



SHARK FEARS

I know everyone believes their fears are just their own. That you're the only one who worries about the depth of the water, the waves, getting kicked by a competitor, the jump, whether you will be the last swimmer out of the water, or if a shark is lurking. It's important to accept that all of these worries are normal. . . for living-life-to-the-fullest triathletes.

No matter how experienced you are, galeophobia, the fear of sharks, can make the steeliest of competitors pee in their wetsuits. The difference between the best triathletes around and you, besides the obvious, is their acceptance of the fact that this sport is full of unavoidable mental and physical challenges, and that their energy must not be wasted on something they can't control.

Here's are the top 5 ways the pros handle sharks and other ocean water swim fears.

1. What's possible ≠ What's probable. In other words, you are more likely to misplace your goggles, swim too far around a buoy, or struggle to get your wetsuit off then encounter any underwater life. You do realize, don't you, that just because something bad could happen doesn't mean it will. The pros conserve their energy by occupying their minds with plans about how they want to act on race-day – regardless of what they might be thinking at any point in time. Like you, they don't have time to worry about things that have little chance of becoming true.
2. Uncomfortable ≠ Unsafe. Worrying about creatures under the sea can make anyone feel jittery, but an uncomfortable thought must remain just that. . . an uncomfortable thought. Thoughts can't bite you. So, have your discomfort, and then get back to the business of focusing on your glide, turnover, and sighting. Don't allow the mind to turn a normal concern into a safety issue.
3. Unfortunately, nervous athletes tend to over-focus on negative outcomes instead of positive actions. To help with this, a mantra of "nervous but focused" might help you appreciate that it's okay to be nervous, but it's not okay to use it as an excuse for a lack of a swim plan. Lock in on a few strategies (e.g., I'll take 10 strokes then I'll flip on my back and rest, or I'll get on people's feet as soon as I can, or I'll sing my favorite song the whole time I'm swimming, etc.) and make the process of swimming more important than the potential hazards, and even more important than worrying about the result.
4. "Fear is always present" at every level of the sport – novice through professional – and fear, by definition, "always precedes courageous action." Said differently, you cannot be courageous unless you are fearful. If you are worried about the ocean swim, and sharks in particular, then congratulations are in order. You have chosen to "lean into life," which while intimidating, puts you in a position to reap the rewards of your willingness to get out of your comfort zone.
5. In psychology, there's a technique called "acting as if" where someone identifies the way they would behave if they believed the exact opposite of what they thought. In the case of shark fears, "acting as if" might lead you to stop talking (to anyone who will listen) about what could possibly go wrong, and start discussing what you want to accomplish in this race. "Acting as if" changes where you focus, and how you communicate, and with some practice can help elevate your mental game to new heights.