. Remaining informed by new scientific research across disciplines ensures the profession can offer a wide range of interventions tailored to individual needs (Gangadharbatla, 2020; Cloitre, 2015). While the field of counselling psychology embraces values such as pluralism and reflexivity, it has been slow to incorporate non-traditional or embodied interventions often due to constraints within professional frameworks, limited resources, and the demands of clinical practice (Carroll & Nuro, 2002). There remains a strong reliance on established modalities such as CBT, which, while evidence-based and widely accepted, may limit the integration of experiential, somatic, and nature-based interventions such as cold-water swimming. This research, therefore, contributes to the field by highlighting the therapeutic potential of embodied practices. It challenges rigid professional boundaries and supports a broader, more inclusive view of psychological support that acknowledges the role of the body, the environment, and non-traditional therapeutic experiences.

It is valuable for counselling psychologists to gain insight into the lived experiences of individuals who engage in cold-water swimming as a means of managing mental health difficulties. Understanding their protective factors and motivations behind this practice can support more tailored and holistic approaches to psychological care. Cold-water swimming may also be incorporated into existing therapeutic frameworks such as CBT through behavioural activation strategies, graded exposure, or as part of therapeutic homework (Veale, 2008).

Engaging in cold-water swimming, particularly in natural settings, offers a break from the demands of the digital world, where constant exposure to smartphones and laptops is the

norm (Dekker & Baumgartner, 2024). This disconnection from technology allows individuals to re-engage with their sensory environment, through the sounds, smells, and tactile experiences associated with cold water and nature (Lv, Zhang & Li, 2024). One notable benefit is that even brief exposure to cold water has been shown to produce a positive and sustained impact on mood throughout the day, making it an efficient and accessible activity (Brooks, Howard & Neifer, 2005).

It is important to acknowledge that individuals respond differently to interventions, and cold-water swimming is not a universal solution (Ruggeri & Tansella, 2002). Mental health care would benefit from not just one-size-fits-all models and instead support a diverse range of strategies (Whitney & Costa, 2012). The combination of blue therapy, nature immersion, bodily attunement, and the unique sensory experience of cold-water swimming appears to have a direct correlation with improved mental health outcomes. As such, healthcare professionals should remain open to alternative and innovative interventions that respect the diversity of human needs and preferences. Cold-water swimming in natural environments should not be seen as a replacement for medical or psychological treatment but rather as a complementary approach that may support individuals experiencing anxiety or low mood (Christie & Elliott, 2024).

Currently, there are several studies highlighting the potential of this intervention, while also highlighting the need for more robust research (Hjorth et al., 2023; Massey et al., 2023). Although several case studies and personal narratives provide valuable initial insights into open-water and cold-water swimming (Oliver, 2021; Van Tulleken et al., 2018; Hjorth et al., 2022), the existing literature remains limited. Quantitative studies have primarily focused on measuring outcomes before and after cold-water swimming sessions, showing promising results. However, there is a notable gap in qualitative research that captures the rich, subjective experiences of individuals particularly those dealing with anxiety and low mood to better understand what it about this experience is that keeps participants coming back to cold water swimming in nature.

This gap highlights the importance of exploring how people make meaning of their experiences with cold-water swimming, and how this may serve as a coping mechanism for psychological distress. Gaining a deeper understanding of these lived experiences can inform the development of embodied, nature-based therapeutic practices. This could potentially lead to the creation of clinical guidelines, screening tools, or referral pathways for those who may benefit from incorporating cold-water swimming into their broader mental health care plans.

2. Methodology

Chapter overview

In this chapter, I will first outline the rationale behind the choice of design and methodology. The chapter will then continue to outline Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the methodology implemented, whilst drawing attention to my ontological and epistemological assumptions that are essential to this approach. I will also outline the data collection and participant sample. Following on from this an overview of the analysis process will be presented. Next, I will make explicit the ethical concerns that were involved in the study, while touching on how they were effectively managed. I also outline how research quality was adhered to whilst undertaking this project. Finally, the chapter will end with reflections on the research design, data collection and the analysis.

Research rationale

To address the research questions outlined in Chapter 1, a qualitative approach is most suitable. As stated in the research question, this study aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of those who cold water swim in nature that self-identifies as having anxiety or low mood. I am interested in those that engage in this phenomenon how they make sense of their experiences and what meaning making they get from cold water swimming in nature (Tulleken et al., 2018). It is important that when exploring emotional life and related phenomenon's, qualitative methods provide a more in depth understanding of how they are lived (Zahavi, 2018). This research is invested in exploring what the experience is like for those who engage in this and how this relates to their anxiety or low mood. It has been well documented the benefits of cold-water swimming on both physical and mental health, however there is limited research into what the experience is like, and the meaning participants prescribe to this phenomenon (Espeland et al., 2022). The researcher is interested in what meaning making those take from cold water swimming in nature, which could be found through a qualitative approach. As quantitative research was not a good fit as it is more interested in cause-effect relationships, thus qualitative methods felt like the more suitable way to meet the aims of the research.

IPA stood out for me as its aim is gathering rich and in-depth quality data of individuals lived experiences, given it is drive by phenomenology, the study of live experience and

hermeneutics meaning through interpretations (Alase, 2017). IPA is interested in individuals' subjective experiences and its method that pulls from various analytical tools, as it allows for a more in-depth comprehension of cold-water swimming in nature, as its accounts are from the participants and not hypothesis by the researcher. When conducting this research, I hold in mind why I am doing what I am doing, which speaks to 'what it is like' for the participant and what sense do they make of it (Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). This is in line with my values of the power threat meaning framework, as this aims to understand the person more through subjectivity (Johnstone, 2022). This framework is an alternative way to approach diagnosis as it seeks to find out more about what happened to someone and how it affected them (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). As cold-water swimming in nature holds a unique and subjective experience IPA was the best fit to explore this phenomenon. Finally, IPA comes from a critical realist lens which is in line with my epistemological viewpoint which is discussed below (Hood, 2016).

Epistemological and ontological reflexivity

The humanistic values and ideology embedded in counselling psychology have guided my research journey. Rooted in a phenomenological approach, my research requires reflection on my ontological and epistemological positioning, as these shape the entire research process (Willig, 2019). Ontology concerns what exists, while epistemology relates to how we come to know what exists, including how knowledge is created, understood, and interpreted (Willig, 2012). Engaging with these foundations has allowed me to reflect on my assumptions and how they influence the framing of my research question. This process has also deepened my awareness of how my identity as a psychologist has evolved and how I interpret the world around me (Willig, 2016). I value understanding subjective experiences and the meanings individuals attribute to them, rather than seeking a single, factual "truth" to explain psychological difficulties. This aligns with the humanistic lens of counselling psychology (Bhaskar, 2020). Accordingly, I adopt an epistemological position informed by phenomenology, which emphasises individual lived experience while remaining sensitive to the social contexts in which these experiences occur (Fletcher, 2017). From this standpoint, I locate myself within a critical realist paradigm (Fleetwood, 2005). Critical realism integrates a realist ontology, the belief that an objective reality exists with a relativist epistemology, which acknowledges that our access to this reality is mediated through subjective, socially constructed perspectives. This philosophical position allows me to recognise both the existence of an external reality (e.g. the phenomenon of cold-water swimming) and the multiple ways individuals experience and interpret it. Through this lens, I appreciate how qualitative research provides a platform for to give voice to peoples unique experiences and

aims to shed light on social justice in line with values of counselling psychology (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). I acknowledge that while there is an external reality beyond our constructions, our understanding of it is filtered through personal and social lenses shaped by upbringing, culture, and previous experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 2023). Although I share a connection with my participants as someone who also engages in cold-water swimming and self-identifies as experiencing anxiety, I recognise that I can only partially understand their lived experiences (Murray & Holmes, 2014). Our individual differences mean that my interpretations will always be partial. As such, I am committed to representing participants' meanings faithfully, guided by ethical research practices and ongoing reflexivity (Reid et al., 2018).

My pluralistic epistemological position reflects a belief in the coexistence of multiple truths, embracing the complexity and uncertainty inherent in human behaviour (Hanley & Winter, 2016). Within this, critical realism provides a flexible yet rigorous foundation: it holds that while an objective reality may exist, our experiences and knowledge of phenomena e.g. cold-water swimming in nature are socially and individually constructed (Jeong & Othman, 2016). It acknowledges the subjective emergence of knowledge, while maintaining that this knowledge relates to real-world structures and events (Carless-Kane & Nowell, 2024). Cold water swimming in nature is treated as a real practice that occurs in a natural environment and people are engaging in this activity, therefore it exists as a real phenomenon. However, how individuals interpret and experience this phenomenon is subjective. I believe that language speaks to individuals experience and how they describe the meaning making they take from the phenomenon (Ladefoged, 1990). I appreciate that participants are the experts in their experience and therefore a variety of meaning making experiences are encouraged. IPA celebrates the significance of participants lived experiences and places an importance on investigating the idiosyncratic accounts of those that engage in this activity (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2014). IPA values a small sample with the view of gathering rich in-depth data of the lived experience of those who cold water swim in nature. IPA empowers participants by providing a space to have their voices heard and aims to reduced power imbalances that are found in other research methods such as statistical power designs. Both of which are in line with my counselling psychology values, ethos as a practitioner and researcher.

In exploring cold water swimming in nature for those with anxiety or low mood as a phenomenon, I accept that each participant may have a unique and varied experience of cold-water swimming in nature and therefore it may be only possible for me to understand in part, based on my own interpretation and documenting of that experience. Interviewing several participants may shed light to multiple perspectives on what the experience is like for those who cold water swim in nature that self-identifies as having anxiety or low mood.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

As IPA is concerned with a detailed exploration of individual lived experience and how people interpret and make sense of their experience (Shinebourne, 2011; Murray & Holmes, 2014). The central aim focuses on uncovering subjectivity by taking a closer look into personal perceptions, phenomenological insights and experiential meanings opposed to finding out objective information (Van Manen, 2017). This is demonstrated in its question of what it is like to experience this phenomenon for this unique individual (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). With a focus on subjectivity and intersubjectivity with less of an emphasis on factual information or objectivity (Brew et al., 2017). Four pillars for high quality research in IPA include constructing a compelling unfolding narrative, developing a vigorous experiential account that is close to the participants world, while also attending to convergence and divergence (Nizza, Farr & Smith, 2021).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology was originally developed by Husserl (1927) where he spoke to the importance of intentionality as central to exploring the structures of meaning that constitute human experience. His standpoint involved uncovering the lifeworld by bracketing preconceptions, beliefs and biases to bring to light the essential core of a given phenomenon (Chan, Fung & Chien, 2013). This phenomenological reduction is aimed at uncovering the fundamental nature of experience by bracketing the everyday perspective (Alase, 2017). In contrast, Heideggerian phenomenology departs from Husserl's epistemological stance, shifting towards an ontological perspective (Leonard, 1989). Heidegger rejected the idea of a detached, observing subject, proposing instead that understanding is always interpretative and situated (Smith et al., 2012). He posited that our existence is fundamentally relational meaning that our being is always embedded in a specific context. From his standpoint, experience is not only subjective but also perspectival and interrelation, shaped by our engagement with others, events, and the world around us (Gergan, 2011). Phenomenological inquiry thus considers universal structures of human existence, including aspects such as embodiment, time, language, space as framing individual experiences (Ashworth, 2003). These structures do not diminish individuality but instead place it within context.

All above the above highlight how IPA aims to maintain the richness and specificity of individual experience while also highlighting the broader existential and relational structures that shape that experience. It aims to balance the idiographic depth of the particular with insights into shared aspects of the participant's lens (Larkin, Shaw & Flowers, 2019).

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics refers to a method of interpretation that originated from interpreting the bible and subsequently later was adapted for interpreting other information within qualitative data (Radmacher & Preus, 1984). Central to hermeneutic investigation is the role of conversation within the interpretation (VanLeeuwen et al., 2017). This means that it is not possible to have direct insight into people's experiences as the researchers' insights of their experience will be influenced by several factors and experiences, therefore a double hermeneutic process will be present (Colahan, Tunariu & Dell, 2012). This involves trying to make sense of the participant, who is also trying to make sense of their own experience. This means the first hermeneutic is the participants interpretation and lens of their own lived experience. While the second hermeneutic is the researcher's interpretation of the participants account while trying to understand their meaning making of their experience (Smith & Larkin, 2009). Hermeneutics is a key component of what IPA analysis entails as it is a layered interpretative process with an emphasis on dialogical and contextual nature of comprehension (Joseph, 2014). This highlights the interpretative nature of IPA by engaging deeply in their perspective.

Idiography

IPA is also interested in idiographic phenomena as its focused on a detailed analysis of subjective phenomenon. This allows for the focus on individual experience as it acknowledges that humans are unique and have individual differences (Shinebourne, 2011). Idiographic methods speak to the subjective and interpersonal experiences that entail feelings, thoughts, behaviours and everything else being human encompasses that cannot be as easily accessed through quantitative methods that are stricter and more inflexible in their approach (Sofaer, 1999). It is hoped that exploring subjective experiences which aim to be transferable.

Alternative qualitative methods considered

There is a wide variety of methodologies available to undertake qualitative research (Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004). Methodology speaks to an approach that includes both philosophy and methods, while method speaks to how information is gathered and analysed. Other methodologies were considered for this research, however IPA was most in line with my epistemological and ontological position and what the research set out to explore in terms of meaning making and experience (Smith, 2017). The sole reason for choosing IPA over other qualitative methods was that IPA provides a more in depth understanding of those who cold water swim in nature that self-identify as having anxiety or low mood, while focusing on idiography and meaning making of cold-water swimming in nature.

Different methodologies were considered at the start of the research process such as grounded theory as it asks a range of questions about psychological processes by looking at what is happening; however, it was ruled out due to its use predominantly towards constructing a theory (Cutcliffe, 2000). This method was appealing due to its approach and the possibility of acquiring a new theory about cold swimming in nature. That said, I am not focused on developing a theory about social processes. This methodological approach holds the assumption that social events and processes have an objective reality and as a result how the individual interprets this will affect their outcome (Holton, 2000). Ultimately, I did not aim to construct a new theory of cold swimming in nature as this knowledge already exists in the literature, but I wanted to understand more about the lived experience (Wuest, 2012). Grounded theory holds in mind that the data will speak for itself and therefore the researchers' reflections are not as insightful, and I wanted to be given the opportunity to fully immerse myself in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1998). However, this could have been achieved to some degree if I used Charmaz (2017) approach who emphasis the researcher's role in constructing the theory with the participants. Nonetheless I still aligned most with IPA, and its approach best fitted my research question.

Discourse analysis was also considered for the research as it values the use of language and meaning making in understanding the given phenomenon. However, its underpinnings believe that language creates the meaning and therefore the reality (Yazdannik, Yousefy & Mohammadi, 2017). This viewpoint places a higher emphasis on the language used rather than the person (Willig, 2003). This does not align with my overall values and the research question given I do not want to explore the individual life word and factors outside of language (Fairclough, 2001). I place importance on the language participants use to describe their experiences as it speaks to the meaning they prescribe to the phenomena however language is not the only factor as cold water swimming in nature is multifaceted (Bondarouk & Ruel,

2004). I also wanted to focus on the individuals' experiences rather than groups which is often what discourse analysis is used for.

Data collection and participant sample

Sampling

To answer the research questions and adhere to ethical guidelines, participants needed to meet several inclusion criteria. Sampling of this research study was theoretically consistent with the IPA framework. In IPA research, samples are selected on the basis to offer understanding into a particular experience or perspective on the phenomena of the study. As a rule of thumb, it is required to recruit a homogenous sample for high quality IPA that provides a detailed analysis with the aim to create in depth knowledge of the phenomena (Noon, 2018). A homogenous sample means collecting data from a similar group of people such as a shared experience (Jager, Putnick & Bornstein, 2017). The suggested sample size for a Doctoral level in the UK is between eight to ten participants, which is in line with my sample size as I recruited eight participants (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). A purposive sample was recruited given I intentionally selected this group of participants based on the specific needs to address the research question (Eitkan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). A snowball method was also used as the recruitment expanded through word of mouth (Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019).

A limitation of the study relates not to the use of snowball sampling per se, but to the demographic homogeneity of the sample that emerged through this recruitment strategy. While snowball sampling does not inherently result in the recruitment of participants from similar racial, cultural, or socioeconomic backgrounds, in this study, participants were recruited through interconnected networks that appeared to be demographically similar. This homogeneity functioned as a methodological strength in supporting the idiographic and experiential depth sought within an IPA approach. However, it also limited the inclusion of participants from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and those identifying as BIPOC, thereby constraining the transferability of the findings. Importantly, the demographic similarity of participants may also reflect the composition of the cold-water swimming in nature groups and communities within which recruitment occurred, raising questions about accessibility, visibility, and inclusion within these spaces. This points to a need for future research to explore how experiences of cold-water swimming in nature may differ across more

diverse socioeconomic and cultural contexts, and to consider recruitment strategies that extend beyond existing social networks (Gobo, 2004).

Participant criteria

The inclusion criteria included participants that self-identified as having anxiety and or low mood that cold water swam in nature. This nature requirement meant swimming outdoors e.g. pond, lake, river or ocean. Participants were required to have engaged in cold water swimming for over 2 months to be able to speak about the experience in a more meaningful way, as research suggested it takes around 66 days for a habit to form and experience something in full (Lally, Wardle & Gardner, 2011; Lally & Gardner, 2013). Furthermore, in previous research physiological adaptations to interventions often occur with a 6-to-8-week period (Biddle et al., 2019). I did not choose to have a certain frequency for attending cold water swimming to keep the research open, I acknowledge the difficulties for those having to commute to blue space and lastly the focus not being on quantity but quality of the experience. They were required to self-identify as having anxiety or low mood, or both. I chose this self-identification as this was in line with my humanistic values as a counselling psychologist and allowed me to step away from the medical model of using psychometric measures to establish anxiety or low mood. For me self-identifying allowed for a more inclusive sample. This helped me reduce any power imbalance and empowered participants to choose participation in the research rather than me choosing for them. Moreover, I chose 'low mood' over 'depression' to step away from labels, clinical diagnosis and pathologizing clients. As anxiety and low mood are a normal part of being human so this was more in line with my counselling values. I chose to explore anxiety and low mood as they are the most common mental health difficulties and they are often comorbid (Stansfeld et al., 2016; Pollack, 2005). Moreover, since COVID-19 levels of depression and anxiety have increased by 25% globally, therefore this felt clinically important (Kupcova, et al., 2023). While well-being was initially considered due to my holistic values, I chose to focus on anxiety and low mood as I felt that mental health provides a more tailored and psychologically grounded lens for exploring the impact and meaning making of cold-water swimming in nature. By focusing on core mental health experiences, this research aims to offer more specific insights into the potential benefits of cold-water swimming for individuals experiencing psychological distress. I hold the belief that supporting mental health can have a positive knock-on effect on overall well-being, as when individuals feel mentally supported, they are better positioned to engage with broader aspects that well-being encompasses.

As the study was conducted in English and was conducted in the UK, the language criteria were defined as in English. I chose to be able to communicate in English due to my own

language and wanting to make the best sense of their experience therefore their first language in English was deemed important. The rationale for choosing anxiety and low mood for homogeneity in the sample was guided through anxiety and low mood being core features of psychological distress. Thus, selecting participants who present with these clinical features of a shared psychological presentation alongside engaging in the same activity e.g. cold-water swimming in nature allowed for a homogenous sample. I acknowledge that demographics such as gender, age and other factors may influence the data. Participants were required to swim in nature when talking about their experience, which was screened for with the gathering of key demographics, such as what location do you cold water swim in nature. If participants identified their location as an indoor pool or ice bath, they would have not met the inclusion criteria and therefore would have been excluded.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria Adults (18+ years). Engage in cold water swimming in the UK. Have engaged in cold water swimming for more than 2 months. Cold water swim in nature e.g. pond, sea, ocean, lake, river. Self-identify as having anxiety, low mood or both. Be able to speak and communicate in English.
Exclusion criteria Cold water swimming in locations that are not in nature e.g. swimming pool, ice bath

Recruitment

After obtaining ethical approval from City University of London (See appendix E) participants were recruited through a poster (See appendix A) displayed in person on a noticeboard at a pond location in Hampstead, London, chosen for its three ponds and the researcher's geographical convenience. The poster was also shared in cold water swimming social groups on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp across various parts of the UK, as this was the primary research location and time constraints prevented traveling to other sites. Additionally, word of mouth helped recruit four participants from Clevedon, North Somerset, England. This recruitment method may affect the transferability of the findings due to the limited geographical

scope, as the experience of swimming in nature may vary between those living in urban versus rural environments.

In addition, I contacted an author of a research paper I had read, who shared a personal account of cold-water swimming in nature, to inquire if she would be interested in participating in my study, as her experience fitted my inclusion criteria. There were several ethical considerations to keep in mind when reaching out, such as respecting her privacy and obtaining consent, since although her account was published, it did not imply consent to be contacted about it. Therefore, I approached her very carefully, acknowledging the sensitive nature of her personal story. I expressed how moved I was by her paper and her account of grief and shared my own passion for cold water swimming in nature. I was careful to emphasize that there was no obligation or pressure to participate and that it was entirely her choice. I also asked if, should she choose not to participate, she might share the study details with others who might be interested. I made sure to be respectful and transparent throughout. After these points were addressed, she agreed to participate and kindly shared the research poster with her cold-water swimming community. As a result, several participants contacted me via email to express their interest in the study.

I used purposive sampling as this targeted a group of individuals that had relevant experience. This was supplemented by a snowball strategy where initial participants referred others that resulted in four potential participants reaching out which were included in the research. For the participants who reached out via email to partake in the study due to meeting the inclusion criteria they were then contacted via email or phone to arrange an interview. Once the interview was scheduled, they were then given the information sheet (See appendix D) by email which detailed the participant criteria, the purpose of the study, confidentiality, anonymity, the voluntary nature of the participation and their right to withdraw from the study despite consent given (See appendix C). Eight participants were recruited in total, everyone that reached out was able to part take in the study as they met the inclusion criteria.

Participants

The table presents participants' pseudonyms, key demographics, where they cold water swim, how long they have doing this for, how often they go cold water swimming in nature and their self-identification of anxiety, low mood or both. The participants consisted of eight females. All participants were given a pseudonym. Any possible identifying information was anonymised throughout for study for protection of their identity.

Table 2. Patient Demographic Information

Pseudonymous	Age	Gender Identity	Ethnicity	Length	Often	location	Self-identification
Bella	51	Female	White British	3 years	Weekly	Ocean	Both anxiety and low mood
Fran	54	Female	White British	6 years	Weekly	Lake	Both anxiety and low mood
Sally	31	Female	White Irish	3 years	weekly	Ocean	Both anxiety and low mood
Polly	28	Female	White British	4 years	daily	Pond	Both anxiety and low mood
Holly	27	Female	White British	4 years	Weekly	Pond or Ocean	Both anxiety and low mood
Alice	47	Female	White Non-British	6 years	weekly	River, lake, Ocean	Both anxiety and low mood
Beth	71	Female	White British	10 years	Weekly	Ocean	Both anxiety and low mood
Molly	21	Female	White British	3.4 years	Weekly	Lake, River	Both anxiety and low mood

Data collection

The interview schedule

Interviews took place between October 2024 and April 2025 and lasted between 45 - 90 minutes each. Participants were interviewed online using the City University teams link, a secure online platform and one interview was taken place face to face at a private room at City University London. As we live in the digital age remote interviews are deemed to be as effective as face-to-face interviews (Cook & Doyle, 2002). An informed consent form was obtained from each participant before the interview began. I ensured they were again aware of their rights, limits of confidentiality and anonymity while also checking in if they had any questions before the interview started. I conducted the demographics screeners before the interview started and made participants aware that if they needed to stop at any point or take

a minute, we can pause the interview. The interview schedule was intended to promote discussion on key topics and prompts where needed through semi structured one-to-one interviews, that ranged from generic to more specific details through a series of open-ended questions. My interview schedule was discussed with my research supervisor to ensure appropriateness in the research questions that they are open and explorative rather than making presumptions. 11 questions were asked that allowed participants to reflect on their experience of cold-water swimming in nature (See appendix B) The questioned helped the interview schedule feel contained and gave a guidance for participants to ensure we covered the basics while also offering room for diversion.

Semi structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data as this would have spoken to the idiographic standpoint I came from. One to one interview enables a more in depth, flexible approach by hearing about their unique experience through open ended questions (Smith, 1995). The interview was co constructed with participants as responses were probed when required with follow up questions (Robinson, 2023). The final question was open to the participants by asking was there anything they wanted to bring forward about their experience that I did not cover.

A pilot interview was conducted prior to the main study to evaluate whether the interview schedule adequately addressed the research question (Majid et al., 2017). The pilot was conducted with a participant referred to as “Sally” (pseudonym), who was included in the final study. She met the inclusion criteria and was recruited through a snowball sample into a WhatsApp swimming group. Analysis of the pilot interview indicated that several questions were overly focused on the impacts and outcomes of cold-water swimming in nature, rather than on participants lived experiences. In particular, the wording of the questions prompted participants to discuss perceived effects and benefits, resulting in data that emphasised influence and outcomes rather than rich, experiential accounts. Review of the pilot transcript revealed that the data generated did not offer novel qualitative insights, but instead echoed findings already well established in the literature, such as the physical benefits of cold-water swimming (e.g., increased endorphin release and muscle recovery). As a result, the interview schedule was revised to better capture participants’ subjective experiences and the meanings they ascribed to cold-water swimming. This involved rewording questions to be more open-ended and experiential in focus. For example, one of the questions was “what are the benefits of cold-water swimming that you find” and as a result of the pilot interview this was then revised

to “What keeps you coming back to cold-water swimming in nature?”. These subtle linguistic changes encouraged more reflective and phenomenologically oriented responses than those elicited during the initial pilot interview. This allowed me to step away from the questions that overly focused on impact and outcomes.

The revised interview schedule was reviewed and approved by the research supervisor and subsequently tested in a second pilot interview that was included in the research. This resulted in clearer, richer data that were more closely aligned with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). As a result, data from the initial pilot interview were excluded from the final analysis.

Given IPA seeks to enter participants frame of reference it was essential to build rapport and cultivate trust of participants (Stranden, 2009). The data extraction draws out their stories, emotions and perspectives. Holding this in mind I strived to come from a more conversational angle with intent. The interview schedule started broad to give participants the opportunity to speak to their experience in general and then more specific questions were asked (Bolderston, 2012). My familiarity with the interview schedule enabled me to use the questions flexibly, adapting them to suit everyone’s communication style. There were a few noticeable differences between participants as some were more talkative and open, while others were more reserved and less expressive. As a result, I used prompts more frequently with certain participants than with others.

Data storage and protection

To protect participants confidentiality, the following measures were in place in line with Data Protection Act, 2018. All appropriate measures were taken to ensure the protection and secure storage of the research data (Rumbold & Pierscionek, 2017). All data was anonymised using pseudonyms, recordings on Microsoft teams were stored in an encrypted folder that was password protected. To protect confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts, and the data was handled in line with BPs guidelines in accordance with City, University of London’s guidelines, the recordings and transcripts will likely be retained for 10 years following the completion of the analysis. After this period, the recordings will be deleted, and the transcripts destroyed, in line with the university's data management policies. The data protection act (UK Government, 1998) was always adhered to (Act, 1998).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from City University of London's Research Ethics Committee ETH2324-0573 for this research study (See appendix E). The research study is in line with the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics and Conduct (BPS,) while also adhering to data protection GDPR regulations (Kwiatkowski & Jackson, 2021).

Ethical considerations were considered within various stages of the research study. To protect participants privacy, they were informed and reassured that all their personal information would be handled with absolute privacy and anonymity. All the required steps were taken to eliminate any identifying information. I held in mind the BPS code of ethics for research such as respect, integrity, competence and responsibility. My aim as the researcher was to make sense of the participants experiences through interpretation regarding their lived experience opposed to factual, objective accounts about cold water swimming in nature.

I was mindful of the power dynamics and imbalances within the research and participant relationship as this is an ethical consideration to hold in mind (Nduna, 2020). The power imbalance exists due to the researcher leading the interview, starting it and finishing it and may hold different levels of power such as higher level of education (Riley, Schouten & Cahill, 2003). As a result, I aimed to create a credible research relationship by communicating to each participant about their rights in the research study, providing them with the information sheet and checked in if they had any questions on this, while also checking they consented to be recorded (Verbeke et al., 2023). I also tried to hold in mind to complete the interview in a casual manner to make participants feel at ease. I was inclusive of diversity as one participant was neurodiverse therefore requested the question to be emailed to her prior so she could familiarise herself with the questions and reduce her anxiety levels (Gupta & Aman, 2025). I vowed to reduce where possible the power imbalances and be inclusive to help strengthen the relationship. For example, I made participants aware that there were no wrong or right answers when describing their experiences and they were experts in their own experiences of cold-water swimming in nature, I was just genuinely interested in hearing more about their story. I made them aware of my background such as being on the Doctorate, hopes for the future and my own interest in cold water swimming in nature to build rapport. IPA suggests for in depth, rich data about participants experiences however it's important to hold in mind what participants want to share and disclose and to respect these boundaries.

I respected my responsibility as the researcher to monitor participants throughout the interview in case difficult feelings arise or they struggled in the interview when reflecting on their experiences and mental health. As the research explored participants anxiety and low mood, I was cognisant this may trigger emotional reactions, therefore I was prepared to allow space for this while also holding in mind my role as researcher and not a therapist in session. I had a distress protocol to refer to if participants distress became too overwhelming (See appendix K). I was attentive to their needs if they became upset or distressed and offered breaks to slow down the pace of the interview, or if they needed anything else. There were moments where participants needed extra time in between some of the questions when speaking about reasons they started engaging in cold water swimming in nature as this was often a meaningful time in their life. I also respected the boundaries and limits as a researcher within the interview and holding in mind my limitations of the ability to help given this was not a counselling session. However, I used my interpersonal sensitivity, communication skills and empathy to help navigate any distress which allowed us to contain and continue with the interview in a meaningful way. The interviews appeared to provide a reflective space for participants to reflect on cold water swimming in nature and brought up material they did not think of until asked the questions. As I am personally invested in this topic through personal experience, I had an ethical obligation to mind myself as at times I over resonated with the participants experiences of cold-water swimming in nature and wanted to ensure to stay within their frame of reference.

Informed consent

Participants were provided with an information sheet before the interview, which provided information on the nature and purpose of the study to support informed decision-making regarding their participation (Bhutta, 2004). Given the potentially emotive subject matter, the sheet detailed possible risks associated with participation, the voluntary nature of involvement, and the right to withdraw up until July 2025, so the researcher has enough time to recruit a different participant. It also included options to pause, terminate, or reschedule the interview if needed or the participant became distressed. This process was in line with the ethical principles set out by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2021; Oates et al., 2021) emphasising the importance of adhering to guidelines to ensure the correct treatment of participants rights and well-being. Moreover, participants were given sufficient time to review and consider the study's goal and procedures in advance, this ensured fully informed consent.

Data analysis

Rather than a preconceived theory or hypothesis, the starting point for IPA is the participant's subjective lived experience. Smith and Larkins approach was used to inform the analytic process of IPA by making use of their guidance protocol (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2021). The analysis was applied to each of the transcripts of the participants. The process for this entailed transcribing the interviews, while paying close attention to the key elements such as crying, pausing, body language many several other factors (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). All identifying information was removed from the transcript to adhere to BPS guidelines of protecting participants anonymity. The interviews followed IPA guidelines of transcribing by making use of margins on either side of the transcriptions for note writing. Details of this step-by-step IPA analysis that was utilized is described below.

Reading and re reading the transcript on repeat to gain access into each participants world and therefore become immersed in the data. This step involves listening to the recordings alongside reading the transcript to enable a more well thought out analysis (Smith, 2017). I also noted any reflections and thoughts that came up for me from my initial readings. Exploratory notes were made on the right-hand side margin with initial reflections, views and thoughts and anything that stood out as interesting and important to the research question. This allowed for more descriptive comments while holding in mind descriptive, conceptual and linguistic aspects of the data. I held in mind to be open to the data, while bracketing of assumptions and be mindful of my own biases. In my experience this was the most time-consuming aspect of the analytical procedure. An example of these exploratory notes can be found in (See appendix F).

The focus then moved on from description to interpretation by making use of experiential statements that developed from participants unique experiences and my interpretations from that as I held in mind linguistic and psychological views. The statements were drawn on the left-hand side in red pen (See Appendix G). Here the aim was to condense the data to a narrower insight without losing its richness and complexity. The purpose of the emerging themes is to integrate participants experience while also using my own interpretations. My choice of emerging themes was found by looking out for frequency of occurrence, relevance to the research question and significance to the participant. The next step involved making connections between statements by creating clusters and they were then put into categories based on similarities and relatedness which allowed me to create Personal Experiential

Themes (PET'S). A table was created which consisted of PET'S, sub themes and quotes taken from the transcripts that were considered significant (See appendix H and I).

Steps one to four of the IPA analytical process were systematically repeated for all eight transcripts. A cross-case analysis was then conducted to explore patterns across the data. This stage focused on identifying both convergence and divergence between individual cases, as well as relevant contextual factors, to develop a comprehensive table of Group Experiential Themes (GETs) that encapsulated the shared elements of participants' experiences across the dataset (See appendix J). Themes that were not aligned with the overarching research question or fell outside the defined scope of the study were not included. This process, while rigorous, was necessarily selective to adhere to the interpretative nature of IPA.

To establish the validity and transparency of the themes generated, I engaged in a collaborative and iterative process with my research supervisor. This dialogue helped maintain a balance between staying close to participants lived experiences and applying an interpretative lens aligned with the double hermeneutic that is central to IPA. Upon critical reflection, I drew on earlier supervision discussions during the PETs analysis assignment, which had highlighted the importance of allowing space for nuance and complexity in theme development. Some themes initially appeared to fall outside the central focus of the research question, but as they were developed further, they provided valuable contextual insights.

Building on the finalised themes, I constructed a narrative account to represent participants' experiences of cold-water swimming in natural environments in relation to their anxiety and low mood (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). This account was shaped by the dynamic interplay between participants' descriptions and my interpretative engagement, again reflecting the double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2012). Throughout this phase, ongoing supervision and reflexive practice, which played a key role in identifying and challenging my assumptions, thereby enhancing the depth and rigour of the interpretative process (Deshpande & Rao, 2024). Finally, the analysis drew on existing theoretical frameworks and psychological concepts to further contextualize and deepen understanding of the emergent themes, supporting both analytical depth and relevance to the wider literature. The eight participants will be given access to a detailed description of the study. Moreover, they will have access to the doctoral thesis via City, University of London on their website. While also being accessible through the thesis repository submission that makes it available for future scholars and practitioners.

Limitations of IPA

IPA has faced criticism regarding the transfer ableness to relevant populations of its findings, primarily due to the typically small sample sizes used (Pringle et al., 2011). It has been up for debate that these limited samples hinder the development of broadly applicable conclusions. However, research by Smith et al. (2009) contends that working with a small number of participants enables a more in-depth and nuanced exploration of individual experiences, thus contributing unique insights which is an invaluable space in the research field. Smith et al. (2009) also suggest that IPA lacks "stand-alone integrity," indicating that quality data extracted is not always assured. Consequently, the robustness of an IPA study is largely contingent upon the researcher's reflexivity, specifically, their ability to critically engage with and manage their own assumptions throughout the processes of data analysis and interpretation. Another limitation of IPA relates to the expectations and demands it places on participants, particularly in terms of their ability to articulate their experiences in rich and meaningful detail (Pringle et al., 2011). This can pose significant challenges for individuals with limited language proficiency, learning difficulties, neurodiverse populations and where English is not their first language as these factors that impact the data excursion (Asmal, Lamp & Tan, 2022). It also places pressure on the research for rich quality data which not all participants can articulate what an experience is like. This speaks to the concerns about IPAs inclusivity and cultural applicability, suggesting that the method may not adequately capture or reflect the diverse ways in which experiences are communicated across different sociocultural backgrounds (Washington et al., 2023). This was found in the current research as it lacked diversity and I acknowledge the difficulties participant's faced in making sense of their experience, therefore my analysis is my best attempt at capturing this. The lack of diversity could be accounted to both the topic and methodological issues as cold-water swimming in nature may attract a relatively narrow demographic (e.g. predominantly white, middle-class, able-bodied people), especially in Western contexts. There may be barriers to access to natural water spaces, and socioeconomic disadvantages that may also limit who participates in the activity. Accessing participants may have posed a challenge as this was conducted through online spaces or social media may unintentionally reach only those within specific networks (e.g., people already familiar with research, educated, or digitally literate).

In the current research there was a clear pattern of white British females from a middle-classed background that engaged in the research. There was a lack of diversity of those from different ethnic backgrounds and males. Despite efforts to be inclusive, the participant group lacked diversity in terms of ethnicity, age range, and gender. This may be partly due to the topic itself, cold-water swimming is often associated with white, middle-class wellness culture in the UK,

which could limit the demographic reach of the study. However, the research method may also have contributed given the recruitment through online swimming communities and social media may have excluded individuals without regular internet access or who are not engaged with these platforms.

As phenomenology it focused on the experience, IPA seeks rich data that holds into account a person detailed experience. Therefore, structured interviews can restrict the possibility for participants to open up and be heard (Shaw, 2011). Quality, rich and in-depth personal exchange is preferable. Consequently, IPA is dependent on expert interviewing as participants should be provided with the opportunity to be able to explain their individual experience, reflect and make sense of their experiences (Charlick et al., 2016). Language is also important to consider when specifying what participants can think consider and reflect due to socially framed perspectives which can have an impact on how they see their experience (Hennink, 2008). As IPA involves a co-created, phenomenological analysis taking into consideration an interpretive lens of the participants experience that also incorporates the researcher's worldview (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Reflexivity

Self-reflection is an essential part of being a researcher, the ability to reflect on my own position and assumptions and how this impacts the data (Karcher et al., 2024). I am aware that I am personally invested in the topic as I also engage in cold water swimming in nature as I self-identify as experiencing anxiety. Therefore, I have my own assumptions of what it is like to cold water swim in nature therefore I held this in mind to remain open and curious about the findings that may confirm or not my assumptions. I also need to be mindful to not over identify with the participants experiences and recognise although there may be similarities, we have all had different upbringings and experiences (Bell, 1998). I strived to stay within their frame of reference by taking a curious approach and really sat back and listened to their stories. Similarities between the researcher and participant can aid rapport and therefore help with closeness which means participants would feel more safe sharing their experiences (Probst, 2016). From a personal standpoint my own experience and interest in cold water swimming is what led me to want to explore this topic further. This will no doubt have informed my perspective on and interpretation of the data. I am mindful with qualitative research places an emphasis on reflective practice while drawing on the researcher as a significant part of the research process. In order not to contaminate the data the researcher must adhere to identifying and reflection on their own personal assumptions and experiences as they engage

with the participants insights into the phenomenon (Clair et al., 2022). Therefore, I made a conscious effort to 'bracket' any assumptions I may have held about this topic. Reflexivity enabled me to cultivate self-awareness and acknowledge the influence and biases I may bring to each stage of the research process (Gao, 2020). For instance, given my personal interest in cold-water swimming, it is possible that participants assumed I held a positive view of the activity. This, in turn, may have influenced how they chose to present their own experiences.

IPA encourages the researcher to hold in mind both their epistemological stance and their personal reflexivity (Willig, 2019). In line with this, I actively engaged in reflexive practice throughout the research, using a reflexivity diary that I regularly returned to for critical reflection (Nadin & Cassell, 2006). Some of my recorded reflections included moments where I noticed myself steering the interview too closely toward my own assumptions about the participants' meaning making. I had to consciously remind myself to reserve this interpretative work for the double hermeneutic process during analysis.

At times, I also noticed myself slipping into a therapeutic mode, particularly when participants spoke about deeply personal psychological experiences such as suicidal thoughts or grief. I found myself becoming over-invested, especially when I shared similar emotional experiences. This took me away from holding a purely research-focused stance. I had to regularly remind myself to remain curious, open, and grounded in the research role ensuring participants were given the space to frame their own narratives without my influence shaping them prematurely.

I am also mindful of the privilege embedded within this research topic. The ability to engage in cold-water swimming in natural environments often involves a level of access such as living near clean blue spaces, affording the low but present costs (e.g., pond access), and having learned to swim. Furthermore, participant recruitment in locations such as Hampstead, London an affluent area may mean that the sample is drawn from a more socio-economically advantaged group. These socio-cultural and economic factors likely shape participants' perceptions of life and mental health, and this context must be considered during interpretation. In line with the ethos of Counselling Psychology, which places value on addressing social justice issues, it is essential that findings from this study are considered in a way that seeks to benefit a broad and diverse population, rather than only those with existing privilege (Yardley, 2000; Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). Therefore, future recommendations will include suggestions for research involving more socially inclusive and diverse samples, as outlined in Chapter 4.

Research Quality

This research project was guided by Yardley's (2008) four principles of qualitative validity: This included sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; coherence; transparency, and impact and importance. Sensitivity to context was demonstrated by grounding the study in existing literature, maintaining reflexivity throughout, and attending to participants' emotional needs during interviews (Yardley, 2017).

Commitment and rigour were upheld through ethical safeguards like inclusion/exclusion criteria, screening, and debriefing, as well as deep engagement with data and frequent supervision to ensure theme development remained grounded in participants' narratives.

To ensure coherence and transparency, I clearly documented the research process and provided reflective insights on methodology and personal context, including what came up for me personally because of hearing participants experiences. Thus, I kept referring to my reflexivity diary.

Finally, the study aims to contribute to the under-researched area of what the experience is like for those who cold water swim that experience anxiety or low mood, with potential implications for clinical practice and public health. The credibility of findings was enhanced through feedback from my supervisor, allowing for refinement of themes based on reader perceptions.

Dissemination

I hope to present the findings of this research to both those in the academic and clinical field, I plan to disseminate the results through publication in peer-reviewed journals that align with the research topic and audience. I found I was drawn to the following journals as they identified as the most in line with my research findings. Health psychology open, given the strong interlink between health and mental health interventions. The British Journal of Health Psychology aligns with my values as a counselling psychologist given the link with the BPS supporting the link between health and counselling psychology. Finally, sports psychiatry felt fitting given the link between physical health and mental health which is a central theme to the study.

Chapter 3. Analysis

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the eight interview transcripts I identified three Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and nine sub-themes (Table 3). They provide insights into how participants experienced cold water swimming in nature, that self-identified as having anxiety, low mood or both. The account highlights the varied perceptions reflected across the dataset that speaks to both similarities and differences. Given the extensive volume of data, the analysis is limited to addressing select issues and specific aspects of the overall experience. Themes were generated based on their apparent significance and relevance to the research aim. I assessed this by focusing on frequency and repetition of themes that appeared on several occasions across different participant's data, as they reflected similar experiences. I also came from the lens of looking at issues that elicited strong emotional language given the nature of the topic as this felt most meaningful for participants. While also staying aligned with the research aims to understand the phenomenon being researched. I ensured participants were adequately represented, and their experiences were captured to ensure meaning and context were preserved throughout.

This chapter seeks to present a direct account of participants' experiences, offering readers insight into their perspectives and lived realities by including direct quotes from the transcripts and a tentative interpretive lens was always used. Nevertheless, the analysis presented here speaks to a subjective interpretation, representing a co-construction of meaning between the participants' narratives and my own positionality as the researcher. It is recognised that an alternative researcher might have identified different themes or selected alternative excerpts, leading to a potentially different interpretation. Coming from a pluralistic lens I can hold these tensions. I did this by engaging in regular reflective practice through my reflexivity diary, by addressing my own assumptions and emotional responses. This helped me see through the lens of being a critical researcher as I am mindful of my position in the research, given I am personally invested in the topic which may have influenced the interpretation the data. For example, I found at times I was overidentifying with the same meaning making participants shared about their experience and I had to really take more of an active listening role in these incidents. I reflect on this in Chapter 4 as I am aware that there can be multiple meanings to the data rather than a single way of interpreting the data therefore, I had to remain open and curious. I immersed myself in the data on many occasions each time trying to look at things from a different angle to ensure I did not miss anything and could give voice to less obvious meaning making information. I adhere to offering my personal analysis of the participants experiences in relation to connections between themes as this honours the double

hermeneutic process in line with IPA. The purpose of IPA is to explore both the commonalities and unique aspects of each participant's experience, rather than a define single group norm. To protect participants confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned. The use of quotations was used throughout the analysis using relevant line numbers, page and pseudonym.

Table 3. Group experiential themes and sub themes.

Group experiential themes	Sub themes	Participants per theme
The activating emotional journey	Ability to experience emotions	7/8
	Mind body connection	8/8
Finding myself in the water	Part of identity	6/8
	Self-acceptance and belonging	6/8
	Inner child and play	4/8
Psychological anchorage	Grounding and psychological stability	8/8
	Anxiety relief through here and now	8/8
	Sense of pride, freedom and empowerment	8/8

The activating emotional journey

The first GET describes the way participants experienced the impact of cold immersion and natural surroundings on both mind and body. Their accounts suggested that cold water provided an emotional 'reset'. They often reported the experience of accessing, processing and releasing emotions in a way that felt healing to them, during and after cold immersion.

“I think I like feeling that because it's a bit like internal emotion really because you start warming up. I mean what's important is when you start warming up inside and so then you start feeling yourself becoming” - p 9 Beth

Here, Beth spoke about her experience of cold-water swimming in nature and her journey of grief following the loss of her daughter to suicide. She described an embodied comparison between the physical process of warming up after cold-water swimming and the emotional

process of warming up internally. This appeared to reflect a movement through her internal emotional experience that she associated with this embodied practice. The language Beth used to describe her internal experience suggested an inward shift that she experienced as part of the meaning she made of cold-water swimming in nature. In particular, the phrase “warming up inside” spoke to the somatic quality of this experience and the role of embodiment within it.

Considering how Beth spoke about her struggle to process and navigate her grief since her daughter’s death, her description of beginning to feel herself “becoming” may reflect a sense of reconnecting with herself, especially as she acknowledged during the interview that she had previously avoided engaging with her grief.

Across seven of the eight participants, it was evident that immersion in cold water in nature was accompanied by strong emotional experiences. Participants described their engagement with cold-water swimming as helping them feel more connected to themselves through heightened sensory awareness and attention to the present moment. From their accounts, being in nature appeared to provide a sense of safety that enabled participants to lean into vulnerability and access their emotions through embodied experience. Participants’ accounts shed light on cold-water swimming as a way of becoming more self-aware and accessing emotions through the perceived connection between mind and body during immersion.

The three sub-themes were each connected, in different ways, to the emotional experiences participants associated with cold-water swimming in nature. These emotional experiences were articulated as regulating, freeing, and, at times, transformative. Cold-water swimming in nature was described as offering an emotional journey that made deep and meaningful experiences possible. The following section explores each sub-theme in turn, drawing on participant quotations to illuminate the overarching theme.

Sub-theme 1: Ability to have an emotional experience

The first sub-theme reflects how participants described encountering emotions through the lived, embodied experience of cold-water swimming in nature. Their accounts suggested that entering the cold water was often experienced as a moment in which attention was drawn into the body. Participants described becoming acutely aware of sensation, breath, and physical responses, and within this heightened bodily awareness, emotions began to surface. For many, immersion in cold water appeared to create a sense of exposure. Participants spoke

about feeling emotions directly, noticing shifts in feeling as the cold took hold, with bodily sensation and emotional experience unfolding together.

“It’s provided a space to actually think about them rather than not bottling them up and most of the time, it’s overall it’s a positive. You’re not meant to bustle up your emotions, are you? So technically it’s a good thing” – Molly, p.59

Here, Molly was asked to reflect on a moment in cold-water swimming in nature that felt meaningful to her. She described how cold-water swimming in nature provided her with an opportunity to feel her feelings. Molly articulated clear meaning-making around her experience, describing how engagement with cold-water swimming enabled her to process emotions as they arose, which she experienced as positive.

For Molly, immersion in the water appeared to create space for emotions to surface and be experienced more fully. The water itself may be understood as symbolic of the emotional processes she described in which emotions emerge in an active and ongoing way. Much like objects placed in water naturally rise to the surface, emotions appeared, in Molly’s account, to seek expression rather than remain suppressed.

Across participants, cold-water immersion in nature seemed to make it more difficult to avoid emotions that were attempting to emerge. This experience was likened to the effort required to push a buoyant object beneath the water, where it continues to rise despite resistance. In this way, cold-water swimming in nature appeared to invite emotional engagement by limiting opportunities for avoidance and encouraging embodied awareness of what was present.

“It wasn’t just an emotional response, I think because my body had worked so hard and I was probably shaking and cold, I just started sobbing and sobbing and then I couldn’t stop, my whole body was sobbing, and you have to find a way to put yourself back together. I suppose the sadness is still in there and anyway it all came out on that day, and other swims have done that for me on other occasions” – Beth, p.37

Similarly, Beth is talking about a moment that was meaningful for her in cold water, and she spoke about her grief as her daughter died by suicide, which is why began cold water swimming in nature. She spoke about how she hasn’t had such a strong emotional experience

of sadness since the day she found out her daughter died. She spoke about feeling “absolutely devastated” and just wanted to feel her feelings but could not do this as she had other children to consider and therefore felt that she did not have a grieving opportunity, due to considering other’s needs. As a result, her grief was postponed but held internally as it became more about being supportive for her family and surviving rather than her own emotional process. Therefore, it appeared that Beth experienced cold-water swimming as a safe space in which she felt able to feel and express her grief through embodiment. Through this embodied experience, emotions seemed to come to the surface and become more accessible, which may help to make sense of her uncontrollable response and the language she used to describe it, particularly her body “sobbing.” This expression may reflect the depth and reality of the grief she was carrying.

It is possible that the visceral impact of the cold shock, combined with immersion in nature, created conditions in which these feelings could loosen and be experienced more fully. Beth’s tears appeared to express an emotional overwhelm that she had previously been holding onto. The unresolved grief she spoke about may have found expression through this embodied experience.

This speaks to the space Beth appeared to create for herself in order to experience grief and express her emotions in a way that felt safe for her, recognising that grief is a deeply individual experience. The somatic language Beth used to describe her emotional experience in the cold water highlights the bodily nature of this process and may offer insight into how her unresolved grief was held within her body.

“it provided me with a space to actually feel the emotions and to feel horrendously awful, and to process them a bit, which was actually quite nice because I never had that safety to be able to do that before” – Molly, p.8

Here Molly was asked what her experience of cold-water swimming in nature was. Similarly, she draws on the healing space that cold water swimming in nature provides her with, that allows her to experience feelings, that she could not previously access. She can identify the clear distinction in before and after as she has not had a safe space to process feelings until she cold water swam in nature. She has emotional insight into the difficulties of processing difficult emotions; however, she appears to understand the importance to dig deep to access and process her feelings to heal from the inside. It seems from her account that she is no longer disconnected from feeling the difficult feelings, which allows for emotional reconnection

to bring emotional healing. There is recognition into what the environment in nature brings by allowing her to access feelings, as she is immersed in an emotionally safe place. She recognises the benefits to healing from the inside. Her insights indicated that being in nature provided a therapeutic experience that helped her experience feelings which was healing. Through embodiment in cold water swimming in nature meant she could face her difficult feelings and feel supported rather than overwhelmed by them. There was something about being immersed in the water that made them feel the connection between external sensations and the internal felt sense. The combination of water and nature together acted as a holding space that heals. The space in nature acts as a buffer from the external world, as it feels like a protected zone that many escape to for refuge from the day-to-day stress of life. The cold-water forced those to look inwards and survive in the moment, forcing them to be present instead of thinking elsewhere.

Sub theme 2: Mind body connection

This sub-theme captures how participants experienced a profound mind-body connection through cold-water immersion in nature. Participants' narratives highlight how being in the water drew attention away from habitual thoughts and towards the felt experience of the body. For many, immersion created a sense of being present in the body, a feeling of grounding that contrasted with the constant pull of thoughts in daily life. The cold water was experienced not as a challenge to be overcome, but as a medium that invited attention, presence, and reconnection, an opportunity to inhabit their bodies fully and encounter what arose in that embodied space.

Cold water swimming in nature appeared to help those feel cleansed of their difficulties, as they often emerged out of the water feeling a new sense of release in comparison to when they went in. This appeared to be a transformative experience in relation to their anxiety or low mood. There was a clear overarching theme of the experience in nature evoking a transformative experience through embodiment.

“It allows you to be more in tune with your body. I am not very good at not connecting my brain to my body And just yeah, so it kind of forces you to be in tune with your body and respect your body and the coldness as you get in that water. You kind of have to be aware of your body and like getting your breathing under control and I can’t do mindfulness at all” – Molly, p.10

Here Molly speaks to the powerful embodied experience that cold water swimming in nature provides her with as she describes being attuned to herself which is something she struggles with elsewhere. She highlights that she is often disconnected from herself but by being in cold water she is forced to be in tune with herself physically and mentally. Perhaps due to the cold shock and immersion in nature, an involuntary experience is elicited that allows this connection. She also draws on the more compassionate self that she steps into by cold water swimming in nature. It is evident she wants to become more present and accept without judgement, however struggled to gain this from mindfulness, thus sought out alternative practices such as cold-water swimming in nature.

“when you are in the water and its cold all you can think about is what’s going on in your body really rather than what’s going on in your mind and so that’s very healing, I love that” – Beth, p.4

Beth’s experience appeared to mirror that of the other participants, particularly in relation to a shift from a sense of mental overload towards increased bodily attunement. This redirection seemed to offer a reprieve from becoming caught up in an overactive mind. Beth described cold-water swimming in nature not only as an embodied experience but also as having a therapeutic quality, referring to it as having a healing element.

It appeared that, through cold-water swimming in nature, Beth experienced a sense of surrender to the flow of life, as the intensity of the cold required her to tune into her body. For Beth, this seemed to be a space where she could simply be, with the cold water acting as a vehicle through which she could attune to herself and engage in a process she experienced as healing.

“Sometimes I’ll be thinking about work and that might help you process something because what I do can be quite stressful. I think it just depends on the mood sometimes you, I actively make it a more mindful swim, and other times you’re just seeing what comes up for you” – Fran, p.7 & 8

Fran offers a slightly different experience on the mind–body connection within cold-water swimming in nature, that speaks to its dual capacity to support both active mental engagement and an emotional experience. She highlights how sometimes she thinks about things to process, while at other times she can engage in a more mindful swim. This adaptable

approach contrasts with that of other participants, who often describe how the cold acts as a force for them to be more in tune with their bodies. Fran's experience differs slightly as the water does not dictate her state of mind; rather, she exercises a sense of agency by choosing whether to engage in mindful presence or allow the experience to unfold more spontaneously. Her ability to shift between mental focus and embodied awareness reflects a strong sense of internal attunement. For Fran, cold-water swimming functions as an emotionally attuned space as she can alternate between being "in her head" or "in her body" as needed. This suggests that emotional clarity perhaps does not arise from silence or escape, but from a fluid dialogue between cognition and sensation and trusting in the body to dictate emotional processing.

2. Finding myself in the water

This sub-theme captures how participants experienced a sense of knowing themselves differently through cold-water swimming in nature. For them, it appeared that being in the water was more than a physical activity, it was a space where they could encounter themselves directly. Participants described noticing subtle shifts in how they felt and moved in their bodies, and in these moments, a new sense of self seemed to emerge.

Some spoke of feeling more accepting of themselves, noticing aspects of who they were without judgment, as if the water offered a mirror to their own being. For many cold-water swimming provided a new sense of identity, not simply as something they did, but as a part of who they were. It appeared that the immersion created moments of recognition and presence, where participants experienced themselves in a fuller, more immediate way, and in this embodied space, their sense of self felt reshaped and grounded. For those who sought cold water swimming as part of their identity, this identity was imbued with pride and emotional significance, enabling them to redefine themselves as resilient, strong, and empowered.

"My whole life is like created around swimming like swimming is the centre of my life. Everything else goes around that. And nothing else gets prioritised. Swimming takes the priority over everything." - Molly, p.46

Here Molly was asked what cold water swimming in nature means to her. She spoke about it being such a priority that she rejected job offers that were not near a blue water space in nature. Molly's account demonstrates how cold-water swimming has become central to her identity, and how she meets herself and her needs. She prioritises cold water swimming in

nature to the extent that her life is structured around it, which serves its function as the anchor around which her existence is built. In the water, she finds a sense of authenticity and clarity that shapes how she navigates the world, offering her both continuity and belonging within herself.

“People know me as a cold-water swimmer, even though there are other things that I do as well, you know, like walking or the volunteering that I do that’s my main identity I think, is cold water swimming out in the sea” - Beth, p.29

For Beth, cold water swimming in nature has become central to a part of her identity as it is how she is known by others. Despite having other interests, she places cold water swimming in the ocean as the most significant and differential, as she prescribes more meaning to it. Cold water swimming in nature appears symbolic as perhaps it represents qualities she wants to be identified with such as resilience, empowered and strong. Cold water swimming in nature helps her re-discover her sense of self and identity that she lost when her daughter died.

This construction of identity appeared to allow participants to step away from former self-concepts rooted in anxiety, stress, or low self-worth. Immersion in cold water especially within natural, non-judgmental environments that provided a refuge for participants to feel like they can be their authentic selves. Four of the participants spoke openly about struggles with body image and shared how the act of swimming helped them feel less judged and more “seen.” Through these embodied experiences, they described cultivating greater self-compassion and acceptance of their bodies and selves. Ultimately, participants made sense of cold-water swimming as a transformative space that not only shaped how they see themselves, but also how they relate to the world with a renewed sense of agency, alignment, and as a part of their identity.

Sub theme 1. Identity and sense of self

This sub-theme captures participants’ accounts of cold-water swimming in nature as a lived, embodied experience, through which they described reconnecting with a sense of their true self. Participants narrated this experience as fostering a newly developed understanding of self, contributing to a strengthened sense of identity and self-coherence.

Having a strong sense of self appeared to support authenticity, resilience, and stability, as well as influencing how individuals navigate the world, which may be particularly meaningful for those who struggle with their mental health. The embodied nature of cold-water immersion heightened bodily sensations, as the shock of the cold required participants to be fully present. This present-moment awareness appeared to create opportunities for participants to reconnect with themselves emotionally, physically, and, for some, spiritually.

Cold-water swimming in nature appeared to align with somatic and mindful practices, particularly through its emphasis on the integration of mind and body. Participants described experiences that suggested a shift away from an 'ideal' or socially constructed sense of self towards a more 'real' or authentic self. Being immersed in natural environments also seemed to foster a sense of grounding and interconnectedness.

Overall, cold-water swimming in nature appeared to offer a deeply embodied and emotionally meaningful experience that supported the rediscovery or strengthening of participants' sense of self. Through the combination of physical challenge, present-moment awareness, and immersion in nature, participants described beginning to view their identity not as fixed or defined solely by social roles, but as something more dynamic, resilient, and authentic. There appeared to be something inherent in what cold-water swimming in nature encompasses that participants associated with developing resilience, courage, and strength. For individuals who struggle with their mental health, these experiences seemed to feel empowering offering a sense of identity rooted in perceived mental strength and self-connection.

"I joke that it's 80% my personality." - Holly, p.10

"It really is, umm, we had to do this sort of this silly thing where we had to say kind of what superpower we wanted as an icebreaker or what superpower we had. And I said it was my ability to dump myself in cold water and tolerate subzero temperatures. So, it really does feel like superpower." - Holly, p.11

Here Holly speaks to how cold-water swimming in nature is a self-defining personality trait of how she represents herself. It highlights how she makes sense of herself and the narrative she uses to explain this. Her language used of it being a "superpower" marks personal strength, empowerment and uniqueness. Having the ability to tolerate freezing temperatures is something that makes her feel extraordinary which for someone who struggles with their mental health and self-worth is hugely empowering. It has also changed the narrative for her about how she speaks about herself in a more positive light.

“Umm. It's become It's sound a little bit Well, yeah, it's become my identity so that. You know when you're in work, people sort of ask the question, what do you do? Meaning, what's your job and when you haven't got that job anymore, you know, very often there's that search for that identity. Like who you are, what you do?” – Beth, p.30

Beth provided a similar account as when she was asked what cold water swimming means to her; it appeared to provide a lot of meaning as to who she is as a person and what she does. It helped her with a major life transition of employed to retired which eased her identity crisis. Identity can be often tied to employment; therefore, retirement can create an identity loss. Beth faced an existential crisis when she retired and asked, “who am I now” and when she began cold water swimming in nature this provided her with an identity shift that stabilised her during a difficult transition. Cold water swimming in nature provided her with an identity reconstruction and redirection outside of the norm of how people base identities.

“So yeah, that helped with that identity thing as well. Not, you know, I wasn't just an old lady” – Beth, p.32 & 33

Following on from the above this brings in elements of age, identity, self-worth and an existential lens. It helped her step outside of the frame of being seen as “old” and therefore marginalised. She speaks how she was faced with two identity shifts of retirement and ageism. There is a deep sense of not wanting to be assigned to these labels put in place by society and cold-water swimming in nature allows her to step into a new identity that she can lead with instead. She felt she contributed more to society as she also blogs about cold water swimming in nature, so this also gave her an outlet of purpose in life.

“It's a very big part of my identity, to the point of there was someone when was, I think it was like two years ago and for summer holidays I'd gone into uni and the librarian came in and the person downstairs hadn't known my name but said, Oh yeah, the cold water swimmer's upstairs already. So, I'm known around Uni as the cold-water swimmer rather than actually by my name.” – Molly, p.27

Molly echo's this experience as she is proud of how it's become her identity and how she is recognised socially, as its symbolic for her to be viewed in this way. There is a sense of pride that is felt from being known and identifying with this activity. Ultimately it shapes her sense of self, how she views herself and how the world views her. On the hand, her not being known by her name could have made her feel unseen, almost like people don't really see her for who

she is. However, for Molly this doesn't appear to be an issue and instead she places so much value on having her identity as a cold-water swimmer. For someone who struggled with their mental health and was actively suicidal this a huge marker in her self-worth and importance of existence. Cold water swimming in nature provides her with a sense of pride and uniqueness as she positions herself as someone who can complete challenging things. For Molly, it appears it is not just something that she does but who she is, which compliments the group experiential theme of finding yourself in the water.

“I’d actually say it’s my life now.” – Fran, p.27

Sharing the same common ground Fran speaks to how cold-water swimming in nature provided her with an identity integration as its central to her sense of self. Her language used highlights the emotional intensity and deep connection she gets from this experience. It being her whole life is a powerful statement that speaks to how much it shapes her as a person and as it helps her make sense of who she is, thus she can construct meaning from it.

Sub-theme 2: Self-Acceptance and Belonging

This sub-theme foregrounds participants lived experiences of cold-water swimming in nature as a safe and accepting space. Within their accounts, participants described embodied immersion as facilitating a shift from critical self-awareness and negative self-judgement towards a more positive, accepting experience of self and presence with others.

This experience appeared to arise from the shock of the cold water and the body's instinctive need for survival, creating a cognitive shift towards connecting with the body in a more immediate and attentive way, particularly in response to the physical challenge involved. Nature seemed to provide a non-judgemental context within which participants could engage with a sense of neutral acceptance, often describing the environment as allowing them to simply be with their experience.

There also appeared to be a sense of shared experience within this setting and activity. Cold-water swimming in nature was described as inclusive and accessible, offering participation to people of different ages, genders, backgrounds, and body shapes. This inclusivity appeared to support authenticity, with participants describing the absence of hierarchy or societal pressures that are often present in other contexts. The experience was described as offering a non-judgemental presence with less emphasis placed on appearance.

Several participants noted struggles with body image and weight; however, they described feeling less conscious of these concerns when immersed in cold water in nature. For participants who struggled with their mental health, having access to a space in which they felt accepted and not judged appeared to foster a sense of belonging and emotional safety, which may contribute to a reduction in mental health distress.

“And nobody judges you at swimming. So, you really can just be yourself and like it’s the most positive environment you will ever find. It’s so, so, so positive. So, nobody judges, judges, you and you feel more confident” – Molly, p.7

Molly gives an overview when asked what her experience of cold water in swimming nature that conveys a powerful sense of feeling at peace in herself due to the encouraging environment that cold water swimming in nature provides. It is a deep-felt sense and meaningful moment for her where she can feel authentic and accepted. It appears to offer an opportunity for her to feel seen and her sense of self to be valued. Given her mental health difficulties where she describes she was rejected from mental health services and fell beneath the cracks of the system, this therefore provided her with a sense of belonging at last.

“It really helps you to build a positive body relationship” - Molly, p.13

She further builds on this as it appears there was a shift to a transformative experience about how she views herself, which enabled her to have more body positivity. The link between the emotional safety net created in the first GET and the ability to gain body confidence underscores how embodied self-perception can be reshaped with the right tools. For example, support, nurture and inclusivity, all of which participants describe gaining from cold water swimming in nature. Cold water swimming in nature offers a haven of acceptance, lack of judgment and nurture through a carefree zone.

“So it’s sort of feeling proud of what my body can do. And not thinking about the aesthetics. Yeah. And I guess there’s something in that about the ponds in that itself that everybody is all different shapes and size. Isn’t it so inclusive. Yeah. So that’s really helps out this mission of all ages, all sizes and just getting on with it. So seeing what their body can do, yeah, sort of helping them do these things. Everyone’s there for the same purpose, and no one’s looking what everybody looks like” – Holly, p.7

Holly draws on a powerful shift from focusing on her body’s appearance to having gratitude for what her body can do, describing how cold-water swimming allows her to feel pride without

fixating on aesthetics. This internal transformation is supported by what other participant's spoke about in terms of the inclusive environment cold water swimming brings, where people of "all ages, all sizes" gather with a shared sense of purpose. She notes that "everyone's there for the same purpose, and no one's looking what everybody looks like", suggesting that her body positivity is not only self-generated but socially reinforced. The environment holds a shared value of acceptance as people come for health, connection, and immersion in nature and there is less of an emphasis placed on appearance and superficial elements. This creates a space where Holly feels emotionally and physically safe, and where the absence of scrutiny allowed her to accept herself more easily. It appeared that there is a sense of an unspoken, ethos of inclusion and respect within the cold swimming in nature community. This interplay between individual and collective experience deepens the sense of belonging and self-acceptance that cold-water swimming in nature produces.

***"But just because everybody's so accepting down there. There is no judgement. So you know, there's all shapes, sizes, ages, everything. There is absolutely no judgement, and I think to know that everybody feels like that or most people feel like that. That's a good place to be and you know my hang ups about my body. They are nowhere near as what they were before and a lot of that is because. Of being down there as well."* – Bella, p.34-35**

Here, Bella provides an account of the transformation she experienced in relation to her self-esteem as a result of her interaction with the unique environment that is created from cold water swimming in nature. There is a clear shift in perspective as she can identify how she felt about herself before cold water swimming in nature and the progress she has made to get to more a secure place within herself. This has helped her dismantle the internalised body discomfort she feels about self to a therapeutic shift of change. This shift was created by the inclusive and non-competitive, but supportive environment that created healing and self-acceptance. She experiences acceptance and a lack of judgment being immersed in this environment, which causes her to be less critical of her body. The language she uses to describe where she swims, such as "down there" and "a good place to be", highlights the meaningful space and perhaps the psychological state she has reached in terms of how she feels about herself. She speaks to the shared vulnerability and defining shame that people feel when they are engaging in this activity, which created psychological safety. As four of the participant's described a similar experience of cold-water swimming in nature being an inclusive environment it appears to be a felt sense that is possible from nonverbal language such as the focus on the cold water and being nature, and the normalisation of body differences from all ages. Half of the participants on several occasions referred to the

inclusivity in terms of physical traits such as age, size, shape however less attention is given to invisible differences such as race, sexuality, or beliefs. This may reflect both the embodied nature of the activity and broader sociocultural pressures on women's appearance, in western contexts where weight and youth are favoured. Cold-water swimming in nature seems to offer a space where there is less of an emphasis on the ascetics.

“But yeah, the body positivity side of it obviously wasn't my reason for starting or anything. But it does make it very welcoming. It is very welcoming. All shape sizes. Nobody's looking. Nobody's judging. Everybody's there for the same reason, just to feel good. And yeah, it is probably the one of the friendliest environments” – Fran, p.17-18

Fran echoes this experience in terms of body acceptance, inclusivity and a bigger purpose within cold water swimming in nature. She highlights how this level of acceptance was a by-product of being in nature cold swimming. The language she uses being “welcoming” speaks to the inclusive nature of this space. There is no discrimination present as it encourages diversity and all appearances are welcomed. There is a shared sense of purpose within this environment that is focused on improved health and less importance placed on the aesthetics. She finds a safe space here as it enables her to be authentic, body positive and be in a social atmosphere that is encouraging.

Sub theme 3. Reconnection with the inner child

This sub-theme captures participants' accounts of cold-water swimming in nature as enabling a reconnection with aspects of a younger sense of self that they described as having been lost or diminished through adulthood. Participants made sense of this experience as offering feelings of freedom, joy, playfulness, and innocence, which they understood as providing short-term relief from everyday demands and stressors.

Within their narratives, participants described entering playful and childlike states while immersed in cold water, including the use of imagery, spontaneous sounds, and laughter, which they associated with memories of childhood. This embodied and sensory immersion in nature was experienced as occurring within a non-judgemental space, allowing participants to reconnect with joy and play in ways they felt less accessible in adult life. For some, participants reflected on how the demands of roles and responsibilities in adulthood limited their capacity to engage in play, whereas cold-water swimming in nature was understood as granting permission to momentarily step outside these identities and reconnect with a more playful way of being and part of self.

“It's opened up a bit. It's opened up an adventurous side of me that I didn't know was there or that was probably trying to get out because I'm overweight” - Fran, p.33

Here Fran speaks to cold water swimming in nature allowing her to open a part of her she did not know existed previously as this was dulled down to her lack of self-confidence due to her weight which is highlighted in the second GET. As a result, she feels psychologically free and can reconnect with old parts of herself that were more carefree. Her language used to describe the hidden part of herself “probably trying to get out” highlights how cold-water swimming allows for a space to enter where you can be authentic and express yourself. Being in nature, in the cold and amongst wildlife, this enabled a dormant part of herself that is more in line with adventure, play and spontaneous fun.

“I feel like there's a bit of like my inner child which gets to heal slightly when I get to go and play around in the waves”- Molly, p.49

This is a powerful insight into the deeply emotional and embodied form of healing she gains from engaging in cold water swimming in nature. She provides an image of a playful interaction with the waves that becomes a place of psychological healing. Her awareness into her inner child that comes to light during this experience speaks to the part of herself that longs for freedom and being carefree, as now she is in adulthood, accessibility to these aspects of life are limited. It doesn't just become a memory of childhood but a way to actively engage to reconnect that part of herself. She acknowledges the limitations of healing to, by her language used that it slightly helps which speaks to the ongoing process of self-help and the important of therapeutic input.

“And there's a tree which in the winter looks like an alligator. And we always say that the alligator's chasing us, which is always great fun. We always say there's an alligator in the trees chasing us. There's also eels in the lake, so we say it's an electric eel trying to attack us. There's the seaweed monsters as well, and there's all the birds. There's like, they're not ducks. It's interesting. It's good fun. It means you get to be carefree. You just get to be carefree and have fun and like sound water, like lapping all around you” – Molly, p.18-19

Following on from her experience, here Molly's language is very descriptive as she describes a childlike imagination game with the combination of wildlife, nature and the meaning making she uses to describe this. These images provide a space of creative play that helps her

reengage with her inner child that was a lot more carefree. This provides her with a temporary relief from her mental health difficulties which can feel heavy. She speaks to the sensory elements that this experience brings too in terms of sound and visual, highlighting how she is fully immersed. Through this playful interaction and reconnection with inner child she steps into a version of herself that is playful. These descriptions are rich with childlike fantasy, and she describes them not as frightening but as fun that help her be carefree. At first it appeared playful, however the imagery of being chased or attacked introduces an interesting new psychological lens in line with play therapy of acting out experiences. Molly engages with fears or threats in a safe and an embodied therapeutic way. The lake becomes a space where fear is transformed into fun, and anxiety into laughter all of which highlight how much she gets mentally from cold water swimming in nature and a temporary relief from her mental health distress.

“Or even just swimming with ducks. I have a joke with sort of colleagues that my happiness ratio is kind of a perfect positive correlation, like depending on how much time I’ve spending with ducks. It’s like I’m doing psychologically okay - ” Holly, p.3

Holly provides a similar account as the combination of nature and wildlife helps her mental health when she is engaged in this environment. She finds joy in the simple things in life, such as spending time with ducks as this has a positive impact on her emotional wellbeing. She is mindful if she was not engaging in cold water swimming in nature, what impact this has on her psychological state. This meaningful moment in the cold water provides her with the opportunity for reconnection with more joyful childlike parts and the simplicity of what positive inner child work brings. It is important to consider across participants’ accounts to the interplay of the cold water, the wildlife, the social contact or is it a combination of all of these that provide healing. Hollys meaning making sheds a light on the combination of all these rather than the cold water being the sole source of it which speaks to the whole encompassed experience it provides.

Group experiential theme 3: Psychological Anchorage and Stability

The final GET, psychological anchorage, captures participants’ accounts of cold-water swimming in nature as a grounding and empowering refuge. Within their narratives, participants described this experience as providing a sense of psychological anchoring that supported their sense of self, reduced feelings of anxiety, and fostered stability. Participants

made sense of this anchorage as a place they could return to, experienced through embodied immersion, which offered feelings of steadiness and support for psychological wellbeing.

For example, Molly was asked what keeps her coming back to cold water swimming in nature:

“it’s the most effective way that I know to keep myself well enough to thrive and keep going and survive life” – Molly, p.63

Molly’s experience highlights how cold-water swimming functions as a form of psychological anchorage that provides her with a stabilising force despite life’s difficulties. Her use of language such as survive life and keep myself well enough speaks to the existential weight of her experience. Cold water swimming provides her a lifeline that makes her able to continue living. It appears to offer her a reliable, embodied way to restore psychological equilibrium and resilience. In this sense, cold water becomes her psychological anchorage that provides a constant space of return, grounding, and strength.

Cold water swimming in nature appears to allow participants to anchor their sense of self through the embodied experience of cold water and physiological shock. This experience forces individuals out of their thoughts and into their bodies, creating a pause in anxiety through deep grounding. This space seems to offer a transformative experience, as it allows participants to anchor themselves in the present moment and overcome the challenges that cold water swimming presents. Participants describe how this practice helps them regain a sense of self when life feels unmanageable, compelling them to be present in the here and now for survival.

It may be that participants are attributing symbolic meaning to the notion of anchorage, representing something that keeps them steady during difficult times. Their narratives suggest that the cold-water environment acted as an anchorage, symbolising how immersion helped them feel stable and emotionally grounded. The anchor is described as a safe space when participants are experiencing overwhelming emotions and mental health distress.

“And it just helps me massively. No matter how bad I mean and the last couple of months have been really quite difficult because my daughter suffers from anxiety and school is quite hard in the mornings. And I’ve spent lots of mornings crying and in tears. But then I’ll go swim in my days off and it just I it really really helps.” – Bella p.12

For example, how Bella navigated her difficulties was by using cold water swimming in nature to re centre herself in times of chaos. Her language used describes the palpable shift as she can return to her psychological anchorage of cold-water swimming in nature and it helps. She feels different as the combination of immersion in nature and the cold water allows her to decompress from the stress of being a mother. It appears to act as a stable psychological anchorage that really supports her emotional state, rebalance her thought process and move through her distress in a meaningful way. This can also be seen for Molly as she spoke about her suicidal ideation and how cold-water swimming in nature saved her from following through with this

“It just made it tiniest bit more survivable, which ultimately still alive today” – Molly, p.31

For Molly, during periods of emotional turbulence, such as grief or trauma, in line with other participants’ accounts suggest that cold water swimming in nature helped regulate overwhelming emotions by providing a sense of stability and anchorage. This anchorage also appeared to support participants in tolerating uncertainty, as they described being able to return to this psychological point of grounding when life felt fragmented. Finally, participants suggested that cold water swimming provided stability on physical, psychological, and existential levels, all of which contributed to a deeper sense of grounding.

“Yeah, it was definitely during COVID when. There were different periods throughout the lockdowns. The only thing you were able to do was to be outside. With somebody who is not from your household. So I met people for swims quite often. And again, it just turned into like a very positive feel good interaction during a really bizarre and difficult time” – Sally, p.13

Sally provides a similar account as she was asked what motivated her to start cold water swimming in nature. During the global pandemic in 2020 she speaks to how it provided her with a psychological anchorage, which provided her with a stabilizing experience in times of uncertainty. With day-to-day life impacted and constrained this provided her with an outlet to tolerate this uncertainty and manage distress. This became a part of her daily routine that help keep her grounded, while living through the challenges of a global pandemic.

Sub theme 1. Psychological grounding and anchoring

This sub-theme explains how participants experienced cold-water swimming in nature as providing an anchorage that kept things in place and steady when life felt chaotic. Participants' narratives shed light on how they felt they could always return to this anchorage, keeping them afloat through life's difficulties.

Here Fran was asked to describe a moment in the cold water that was meaningful to her.

“The only noise you've got is just climbing into this beautiful lake and possibly a few birds in the distance. And I can just remember thinking, this to me is heaven And I got a picture of it on my phone as well and I just love it.... God I'm welling up....**visibly tearful** It was just such an emotive” – Fran, p.25-26

Here she speaks to the sensory experience that grounds her as she is fully immersed in nature's stillness. The sensory rich experience it provided as she only heard wildlife, which as a result quietness down the mental noise of day-to-day life stress. Her language usage of “heaven” highlights the deep attachment and psychologically safe space she gains from this experience. This experience was so meaningful she has a picture of it to keep as a memory, to help her return to this anchorage. She got emotional speaking about this meaningful moment in the water for her as she became visibly tearful which highlights the depth of how much cold water swimming in nature means to her and emotions were triggered thinking about it.

“So I had no one, but I had cold water swimming, so it was incredibly useful. I wouldn't be alive today if I hadn't have had it. And it was, yeah, it saved me. It really did.” Molly, p.26

Here Molly was asked what the reason was she got into cold water swimming in nature, she spoke about how she fell through the gaps of the mental health care system and had no one for support, therefore was considering ending her own life but used cold water swimming in nature as a final last resort. She turned to cold water swimming in nature as a survival strategy in hope to anchor herself to life. This anchorage success prevented her from following through with her suicidal plans as it gave her meaning, purpose and hope. The language she used to describe what cold water swimming in nature did for her speak to the depth of impact this had on her as it ultimately saved her and is the reason she is alive today.

“It gives the structure to the day. Because I go every day. You know, it gives me something to get up for in the morning. You know, I’ve got a plan. I need to get up and need to go at that time. And I think probably, and people talk about it being addictive. It’s I don’t know whether it’s addictive in the same way that other things are, but there’s something. About it, which you know, if I haven’t done it for a couple of days. I’ve I feel it in my body that I need.” Beth, p.51

Beth articulates a similar experience that cold water swimming in nature provides a grounding experience, as it became a part of her daily ritual that kept her held together, gives her purpose and meaning. Her language used to describe how it’s a felt sense that her body needs it, highlights the grounding component that is deeply integrated. Cold water swimming in nature provides an existential routine as it helps provide stability and orientation that helps her navigate life’s challenges and her new sense of identity, that she spoke to in the previous sub theme. This anchorage helped her create meaning to her day and shaped her identity to ground her.

“Nine degrees. I can tell there’s a difference and seven degrees and six degrees, I can tell is the difference and if it goes below 5, I can also feel the difference and it’s weird how your body reacts differently to every single one. It’s actually quite nice to be in charge of your body enough to be able to do that, but also the cold teaches you to respect your body.” - Molly, p.12

Molly’s attunement and awareness of her internal bodily system to temperature changes and her reflection on bodily control illustrate how cold-water immersion acts as a form of psychological anchorage, that grounds her through embodied awareness. She sheds light that she feels in control of her body which for someone struggling with feeling out of control with her mental health would be very powerful. This experience of cold-water swimming in nature fosters respect for her physical limitations and offering a sense of agency and stability against life’s uncertainty.

“I very often feel held by the sea and I always feel safe.” – Beth, p.25

Beth’s account also highlights a felt sense of being supported by the sea, which speaks to her experience of having a safe place in which her inner world can be held. She appears to express a sense of trust in the natural environment, which provides grounding through its reliability as a space to retreat from the chaos of the external world. Her use of the word “held” suggests an intimate and deeply personal relationship with the sea. The feelings of safety she

describes are qualities often associated with therapeutic input; therefore, her language implies that the sea functions as a means through which she can be fully present and experience support within a safe space.

“It feels very safe and secure” – Polly, p.2

Polly provides a similar account when asked what her experience of cold-water swimming in nature entailed, she spoke to the sense of the emotional safety she receives from being amongst nature and having a strong trust in that environment. The water appears to provide a sanctuary that allows her to connect with and inhabit her physical body as a tool to enable a deep sense of safety and security.

“Just as a woman and you look out and it's that whole sense, I feel safe because it's a contained area” – Bella, p.5

There is a felt sense of safety that cold water swimming in nature provides her with which aids to her sense of control and reliability from that environment. Cold water swimming in nature provides her with this grounding experience to feel vulnerable yet safe. She highlighted the space as being with just for women, which may have added to that feeling of safety and it being containing with no men being present as it was a lady's pond, therefore this may have enabled a deeper sense of ability to be vulnerable and emotionally safe. On reflection, I am cognisant that I could have explored further here what it was about it being just women made it feel safe as this could be due to cultural, political or person factors given the current climate of debates regarding gender identity and inclusion. For example, I would have further explored if it was its relief from the male gaze, not being sexualised, a felt sense of freedom from judgment or the embodied sisterhood.

“Oh yeah, it helps me to feel quite safe in knowing that like difficult times will always come and go. But like you can kind of always have your sea swimming” – Sally, p.17

Sally was asked what keeps her coming back to cold water swimming in nature. In line with others Sally experiences cold water swimming in nature as a reliable source against life's chaos and uncertainty. She speaks to the clear contrast between the temporary nature of difficulties and the stability she gets from the sea being a constant. This space is used as a coping mechanism and a place to self sooth. Her use of the possessive ““your” reflects a personal and meaningful connection to sea swimming, which appears both grounding and enduring. However, her shift in pronouns from the first person (“me”) to the second person

(“your”) is noteworthy. Instead of saying *“I can always have my sea swimming”*, she generalises her experience to an imagined other or even to a broader shared truth. This movement from the personal to the general perhaps functions as a form of psychological distancing, to enable her to speak in a less personal way that feels emotionally safer. This shift may speak to a desire to share the wisdom she’s gained, turning her experience into something others can access rather than it being exclusively personal. It might also be the case that the participant knew the researcher was personally invested in the topic and cold-water swims in nature therefore felt like she was speaking to the experience of us both.

“what’s coming up for me is really being absorbed by the water nothing else matters, your just being held and it feels like a euphoria feeling as well as feeling contained and feeling safe”- Holly, p.6

Similarly, Holly was asked about her experience of cold-water swimming in nature, and she provides an account that speaks to the positive feeling achieved by cold water swimming in nature. She draws on it providing an emotional space, psychological refuge and a sense of safety. The language she uses to describe her experience creates a picture of being embraced by the water and this is what keeps her afloat amongst all life’s chaos as nothing matters when you are immersed in cold water. Her language used by being absorbed speaks to the full embodied experience she feels in the cold water giving her a feeling of intense joy.

Sub theme 2. Resilience pride, freedom and empowered

This sub-theme foregrounds participants’ lived experiences of pride, freedom, and empowerment while engaging in cold-water swimming in nature. Within their accounts, participants described a felt sense of freedom that they connected to their values and sense of purpose, which they understood as giving personal meaning to the experience.

“for me it’s made me really, really proud of me and that helps with my self-esteem then as well because I think if I can do that I can do anything” – Bella, p.8

Bella’s experience of cold-water swimming in nature serves as a powerful catalyst for positive self-esteem and empowerment. The pride she feels is deeply personal, grounded in her own growth and resilience. By overcoming physical and mental challenges in the water, she begins to see herself through a different lens of being more able to tackle challenges. The experience becomes an anchor point in her identity and an empowered sense of self.

“There's a there's catharsis about it, as well as just feeling proud that you, you know. That I'm doing my, the daughter who died proud. You know, I'm sort of doing it in her honour, really and because she was a very sporty outdoor sort of person. So. Umm. Yeah, I mean that's the trigger and the reason why I continue is because I also when I'm swimming, I feel quite close to her as well.”
- Beth, p.22

Here Beth offers an account that illustrates this experience, as a release of intense emotions through embodiment allows her to access her grief. The space of cold-water swimming in nature provides meaning as it allows her to stay reconnected with her daughter. This provides her with a sense of pride through being aligned to her daughters' interests and using that to remain connected to her. There is a sense of empowerment in regaining a sense of autonomy through grief, as she is actively making choices to lean into her grief therefore turning this loss to inner strength. The cold-water swimming in nature space enables her to stay in dialogue with her daughter and keep that connection alive, it provides a safe space to be present with her. She has turned her grief into a meaningful action that helps her with her identity shift, purpose and structure to her day. Moreover, cold water immersion serves as a grounding mechanism for the complex and multifaceted emotions of grief such as love, anger, and sadness, while the sense of legacy intertwined with these feelings enables her to find meaning, experience empowerment, and sustain this connection with her daughter amidst the pain.

“Yeah, I guess that kind of makes you feel a bit empowered that you know you are doing this and not everybody can. And even though there's things that kind of freak you out and scare you, and it's difficult, you still go. It's like, you know, you're more powerful than those fears or anxieties.” Holly, p.6

Here she speaks about feeling empowered due to her individual uniqueness and strength as she is aware she can complete challenging things. This makes her feel capable and provides her with meaning and identity. She has a sense of being resilient as she speaks about her fears and difficulties yet still engages in the task which means she has a direct confrontation of her vulnerabilities. There is a deep sense of pride in her uniqueness and these abilities. Empowerment, in this context, acts as a stabilising force, grounding the participant in a belief in their own ability to cope, even amidst emotional uncertainty and fear.

“I can only think about like, well, getting this water. And I know that this is what I've got to do to get in it. And yes, I'm going to feel worried when I get in, but I'm going to be

fine. And so it gives me that positive edge as well, but always say to myself. I know I can do this and I know I'll be fine when I get in and I know I'll be fine when I get out"- Bella, p.53

Here, Bella described her experience of cold-water swimming in nature as a way of managing her anxiety. Through this embodied practice, she appeared to challenge herself to engage in experiences she perceived as difficult, which she associated with positive outcomes for her mental health. Bella spoke about using positive self-talk to support herself through cold-water swimming, and successfully completing the experience seemed to contribute to an internal narrative of capability and strength, which she experienced as empowering.

The sense of reward Bella described following cold-water swimming appeared to reinforce her view of herself as someone who can face and overcome challenging situations. This experience seemed to mirror how she understood and managed her anxiety in day-to-day life, echoing the account provided by Holly. Cold-water swimming appeared to become a ritualised space in which Bella could experience fear while still choosing to engage, a process that seemed to extend into how she approached anxiety more broadly, supporting her ability to cope in everyday contexts.

"Because that is such a psychological barrier to not go down those steps. It's very similar to the barrier of not wanting to talk in front of people or not wanting to go to certain meetings or not wanting to do a test or not wanting to go to a new place it is a very similar barrier. So if I can go down those steps every single time, every time I do that, I am proving to myself I can overcome that. Which then means I often say that if I can go in cold water, I can do anything. And it is again in that psychological barrier of going into ice cold water. You learn that you can handle things."- Molly, p.60

Here Molly was asked about how she experiences her anxiety and low mood in relation to cold water swimming in nature. Molly articulates herself in a similar way as the steps into the water represent approaching difficulties or anxiety provoking situations and navigating through this challenge, she overcomes this psychological barrier. She is very self-aware and reflective of this direct parallel between this experience and other day to day life anxiety inducing situations e.g. public speaking. She also engages in positive self-talk to help build her strength and sense of self e.g. "I can overcome that". As a result, cold water swimming in nature this provides her with a psychological grounding. As someone who struggles with low mood and anxiety this narrative and language, she creates about herself as being resilient and empowered, aid her

self-efficacy. This helps with a shift in her identity as someone who can handle discomfort and overcome her difficulties.

“Also, there's the sense of achievement and like achieving a goal, something that's like incredibly difficult and in some ways like seems like a crazy thing to do, to swim in cold water. Like, you know, in the middle of winter” – Sally, p.7

Sally further echoes this experience as she was asked about what her experience of cold-water swimming in nature was which spoke to the internal validation, she gains from engaging in this. She places an emphasis on the difficulty of cold-water swimming in nature and the psychological reward that comes with it as a result. She is cognisant of the hardship that cold water swimming in winter entails and acknowledges that she finds it ‘crazy’ which adds to her a sense of pride as she is completing her goals. She further builds on this as she is aware of the reward she gains from cold water swimming in nature that leads her to motivation and success in other areas of her life as there is a direct linkage, ultimately building her resilience. She feels both resilient and empowered by positive self-talk, that she can achieve things and get through challenging situations. She speaks to the transferable nature of her psychological gains through cold water swimming in nature, and that also trickles down to other aspects of her life in terms of work and relationships.

“I think that kind of creates also like that positive feedback loop of You know you can achieve something and find it quite motivational and then it helps with motivation and focus in my life outside of that, like obviously work, relationships, Yeah. And I think that feeling that you have after is obviously what keeps me going.” Sally, p.7

“I really enjoyed the fact that I'm completely. How do you call it? Like you don't have the ground underneath your feet, so you like, immersed. But also like you can't stand up there and it was giving me freedom rather than panic or anxiety.” – Alice, p.8

Alice offers a particularly striking description of her experience of cold-water immersion, highlighting a paradoxical sense of freedom in being ungrounded. She reflects on being in deep water, without the ground beneath her feet, saying “you can't stand up there”, a situation that she seems to anticipate might typically trigger feelings of panic or anxiety. Yet, for her, this literal lack of footing gives rise to a powerful sense of freedom and upholding. This may reflect a psychological shift in which the usual associations with being “ungrounded” such as

instability are reconfigured into a form of release and surrender to the flow of life. This is mirrored in the experience of cold-water swimming in nature as you rely on the water support you. While she initially struggles to articulate the experience, her tone speaks to being completely immersed in the water which allows her to surrender and let go, not only physically but emotionally. This experience seems to differ slightly from other participants, who often described grounding as a return to stability, and it provides an anchorage. For Alice freedom lies in the absence of this grounding and anchorage and by surrendering control, she gains relief from anxiety.

“Again, I think it probably comes back to sort of freedom. You know, because you’re a mum, you’re a wife. You are a carer, a bit of a carer for my elderly parents, you know, it’s all of those things but right there in that lake, it’s just you and that lake. And you’re free, aren’t you?” – Fran, p.27

Here this speaks to the more experiential theme of freedom as felt agency that occurs through embodiment. Fran describes how cold-water swimming in nature provides her with freedom within constraints that provide a temporary release from life’s demands such as being a mother, carer and wife which are central to her identity. Her roles and responsibilities leave minimal room for Fran to be able to prioritise herself and her mental health. The space of cold-water swimming in nature allows her to step outside of these roles to simply ‘be’ instead of having to ‘do’. She speaks to the stark differences of her daily life struggles being emotionally charged and role heavy, in compassion to her experience in the lake, which is freeing, open and a place for solitude.

Sub theme 3. Anxiety relief through here and now

This sub-theme foregrounds participants lived experiences of cold-water swimming in nature as a form of embodied anxiety management. Participants made sense of their engagement with the cold water to connect with their bodies, which they described as helping them navigate moments of anxiety.

“When I’m feeling either anxious or low or both, I know. That that is. It’s like my medicine. I know even more that I need to go when I feel like that.” – Bella, p.51

Similarly, Bella was asked her about her anxiety and low mood in relation to cold water swimming in nature, where she provided invaluable insights into it being as important as

medicine to her which speaks to the positive mental health function of it. She places a deep trust in cold water swimming, just like a medical prescription therefore it gives her a solid function to improve her mental health. She is reflective of the pull to cold water swimming in nature to feel better. Cold water swimming in nature provided her with a reliable source of feeling better for her emotional wellbeing. Her language and description used speaks to a form of self-prescribed therapy and a coping mechanism to tackle her low mood and anxiety. Her embodied experience through immersion provides her with a psychological anchorage that keeps her in the here and now, providing a relief from her mental health difficulties.

“When you're, when you get into the water, sort of your heart rate goes up, sort of. You feel those kinds of symptoms of stress, fast breathing and so it. Sort of. You learn to breathe through it, you learn to control your breathing. Calm your calm yourself. And then when you kind of face anxious situations. For kind of more psychological reasons, you've. You've got that experience of just thinking, OK? You've got this.” – Holly, p.2

Holly was asked what her experience was cold water swimming in nature as someone that identifies as having anxiety or low mood. She provides an account that speaks to the relief she experiences from her anxiety because of the embodied experience in cold water swimming in nature. She is reflective of the symptoms of anxiety that show up and how to manage this as she tries to control her breathe, to calm her physiological state. This skill she has learned from cold water swimming in nature, helps her manage day to day life anxiety, as she highlights the empowerment that comes from the exposure of anxious situations e.g. cold water. By being present in the moment while immersion she can see she can face difficult situations and get through it making her feel strength.

“Like I think the breathing thing helps as well. That's the other thing. Getting my breathing under control and because swimming is a breathing activity. I find that helps when I'm feeling anxious and upset is it feels a bit like butterflies in my stomach sort of churning feeling. And a little bit of sort of muscle twitchiness and that's when I know I've got to go for a swim and it takes it away. And I don't know whether that's the cold doing that or whether it's the breathing. Or whether it's just, you know, because my mind is switched off from things that might be upsetting. I don't know what it is, but it that's what it does” – Beth, p.48

Here Beth was asked how she experiences her anxiety and low mood in relation to cold water swimming in nature where she describes very physical symptoms of anxiety and how the

embodied experienced helps her manage this anxiety. She is in tune with her symptoms and is aware of how to manage and improve this through cold water swimming in nature. There is a direct correlation in how the breath work and controlment helps keep her present and grounded. She has good self-awareness of how her mind switches off and she can be in the present moment, thus taking a break from her anxiety. It becomes more about a mindful practice in the here and now. She tries to articulate her experience which highlights the experiential knowing she is gaining something and trusts the process rather than being focused on analytical knowing.

“It varies, sometimes things can be loads better, as if after I've been, especially if I've been like, overthinking things, then it can be those better ones. After a swim it can just feel much more doable and I can actually do it” – Molly, p.58

Molly was asked the same question here and her response was in line with the above that it provides her with a way to stopping overthinking which can be extremely anxiety provoking. Cold water swimming in nature appeared to open a window for a psychological reset as it interrupts the chaos of everyday life and changes her perspective that she can work through her difficulties. Her anxiety is transferred into a more meaningful task that makes her feel capable and can engage in positive self-talk. As this interrupts her overthinking she can gain more control over her mental health. She acknowledges that swims can vary in what they bring for her however they still serve as a function as a tool for managing anxiety.

“But I think it really helps keep the anxiety at bay, like the physical anxiety that I feel from the shock therapy and that calmness in my body and that helps I suppose give perspective and like bring the anxiety down. Which is very much linked to the mood I think when the anxiety is under control, the mood is kind of also being more managed, more appropriately – So yeah, it's really positive for, my anxiety.” - Sally

Sally described a similar experience, articulating how cold-water swimming functioned as a form of psychological anchorage in relation to her experience of anxiety. This appeared to align with the broader concept of psychological anchorage identified within the overarching experiential theme, while remaining specific to her anxiety. She described the physical sensations associated with entering the cold water as a form of “shock therapy,” which she experienced as paradoxically leading to a sense of calm.

The physiological impact of the cold appeared to create a foundation for an emotional and cognitive reset, allowing Sally to regulate her anxiety and regain a sense of “perspective,”

which she associated with improvements in her mood. In relation to her mental health, cold-water swimming appeared to offer regulation across bodily, emotional, and cognitive levels. This holistic grounding reflected how Sally experienced psychological stability through this embodied practice, echoing processes highlighted within the previous sub-themes.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experience of cold-water swimming in nature for individuals who identify as experiencing anxiety, low mood, or both. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), three group experiential themes (GETs) were developed: *the activating emotional journey*, *finding myself in the water*, and *psychological anchorage*, supported by seven sub-themes. This chapter discusses these findings in relation to existing literature and theory, while highlighting novel insights that emerged through participants' accounts. In line with IPA, the discussion integrates anticipated and unanticipated findings, foregrounding the meaning participants ascribed to their experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

Contribution to the Literature

Building on existing research demonstrating the psychological benefits of cold-water and open-water swimming (e.g., Yankouskaya et al., 2023; Murray & Fox, 2021; Massey et al., 2020), the current study extends understanding beyond symptom reduction. Participants described cold-water swimming as more of an embodied, meaningful practice that supported identity reconstruction, existential engagement, and play. As a result, the findings contribute to theoretical developments in embodiment, meaning-making, and holistic wellbeing, responding to calls for alternative and integrative approaches to mental health (Lord, 2023).

Novel Contributions of the Study

This study makes three key novel contributions to the literature on cold-water swimming, nature-based interventions, and mental health. The findings highlight play as a meaningful psychological process within cold-water swimming in nature.

While previous research has focused on physical and mental health benefits, participants described playful engagement with cold water swimming as facilitating joy, freedom, imagination, and an opportunity to experience emotions. Play aided a temporary relief from rumination and adult responsibilities and supported reconnection with childlike aspects of the self often neglected as adults. This suggests that cold-water swimming functions as a space for embodied play and creative self-expression, a process that has been largely overlooked in existing research on ecotherapy.

The study provides new insight into identity reconstruction and resilience through cold-water swimming in nature. Rather than being experienced solely as a way to manage mental health cold-water swimming became integrated into participants' sense of self. Many described

increased self-efficacy, empowerment, and pride, allowing them to move away from identities shaped by anxiety, low mood, grief, or stigma. Engaging in a physically and emotionally demanding practice supported the re-authoring of personal narratives and the development of a more resilient identity. This extends existing wellbeing models by demonstrating how embodied engagement in nature can play a central role in narrative identity formation and meaning making despite adversity.

The findings highlight a clear existential dimension to cold-water swimming in nature. Participants' accounts reflected themes of meaning, purpose, freedom, authenticity, and responsibility. For several individuals, cold-water swimming provided a way of tolerating uncertainty, making sense of suffering, and sustaining life during periods of profound distress. The practice functioned as a psychological anchor, offering stability, structure, and purpose. This positions cold-water swimming in nature within an existential framework, aligning with meaning-making models and logotherapy, and suggests its value lies not only in symptom reduction but in facilitating deeper engagement with life and values.

The Activating Emotional Journey: Embodiment and Emotional Processing

Participants described cold-water swimming as an embodied experience that facilitated emotional awareness. The physical shock and sensory immersion brought attention into the body, interrupting habitual rumination and enabling participants to “feel their feelings.” (Fosha, 2004). This supports embodied and somatic theories suggesting that emotional experiences are accessed and processed through bodily sensations rather than cognition alone (Damasio, 2011; Van der Kolk, 2002).

Several participants reported involuntary emotional responses in the water, including grief release and emotional expression, highlighting bottom-up emotional processing. Cold-water swimming created a rich sensory and relational environment that supported emotional activation, regulation, and meaning making. These findings align with phenomenological perspectives that emphasise lived, embodied experience as central to wellbeing and healing (Hawkins, 2021).

Finding Myself in the Water: Meaning, Identity, and Resilience

The theme finding myself in the water captured how participants used cold-water swimming to construct meaning following adversity (Barnes & Shardlow, 1996). Many began swimming during periods of crisis, grief, or transition, using the practice to regain agency and coherence.

Cold-water swimming supported meaning-making processes by enabling participants to reframe suffering and integrate hardship into a renewed life narrative (Thoits, 2012).

Participants' accounts align with existential and narrative identity theories, suggesting that meaning-making following distress can foster resilience and psychological growth. Cold-water swimming symbolised strength, endurance, and self-belief, allowing participants to view themselves as capable and empowered rather than defined by mental health difficulties (Kau, Lusher & Pipkin, 2024). This identity shift was particularly salient for those navigating life transitions, loss, or societal stigma.

Psychological Anchorage: Grounding, Regulation, and Stability

Cold-water swimming in nature also functioned as a psychological anchor, providing participants with routine, structure, and emotional stability. The practice helped individuals return to the present moment through sensory immersion and breath regulation, supporting grounding and anxiety management. Participants described cold-water swimming as a reliable reference point during times of distress, often framing it as essential to their wellbeing.

Repeated exposure to discomfort enabled participants to build distress tolerance and confidence, which translated into feeling empowered. This reflects how embodied exposure to challenge can foster self-regulation, autonomy, and competence (Treichler & Lucksted, 2018). Cold-water swimming thus functioned as a ritualised practice that supported emotional regulation, resilience, and a sense of safety.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that cold-water swimming in nature moves beyond symptom relief for anxiety and low mood. Participants experienced embodied healing, identity transformation, play, and existential meaning through engagement with cold water and natural environments (MacInnes, 2006). The novelty of this study lies in illuminating how these processes intertwine, suggesting that healing is not solely cognitive but deeply embodied and meaningful. Cold-water swimming in nature may therefore be understood as a holistic practice that supports healing, identity reconstruction, and engagement with life in the face of adversity.

A quantitative study emerged by Forsten and Wetherell (2025) that explored the effects of cold-water sea swimming measuring mental health outcomes as a result. Their research explored if there were notable differences in participants mental health and wellbeing on days, they cold water swam vs when they did not. They completed the competitive sport anxiety inventory measures in both the morning and evening and used a diary method to track their

feelings. ANOVA was used to analyse the data. It was found that cold water swimming reduced anxiety levels, improved both sleep and confidence. Their study is consisted with the literature and the current study as they also had an all-female sample and lacked diversity.

The current findings are supported and in line with Crook, Brown and Bell's (2025) qualitative research that explored the experiences of open water swimmers with depression. They had 9 participants in their study, 8 females and 1 male that had been diagnosed with depression and engaged in outdoor swimming. They used IPA to analyse their data. Three themes emerged that included how cold-water immersion enabled them to confront their depression, given the challenge of the cold and this helped them push through the discomfort which had a direct mirror on getting through the depression. Moreover, they found that participants felt they had more autonomy by swimming, which made them feel they were tackling their depression. They also found that self-acceptance, play and community was a big part of overcoming their depression that was achieved in cold water swimming. Finally, through embodiment and connection in nature this allowed them to step outside of rumination. For one participant reported "it seems to sort of wash my brain out" which speaks to the rich experience of cold-water swimming in nature for mental health benefits. A strength to this study was how the authors were clear about their method procedure e.g. sample size, limitations, ethics which makes this study easy to replicate. The study lacks diversity and gender balance given there was one male, which was an issue the current study also experienced.

To build on this, this is further supported as research suggests it is a primarily women led activity given the sample consisted of all females (Christie, Elliot & Wilbraham, 2024). Being self-conscious, having body image struggles, therefore fearing judgement may affect women's motivation to engage in exercise at often male led facilities e.g. gym and sports centres (Christie, Elliott & Wilbraham, 2024). This is in line with what the current research found as four of the participant's highlighted how cold-water swimming in nature provided a judgment free zone where they acknowledged there was less emphasis on appearance. Roth and Basow (2004) put forward how women's physical capabilities are often underestimated and that perceived differences are exaggerated. This highlights physical disparities between men and women that may be socially constructed. In the context of cold-water swimming in nature women view themselves as equal to men challenges the traditional notions of male dominance in risk taking sports. Which may be explained why no males came forward to partake in the study.

Research strengths and limitations

This qualitative analysis adds to the limited empirical studies that explore the experience of cold-water swimming in nature for those who self-identify as having anxiety or low mood. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to use IPA to understand the experience of cold-water swimming in nature for those who self-identify as having anxiety, and or low mood.

Some may view the sample size as a limitation as it is difficult to generalise the findings of eight participants to the wider public. However, the sample size fits the methodological approach and aim of the research. Thus, in line with the idiographic focus of IPA this studies aim was not to produce generalisable findings. However, considerations of transferability are still relevant. The rich, in-depth accounts provided by participants may offer valuable insights that resonate with others who share similar experiences, particularly those who self-identify as having anxiety and low mood, who have a curiosity about cold water swimming in natural environments or alternative ways to manage their mental health. The findings may be especially relevant to mental health practitioners, researchers, or policymakers interested in ecopsychology or body-focused interventions for anxiety and low mood. All that being said, the transferability of this research is naturally limited by the small, purposive sample and the specific context in which the study was conducted. Thus, future research needs to assess the applicability of these insights to larger populations. Moreover, the inclusion criteria of the eight participants allowed for a more coherent analysis of their experiences that I would achieve with more participant's which is in line with idiographic understanding. The findings build on the existing limited research into the experience of cold-water swimming, provided new insights and phenomenological descriptions of cold-water swimming in nature for those that experience anxiety and low mood.

The rich nature of IPA, which allowed for a rich and meaningful understanding of the experience of cold water in swimming in relation to mental health difficulties. I was able to capture their lived experience, which helped provide key insights, some new and some corroborating past research. These findings can be transferable to understanding the experiences of those who cold water swim for their mental health and wellbeing. Moreover, I uncovered the extent of what the meaning making entails in terms of what participant's prescribed to cold water swimming in nature. The research was unique in that it spoke to what how participants made sense of their experiences despite adversity they engaged in an embodied practice that aided their wellbeing.

A key limitation of this study lies in the sampling process, which resulted in a lack of gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity among participants. This section will explore these sampling limitations in more detail, focusing first on gender and then on ethnicity and access, before considering the implications for homogeneity within the IPA approach. Despite efforts to recruit a mixed-gender sample, only women participated in the study. This was not intentional, but rather a result of no men responding to recruitment efforts, including a poster placed at a male-only swimming pond. Research suggests that men are generally less likely to speak openly about their mental health compared to women, which may explain the difficulty in recruiting male participants (Brooks, 2001). The absence of male voices limits the transferability of the findings to men, and future research would benefit from exploring the experiences of male cold-water swimmers who identify as experiencing anxiety or low mood. Including men could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how gender may influence the embodied experience of cold-water swimming in nature.

In addition to gender, the sample lacked ethnic and socioeconomic diversity, as it consisted of eight white British women. This reflects broader disparities in access to swimming among black and global majority communities in Western contexts (Wiltse, 2014). Historical exclusion, segregation, economic barriers, and lack of access to facilities have all contributed to lower swimming participation rates in these communities (Ito, 2014; Hastings, Zahran, & Cable, 2006). Despite the existence of Black-led swimming groups and advocates actively promoting swimming in the UK these voices were not represented in this study (Dawe, Ruiz & Devonport, 2025). This underrepresentation may also be influenced by broader structural inequalities, such as transportation, cost, and limited access to natural spaces. As noted by Pretty (2004), individuals living near nature tend to experience better mental health outcomes, and the privilege of living close to clean, swimmable blue spaces should not be overlooked. The lack of socioeconomic diversity in the sample further limits the scope of the findings, as those from disadvantaged areas may have different or more restricted access to the benefits of cold-water swimming. This is supported by the literature as a similar study exploring cold water immersion on mood levels for adolescents found their sample consisted of white middle-class, middle-aged women (Harper et al., 2025). However IPA values a homogenous sample to allow for a detailed idiographic exploration, the shared identity among participants (white British women who cold-water swim and self-identify as experiencing anxiety or low mood) may have created a form of homogeneity based on lifestyle and mental health experience.

Another limitation was focusing on anxiety and low mood as this limited the inclusion of other mental health difficulties. However, anxiety and low mood are the most common mental health difficulties and since COVID-19 anxiety and depression prevalence increased by 25% globally

(Kupcova et al., 2023). Moreover, some mental health difficulties may have presented as problematic e.g. anorexia and using cold water swimming to lose weight (Men et al., 2025). IPA methodology also brings certain limitations that may have influenced the present study. A core feature of IPA is its reliance on participants' ability to articulate their lived experiences in depth. As such, the richness of the data was closely tied to how well participants were able to express their thoughts, emotions, and reflections. In this study, I found that some participants found this much easier than others. For those who struggled to express themselves, I relied on follow-up questions and prompts to encourage further elaboration.

This variation in depth may have been influenced by several factors, including the level of rapport established between myself and the participant, language proficiency, and the desire to present oneself in a socially acceptable manner (Willig, 2001). Differences in participants' ability to reflect on and make sense of their experiences were also observed, which may be shaped by age, education, personality traits, or previous experience with introspective practices. To address these challenges, future researchers may benefit from incorporating several strategies to enhance data richness. These could include sending out a rough idea of the nature of questions to expect, encouraging them to reflect beforehand. Additionally, inviting participants to engage in creative or embodied methods, such as journaling, drawing, or diary keeping accounts of their most recent cold-water swims, which may have helped those who struggle to verbalise their experiences in a traditional interview setting. Offering multiple modes of expression can support a more inclusive and reflective data-gathering process. These techniques align with IPA's emphasis on capturing the depth and nuance of lived experience; while also acknowledging the diverse ways individuals may make sense of and communicate their inner worlds

Research quality

The research project valued to meet the standard good practice of qualitative research that was discussed in chapter 2 that aims to include sensitivity to context by being aware and responsive to the research context (Mooney-Somers & Olsen, 2017). Commitment refers to the degree in which I adhered to the methodological process throughout the research project. I maintained epistemological and ontological commitment, theoretical and methodological coherence and analytical depth. Moreover, I was committed to ethical practice, reflexivity and remaining transparent through the process (Ortlipp, 2008). Finally, the impact and importance that focuses on contribution to knowledge and relevance to the field.

I was sensitive to context throughout the introduction and literature review by making use of links of the current study to existing literature and returning to the literature to support any new

findings from the current study. Throughout the interviews and analytic process of the data I remained reflective while adhering to the BPS ethical guidelines as I am aware I have a duty of care. My interpersonal sensitivity was used for the subject matter and sociocultural influences was therefore held in mind. I was also attuned to participants needs during the interviews, given if a sensitive topic arose and they needed extra time or a break (Dempsey et al., 2016). One participant got emotional when speaking about her grief and stated that sometimes “it catches her unexpectedly”. I showed empathy and compassion and validated her experience. I offered to take a break if she needed some time.

I showed commitment and rigour during the research process by taking precautions to protect participants mental health through having inclusion/exclusion criteria, screening interviews and having a debrief once interviews were completed (Muthanna & Alduais, 2023). I truly immersed myself in the data through interviews, analysis and findings. Moreover, to respect participants meaning making, I ensured my themes were based on the information they provided and illustrated by direct quotes they provided. I upheld the rigorous standards I put in place by meeting regularly with my research supervisor to reflect on the analysis, themes and any significant data, which guided me in establishing my themes and what I needed to develop further to be in line with the participants experience.

I also provided a detailed account of the procedures I took, how I collected my data and how I analysed it. I spoke to this in a clear and concessive way which was demonstrated by the quality of the tables and themes. Being a reflective and scientific practitioner, I aimed to demonstrate transparency through the research process with reflections on my ontology, epistemology and experience of cold-water swimming in nature as someone that self identifies with anxiety.

Reflexivity

My initial use of the term mental health reflected both my awareness of the growing number of people experiencing mental health difficulties and my fairly narrow assumptions about why participants might engage in cold-water swimming. At this stage, my framing risked reproducing a mind–body split by treating mental health as something separate from the body. However, this understanding shifted as the research progressed. By staying closely attuned to participants’ lived experiences, it became clear that their accounts did not focus solely on mental health. Instead, participants described the benefits of cold-water swimming through embodied and relational experiences with water, weather, nature, wildlife, and landscape.

Wellbeing was not talked about as an improvement in mental health alone, but as something that emerged through the physical and sensory experience of being in cold water and in nature.

As a result of remaining close to participants' experiences, my perspective moved towards a more embodied and relational understanding of wellbeing. Rather than rejecting the term mental health altogether, I came to see it as an incomplete way of describing what participants were experiencing. It did not fully capture the close connection between bodily sensations, emotions, and relationships with the natural environment that were central to their accounts. In this sense, my understanding of mental health came to differ from that of participants, who did not use clinical language, but instead described wellbeing through the felt, lived experience of cold-water swimming as an embodied practice in nature. Participants experiences consisted of play, freedom, identity making, meaning making, all of which contribute to positive mental health outcomes. My assumptions shifted as a result of what participants shared through embodied descriptions; I was aware that positive wellbeing was not just cognitive and emotional but emerged through the bodies engagement in cold water and nature. Moreover, their language allowed me to engage differently with the phenomenon of cold-water swimming in nature of why people engage in this activity, as their descriptions where focused on bodily sensations and the connection to nature, open space provided an experiential experience such as freedom.

“Again, I think it probably comes back to sort of freedom. You know, because you're a mum, you're a wife. You are a carer, a bit of a carer for my elderly parents, you know, it's all of those things but right there in that lake, it's just you and that lake. And you're free, aren't you?” – Fran, p.27

This shift reflects a move away from a Cartesian mind–body divide, discussed in the literature review, towards phenomenological and embodied perspectives that view mental and physical experiences as deeply interconnected. The research process was therefore transformative, leading me to reconsider both the boundaries and usefulness of mental health as the main way of understanding the benefits of cold-water swimming.

Dennison (2019) highlights that IPA is not value-free, and the researcher plays a dual role in being situated both inside and outside their research, consisting of their prior lived experience and assumptions, that will impact their interpretations and bracketing these of course can never be absolute. In the present study, the research of lived experience of cold-water swimming in nature was not erased. However, efforts were made to recognize assumptions and avoid them impacting the analysis and interpretation of the experiences. Reflecting on the

double hermeneutic nature of IPA, I am cognisant of my relationship to the topic and assumptions of cold-water swimming in nature for those with anxiety and low mood, which may have influenced the interpretation of the data, and a different researcher may have interpreted the analysis differently. The recruitment poster highlighted how the study aimed to explore how cold-water swimming in nature impacts those with anxiety or low mood therefore this introduces sample bias however, my personal connection to the topic positioned me as a cultural insider among the participants. According to Smith et al. (2009), this insider perspective can benefit IPA researchers, as "...the empathy provided by a shared humanity and common cultural understanding can be an important bridge between researcher and participant and a valuable analytic resource" (p.10). I believe that my own experience of anxiety and cold-water swimming in nature enabled me to form an empathic connection with participants. This connection allowed me to notice subtle nuances in their language and behaviour that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. For example, when participants spoke highly about it being part of the identity and valuing that being how they are known, I felt similar with pride for this identity. Perhaps someone who does not cold-water swim in nature would have understood the identity piece differently. Moreover, my experiences were also in line with the participants, in terms of a sense of freedom achieved being in open cold water which allows for emotions to be experienced. This is a unique experience that unless you engage in cold water swimming in nature, you may not be able to speak to this experience. However, I am mindful that this presents a double-edged sword as my own experience with cold water swimming may have led me to assume an understanding of participants' experiences, potentially limiting the depth of my inquiry. In contrast, a researcher without similar experience might have probed further, seeking greater insight through follow-up questions. Therefore, I ensured to make good use of my reflexivity diary and tried to bracket off any assumptions where possible. As an interpretative phenomenological researcher, I recognize that my understanding of how interpreted the participant's data will have an impact on the research. However, participants themselves made meaning of their experiences in highly somatic and metaphorical language, affirming the embodied, emotionally activating nature of cold-water swimming in nature. My role, therefore, was to interpret this language not as symbolic only, but as experientially real reflecting deeply their meaning making.

Central to both IPA and my development as a trainee counselling psychologist I am committed to exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals. Throughout the interview process, I remained conscious of maintaining appropriate boundaries, guided by the interview schedule and attuned to the participants' cues. I was often deeply moved by their experiences and mental health distress. In addition, the level of meaning they prescribed to cold water swimming in nature was powerful. For participants that spoke about grief and suicide, I felt an

urge to normalise these feelings, however, I remained mindful of my role as a researcher was to understand and represent their narratives, not to offer therapy. I felt privileged that participants entrusted me with such significant and personal experiences. Immersing myself in their stories was an honour and a responsibility, particularly given the under-researched nature of this topic.

My own emotional safety was supported through supervision. Reflexivity throughout the research process further enabled me to identify both the similarities. Participant safety was prioritised at every stage of the research, in line with Yardley's quality framework. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, a thorough screening protocol, and a distress protocol to manage potential emotional impact. I maintained my reflexivity diary throughout the research process where I found myself wanting to go back and ask follow up questions once I had analysed my data, as I read and re read and new insights emerged. I felt frustrated at myself that I did not ask more probing questions in the interview to really dig deeper into what the participant meant. However, this has been good learning for me moving forward for conducting research in the future.

I also felt a strong sense of wanting to get things "right" in terms of the meaning making of the participant's experiences as some of their stories had such a meaning and impact behind them therefore, I often put a lot of pressure on myself with the analysis. I also learned a lot about my own process of what I take from cold water swimming in nature which was confirmed by sharing similarities with what participant's gained from it as I set to out to discover through the experiences of others why exactly I was so drawn to cold water swimming in nature.

Clinical implications and future recommendations

Implications for Counselling Psychology

An implication of the current findings for counselling psychology is the need to more explicitly recognise the therapeutic value of embodied and nature-based practices. Participants did not just describe cold water swimming in nature as a way to manage low mood or anxiety, but more so an embodied, relational experience through which meaning, agency, identity and self-acceptance were achieved.

For counselling psychology this suggests that psychological healing may occur not only through verbal reflection within the therapy room, but also through embodied engagement and reconnection with the world. This aligns with counselling psychology's humanistic and person-centred values, particularly its emphasis on lived experience, meaning making, and the

individual person. As a result, CoPs may benefit from broadening their conceptualisation of psychological wellbeing to include embodied and ecological dimensions, rather than privileging purely intrapsychic models of mental health.

Practically, this implies that CoPs should feel theoretically and ethically supported in discussing clients embodied and nature-based practices e.g. cold-water swimming as legitimate sources of meaning, resilience, and identity, rather than viewing them as peripheral or non-psychological activities, and use these protective factors as a wellness tool.

Implications for Therapeutic Practice Across Disciplines

A broader implication for therapeutic practitioners is the importance of embodiment as a mechanism of psychological change. The findings suggest that participants experienced healing through their bodies as sites of meaning making, particularly through sensations of challenge, agency, and connection with nature.

This implies that therapeutic practice may benefit from integrating somatic and experiential approaches that acknowledge the body as central to emotional processing and identity formation. Rather than focusing solely on symptom reduction, practitioners across disciplines may consider how embodied practices such as nature-based and ecopsychology interventions can support clients in developing trust in their bodies, a sense of agency, and help develop a more coherent self-narrative.

This has relevance for clients experiencing low mood, anxiety, identity crisis, or difficulties with self-esteem, where embodied experiences of competence and resilience may complement traditional talking therapies.

Implications for Inclusivity, Ethics, and Service Design

An important implication of the findings concerns issues of inclusion and accessibility within nature-based wellbeing practices. Participants' accounts highlighted the significance of gendered spaces, such as women-only swimming areas and changing facilities. This raises ethical and practical considerations for transgender and non-binary individuals, who may experience exclusion or marginalisation in such environments.

For counselling psychologists and other practitioners, this underscores the importance of critically reflecting on how wellbeing practices may unintentionally reproduce inequality. In line with counselling psychology's commitment to social justice, intersectionality, and culturally

sensitive practice, practitioners should remain attentive to how gendered, embodied, and environmental contexts shape individuals' access to therapeutic experiences.

Implications for Future Research and Mental Health Services

The findings also suggest implications for future research and service provision. Given the lack of research exploring cold water swimming in nature specifically for individuals experiencing psychological distress, further studies involving more diverse populations are needed. This includes men, transgender and non-binary individuals, and people from varied cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

From a service-level perspective, the findings imply that stronger evidence could support collaboration between wellbeing and community-based or ecotherapy initiatives. This could lead to the development of integrative, evidence-informed pathways that incorporate embodied, nature-based practices alongside traditional therapeutic approaches.

Conclusion

The study aimed to give voice to those who self-identity as experiencing anxiety, low mood or both that cold water swim in nature. It had two objectives: firstly, to understand how those who cold water swim makes sense of their experience, and secondly, how they make sense of their experience in relation to their anxiety and low mood. The essence of an IPA study is that it explores lived experience; hence, the study offers insight into how eight women have made sense of cold-water swimming in nature in their very own unique ways in relation to their mental health.

The study's findings reveal that cold-water swimming in natural settings enables participants to experience a profound sense of embodiment, which they experienced as supporting both their wellbeing and overall quality of life. For many, it offered an effective way to manage anxiety and low mood, yet the benefits extended far beyond mental health support. Participants reported finding meaning, purpose, empowerment, resilience, and a strengthened sense of identity through this practice. Cold-water swimming also allowed them to engage in playful, childlike experiences, reconnecting with their inner child. Amid life's challenges and mental health struggles, participants consistently described nature-based cold-water swimming as a reliable refuge from stress. In summary, it represents a powerful, accessible, and holistic practice with significant potential to enhance mental health and wellbeing.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Online recruitment poster

Department of Health and Psychological Sciences

City, University of London

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR

**RESEARCH INTO THOSE WHO SELF IDENTIFY AS HAVING ANXIETY OR LOW MOOD
THAT COLD WATER SWIM IN NATURE.**

****About the Study:****

We are conducting a research study to explore the experiences of individuals who cold swim in natural settings that experience anxiety or low mood. Your insights can help us understand this practice better.

****Who Can Participate?****

- Adults (18+)
- Self-identify as experiencing anxiety or low mood
- Have experience with cold swimming in nature (e.g., lakes, rivers, oceans)
- have engaged in this activity for at least 2 months +

****What's Involved?****

- One-on-one interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes online via teams or in person.
- Share your personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts about cold swimming in nature
- Your participation is confidential and voluntary

If you'd like to participate or learn more, please contact us at:

Claudia Mulligan (lead researcher)
at [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

This research is supervised by Dr Helen Damon (helendamon@city.ac.uk).

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the Psychology Research Ethics Committee, University of London.

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact Annah Whyton, Secretary to the Senate Research Ethics Committee at senaterec@city.ac.uk

City, University of London is the data controller for the personal data collected for this research project. If you have any data protection concerns about this research project, please contact City's Information Compliance Team at dataprotection@city.ac.uk

Appendix B - Interview schedule

This document includes the interview questions that aid the data collection for the study an exploration of the experience of those who cold swim in nature that self identify as having low mood or anxiety. Research highlights the mental and physical benefits of cold water swimming so I am really looking to explore what it is like for you to experience cold water swimming in nature as some with anxiety or low mood.

60 minute interview

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. I will first cover a few logistical aspects and give you the opportunity to ask any questions again. After the pre-interview, we'll be having a semi-structured conversation, which means I have a set of guiding of 11 questions, but the discussion will remain flexible. This format allows us to explore your thoughts and experiences in more detail. While I'll be asking specific questions, feel free to elaborate on anything you feel is important, or if something we discuss prompts new ideas, you're welcome to share those as well. There are no right or wrong answers; I'm here to learn from your perspective. It should take around 45 minutes.

Pre-interview (15 minutes)

Review participant information sheet and consent forms and address any questions.

Clarify the researcher's obligation regarding confidentiality in Two instances: 1) Serious risk of harm to self or others

Collect demographic information (screener)

Interview schedule

Can you tell me what your experience is of cold swimming in nature as someone that identifies with anxiety or low mood?

-(prompts depending on first answer) Can you describe what are the thoughts or feelings you have when you cold water swim? can be before, during or after the activity?

-(prompt)Can you describe what body experience you have when you cold water swim?

Can you describe what it is like for you being in the open space in nature where you cold swim? Prompt - When you physically in the water what that experience is like, what are you thinking, visual, sensory, feeling etc?

What motivated you to start cold swimming in nature? Prompt, where there specific feelings or events that led you to this activity?

Do you have any rituals or routines for cold swimming in nature that you do?

How would you describe what cold swimming in nature means to you?

Can you describe a moment in the cold water that was meaningful for you? E.g. smell, sound, taste, visual, touch?

What is it like for you to experience cold water swimming in nature alone or with people?

How does the weather impact your experience of cold-water swimming in nature?

How do you experience your anxiety or low mood in relation to cold water swimming?

What keeps you coming back to cold water swimming in nature?

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience of cold-water swimming in nature that I did not cover?

Possible Prompts:

Whats that like for you

How does that feel....

what was it like for you? Was it what you expected?

Can you describe how cws has affected you – your sense of self, outlook on life, relationships, work

What sense do you make of that ?

How did it feel? How did it feel in your body?

What was going on in your thoughts?

How did it impact your behaviour?

Was there something that you were surprised about?

Appendix C: Consent form

Name of principal researcher: Claudia Mulligan

REC reference number:

Title of study: What is the experience of those who cold swim in nature that self identify as having anxiety or low mood. An Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis.

1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information dated 02/11/2024, V1 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions which have been answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw without giving a reason without being penalized or disadvantaged.	
3.	I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to the time of transcription, which will take place two weeks after the interview.	
4.	I agree to the interview being audio recorded.	
5.	I give permission for the researcher to make use of an external transcription software for the purpose of transcribing the interviews.	
6.	I agree to quotes I may share being used without identifying information.	
7.	I agree to City recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) explained in the participant information and my consent is conditional on City complying with its duties and obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).	
8.	I understand that in the event of disclosure around money laundering, terrorism, drug trafficking or drug dealing (this involves giving drugs to friends), the researcher is legally obliged to break confidentiality.	
9.	I understand that my de-identified data may be used for publication in a scientific journal.	
10.	I understand that the researcher will delete my personal contact information after completion of the study and that the results of study will be made accessible on the studies website.	
11.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

Name of Participant Signature Date

Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet

Title of study: *What is the experience of cold swimming in nature for those that self identify as having anxiety or low mood: An Interpretive phenomenological analysis.*

Ethics approval code: ETH2324-0573

Name of principal researcher* Claudia Mulligan

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask if anything is unclear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose is to understand more about the lived experience of those who self identify as having low mood or anxiety who cold water swim in nature. This is important for the mental health field in for those who are perhaps treatment resistant and also that counselling psychology as a discipline takes a more pluralistic and holistic approach to mental health and understands more about peoples experience who identify as having anxiety or low mood that cold swimming in nature. This study forms part of a thesis for the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at City University London.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to participate in this study as you have told the researcher you engage in cold swimming in nature e.g. sea, pond, river etc. and self-identify as having low mood or anxiety. You are also over the age of 18. Please inform the researcher if any of these details are inaccurate.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. You will be able to avoid answering questions that you feel are too uncomfortable or intrusive without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. There is a time limit to withdrawal which is 4 weeks after the interview takes place.

What will happen if I take part?

If you wish to take part you will be invited to attend a one-to-one interview in person or via teams online expected to last 60 minutes. The interview will be semi-structured, so there will be 12 open-ended questions which are expected to lead onto further topics. You will be encouraged to take the lead in sharing your experiences. The interview will be audio recorded on Microsoft teams, all recordings will be made on an encrypted recording device and transferred to a password protected computer for storage. Recordings will be accessible only to the researcher. After the interview recordings will be transcribed, replacing any identifying or personal information with pseudonyms to ensure your identity remains anonymous. The data, including quotations will then be analysed using an Interpretative Phenomenological approach. This involves looking at your insights and how you have made sense of your experiences. The study is expected to last until September 2025 and recordings will be destroyed after 10 years.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Due to the nature of the topic, it is possible that exploring personal encounters of the psychological impact of cold swimming in nature it may involve some emotional upset. If this was to occur, we would be able to take a break from the interview. Also please remember your participation is voluntary and you are able to withdraw at any stage and there are services to support you.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

This is an opportunity to share your views and experiences cold swimming in nature to see what the potential psychological implications are, sense making of your experience of this activity and it may provide a space to be listened to and reflect on what this has meant to you. You will also be contributing to research on an important topic today that is under researched and will benefit the field of counselling psychology, psychologists and the wider public.

Will me taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All information you disclose will be treated confidentially, unless you disclose you or anyone else is at risk. Then there are limits in which we would need to break confidentiality however the researcher will do this in a way that is transparent. All recordings will be accessible only to the researcher and stored securely on a password protected computer until they are destroyed at the end of the study. Confidentiality will only be broken if the researcher feels there is risk of serious harm either to yourself or others, or where the researcher is legally obliged to do so. All identifying or personal information will be replaced by pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity. Your contact details will not be shared with any third parties and

future use of personal contact information will be used only if you express interest in being informed of the results of the study once completed.

Data privacy statement

City, University of London is the sponsor and the data controller of this study based in the United Kingdom. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The legal basis under which your data will be processed is City's public task.

Your right to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in a specific way in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personal-identifiable information possible (for further information please see <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/public-task/>).

City will use your name and contact details to contact you about the research study as necessary. If you wish to receive the results of the study, your contact details will also be kept for this purpose. The only people at City who will have access to your identifiable information will be the researcher, X . City will keep identifiable information about you from this study for 1 year after the study has finished.

You can find out more about how City handles data by visiting <https://www.city.ac.uk/about/governance/legal>. If you are concerned about how we have processed your personal data, you can contact the Information Commissioner's Office (IOC) <https://ico.org.uk/>.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The findings of this study will be written up as part of a thesis for a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. The findings may also be included in various future academic publications. All details, including direct quotations from interviews will be listed under a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. There will be no identifiable or personal information in the final thesis or any other publications, so there will be no way for readers to identify you. If you would like to be sent the results of the study, please inform the researcher and consent to your contact details being kept for this purpose on the 'participant consent form.'

Who has reviewed the study?

[This study has been approved by City, University of London Research Ethics Committee]

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through City's complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you can phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is *A qualitative study exploring the psychological implications for cold swimming in nature?*

You can also write to the Secretary at:

[REDACTED]

Further information and contact details

[REDACTED]

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix E: Ethical approval

Sent on **03 Sep 2024** by **Carla Willig**

[Download as PDF...](#)

Dear Claudia

Reference: ETH2324-0573

Project title: What is the experience for those with depression or anxiety that cold swim in nature: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Start date: 3 Sep 2024

End date: 24 Dec 2025

I am writing to you to confirm that the research proposal detailed above has been granted formal approval from the Psychology low risk review. The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation. Approval has been given for the submitted application only and the research must be conducted accordingly. You are now free to start recruitment.

The approval was given with the following conditions:

Just one thing you need to attend to before commencing recruitment: on the recruitment poster you say that interviews will be conducted via the telephone. However, on the ethics form you say that interviews will be conducted via Microsoft Teams. Can you please make sure that the wording on the poster reflects accurately how you intend to collect data. If you want to give people a choice between the telephone and Teams, then please do say that on the poster.

Please ensure that you are familiar with [City's Framework for Good Practice in Research](#) and any appropriate Departmental/School guidelines, as well as applicable external relevant policies.

Please note the following:

Project amendments/extension

You will need to submit an amendment or request an extension if you wish to make any of the following changes to your research project:

Change or add a new category of participants;

Change or add researchers involved in the project, including PI and supervisor;

Change to the sponsorship/collaboration;

Add a new or change a territory for international projects;

Change the procedures undertaken by participants, including any change relating to the safety or physical or mental integrity of research participants, or to the risk/benefit assessment for the project or collecting additional types of data from research participants;

Change the design and/or methodology of the study, including changing or adding a new research method and/or research instrument;

Change project documentation such as protocol, participant information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires, letters of invitation, information sheets for relatives or carers;

Change to the insurance or indemnity arrangements for the project;

Change the end date of the project.

Adverse events or untoward incidents

You will need to submit an Adverse Events or Untoward Incidents report in the event of any of the following:

- a) Adverse events
- b) Breaches of confidentiality
- c) Safeguarding issues relating to children or vulnerable adults
- d) Incidents that affect the personal safety of a participant or researcher

Issues a) and b) should be reported as soon as possible and no later than five days after the event. Issues c) and d) should be reported immediately. Where appropriate, the researcher should also report adverse events to other relevant institutions, such as the police or social services.

Should you have any further queries relating to this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me. On behalf of the Psychology low risk review, I do hope that the project meets with success.

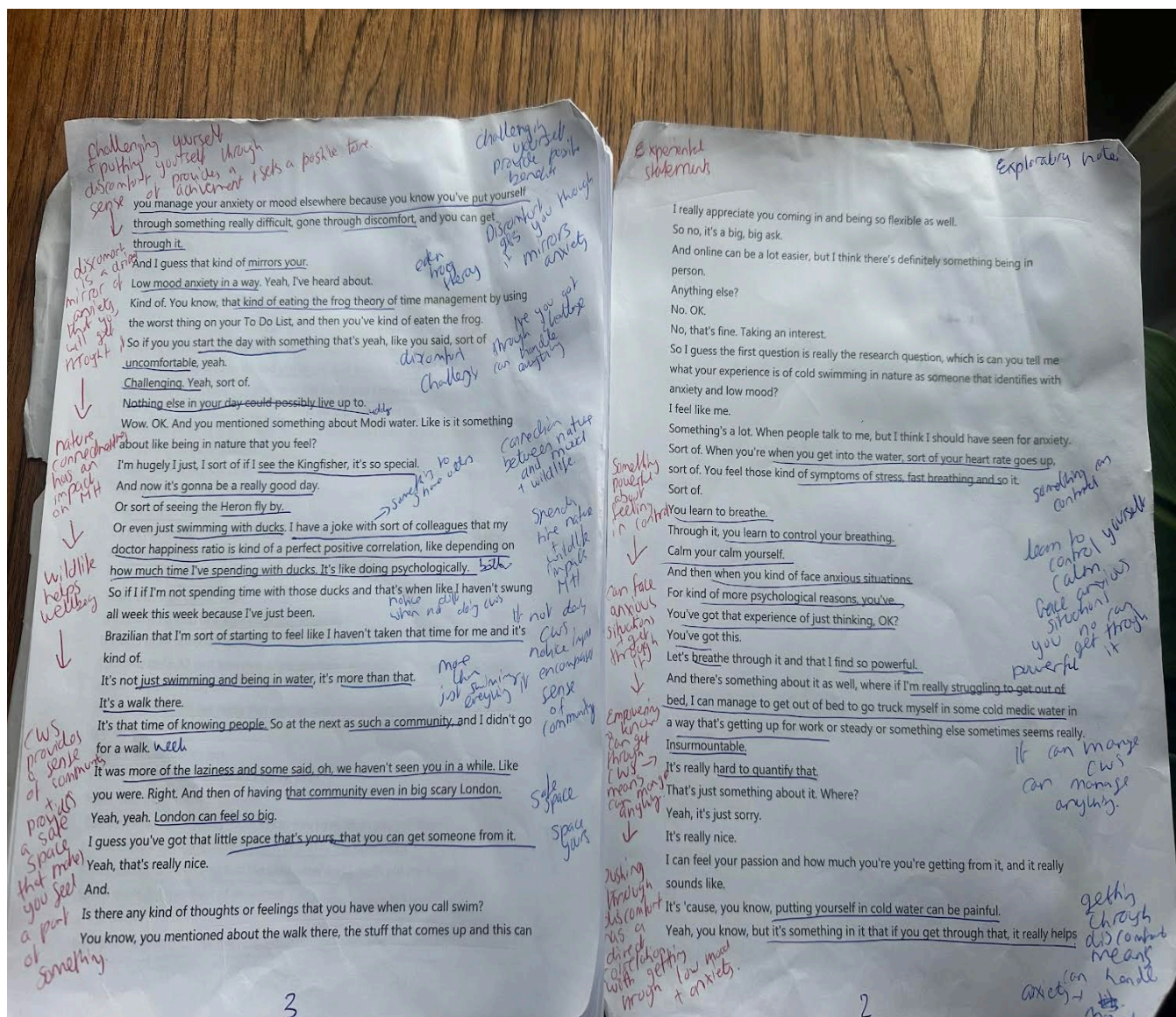
Kind regards



Psychology low risk review

City, University of London

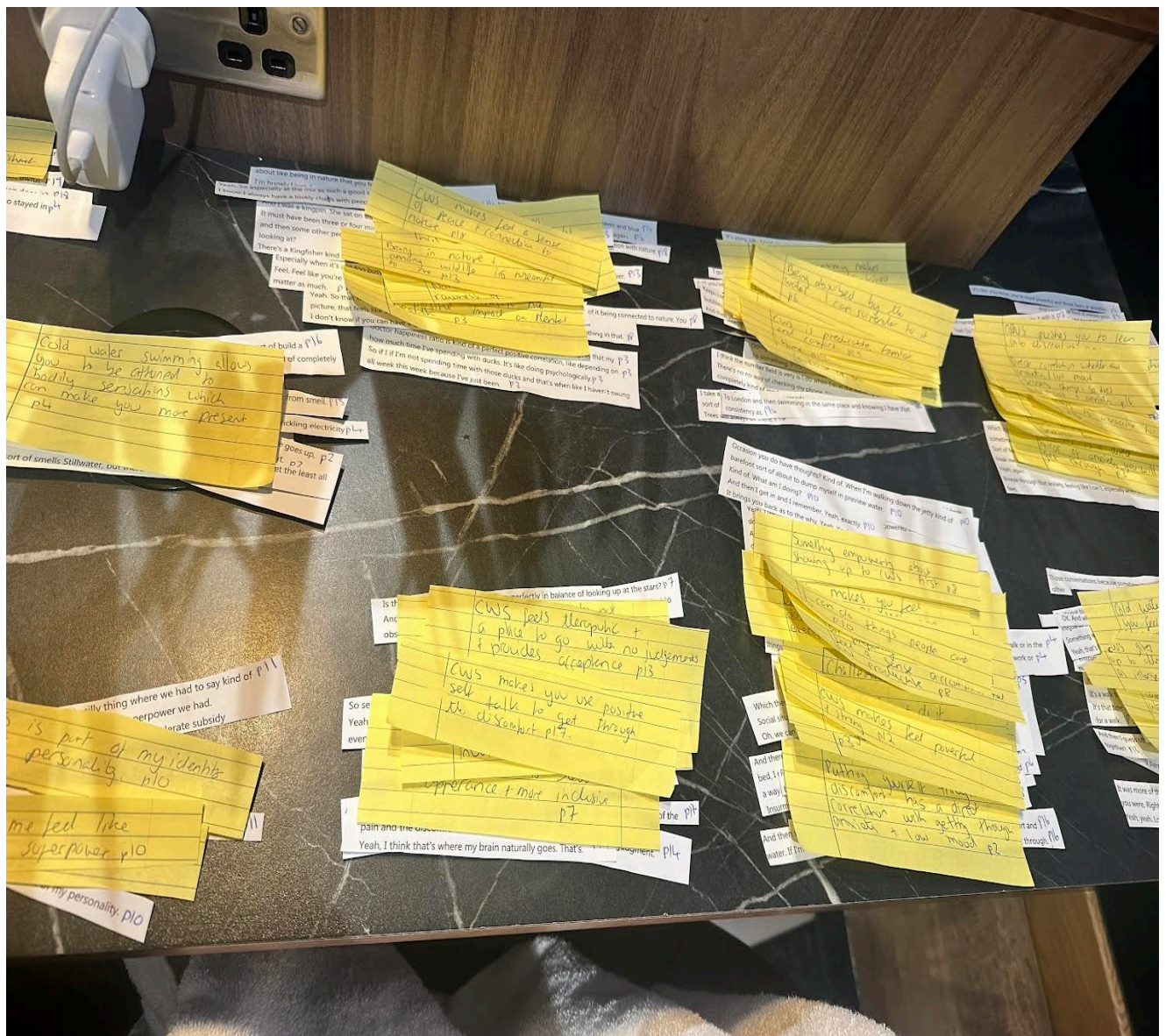
Appendix F: Sample of analysis



Sample of exploratory noting (right hand side)

Sample of experiential statements (left hand side)

Appendix G: Sample of Personal experiential statement gathering



Appendix H: Example of PETs for one participant

Emotional renewal through cold water immersion in nature	Emphasis on being present in the moment internal shift based of external world	Sea offers a deep sense of grounding as it acts as an anchorage	Identity shift – new sense of meaning making at life stage	Connection through authenticity
Opportunity to release stored emotions	Doing breathe work in the water means focus on breathing	Soothing, healing place to be	Cold water swimming in nature became new identity	Sense of community
Grief comes to the surface during cold water swimming	Your mind is taken to another place	Sense of pleasure	Helped with the transition into retirement	Authentic connections similar aligned people
Opportunity to feel emotionally connected to daughter	A way to help manage anxiety	Sea provides a common third	Cws provided an interest to write about	Feel part of something bigger
Engage in cold water swimming in nature as meaning attached to it	Get into body rather than head	Sea brings safety and containment		Activity attracts like minded people

The first PET – **Emotional renewal through cold water immersion in nature**

Opportunity to release stored emotions – letting the body speak as they experience emotional release through an uncontrollable experience that felt involuntary

p.3 “releasing emotions that I must have been holding on to”.

P.23 sometimes I start crying in the water as well”.

Feeling of safety that can have an emotional realise in an environment that makes you feel contained and held

P 37 “I sobbed and sobbed and sobbed

p. 39” That sometimes I started crying in the water as well”

Breakthrough of emotional suppression

P9 I think the feeling that because it’s a bit like internal emotional really because you start warming up

P4. “The ability to cry into my goggles, crying”.

P37. “I think probably with the response to the cold and the exertion of the, I wasn’t sure whether I was sobbing with tears and I couldn’t stop for a couple of hours”

Identity shift new sense of meaning making at life stage at

Participant experiences something psychologically meaningful from this experience which caused an identity shift due to a newfound meaning making which occurred after the context of a death of daughter.

Cold water swimming in nature provided a space to reflect a new sense of self and transformation as an identity shift emerged

The grief and trauma experiences makes sense of a turmoil time in life needed to re find oneself

A new meaning making in life through identity shift

P32. So yeah that helped with that identity thing as well, not you know, I wasn’t just an old lady

P 33“well who am I ?”

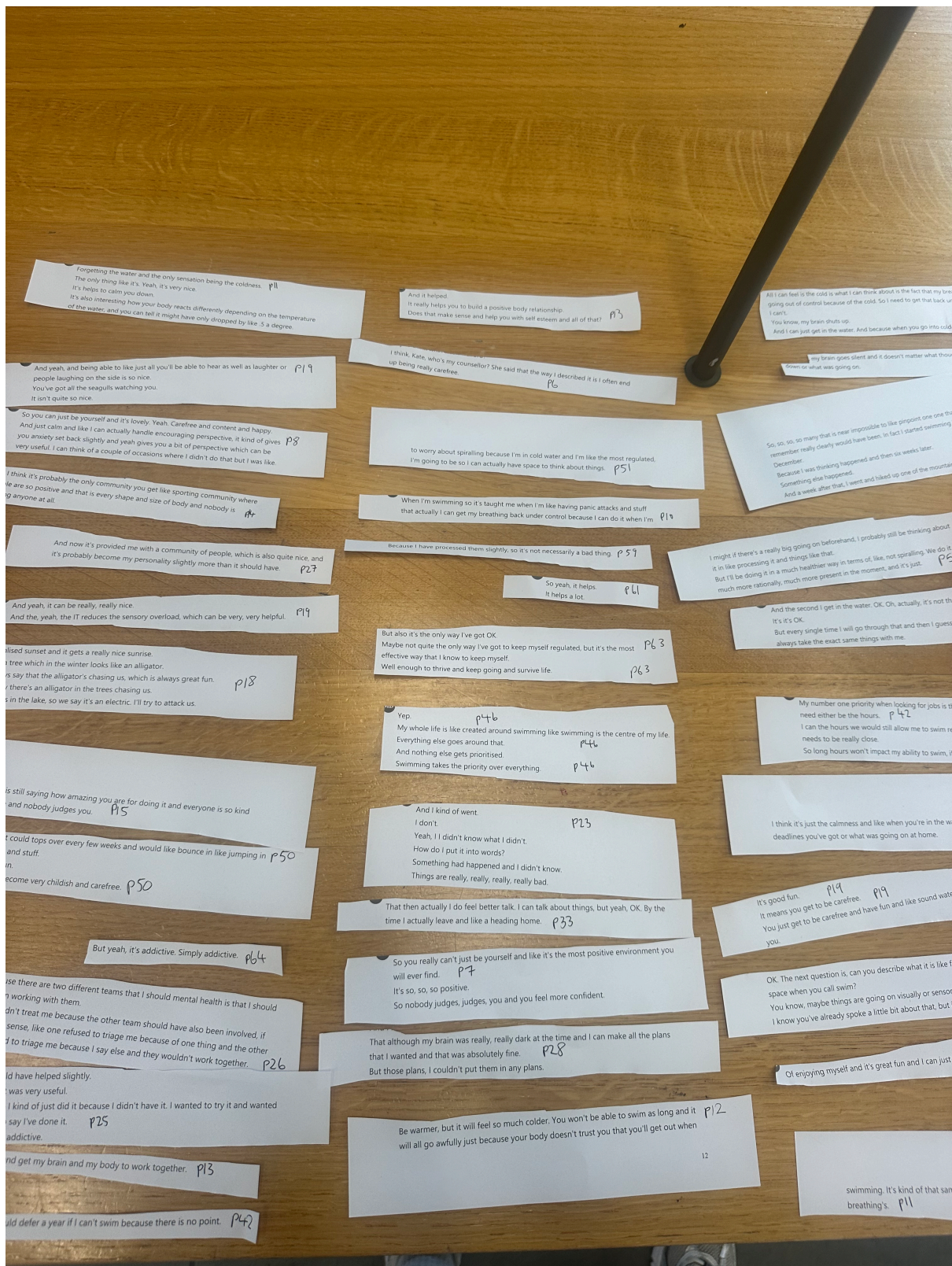
P51. “It gives structure to the day and I have something to get up for”

P29 “well yeah its become my above my identity”.

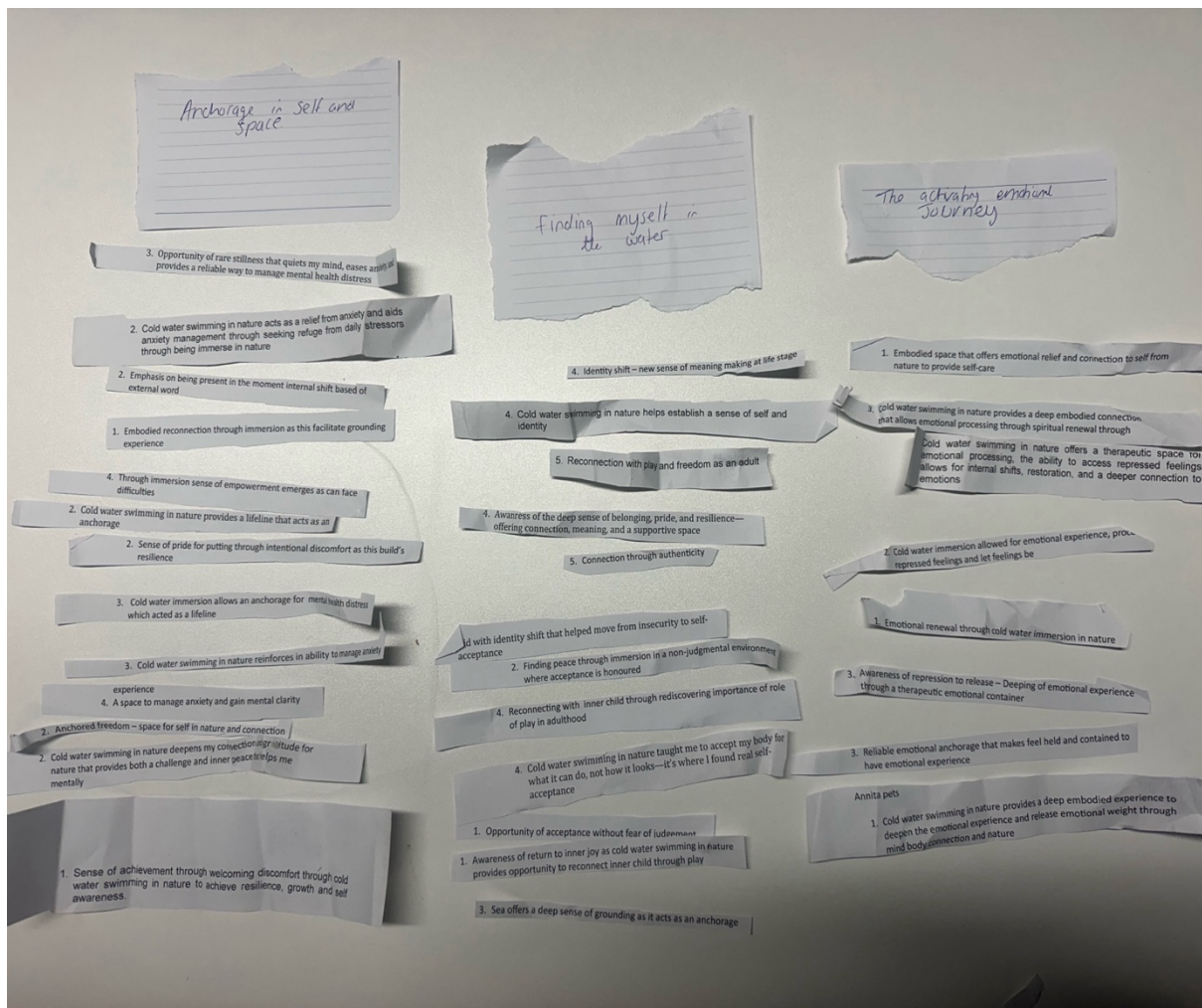
P29”when you haven’t got that job anymore you, very often theres that serach for that identity. Like who you are, what you do”

Appendix I: Sample of PETS gathering





Appendix J: Sample of Group experiential statements



Appendix K: Distress protocol

Distress protocol

◆ 1. Recognizing Signs of Distress

The researcher should monitor for signs such as:

Crying or visible emotional upset

Withdrawal or silence

Verbal expressions of distress (e.g., "This is hard to talk about")

Agitation, shaking, or panic symptoms

Requesting to stop the interview or leave the room

◆ 2. Immediate Response Steps

If a participant shows mild to moderate distress:

Pause the interview or activity.

Gently ask:

"Would you like to take a short break or stop for today?"

Provide reassurance:

"It's okay to feel upset. You're not required to continue if you're uncomfortable."

Offer water or a quiet space if available.

If distress is severe (e.g., panic attack, uncontrollable crying, dissociation):

Stop the interview immediately.

Ground the participant (calm tone, deep breaths, orienting questions).

Avoid physical contact unless clearly welcomed.

Contact a trained professional if available (e.g., on-site counselor).

◆ 3. Participant Choices

Always remind participants that they:

Can pause or stop the interview at any time

Do not have to answer any question that makes them uncomfortable

Can withdraw from the study entirely without penalty

◆ 4. Post-Distress Support

Offer written materials with referral information, such as:

Mental health 24/7 services

Counselling services

◆ 5. Reporting and Documentation

After the session, document:

What happened

How you responded

Whether the participant continued or withdrew

Maintain confidentiality and store the report securely
