

NEW RESEARCH FROM OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Floating, the Brain and a New State Called Aquahenosis

A clear guide to a 2026 Floatation-REST study in people with anxiety and depression

IN ONE SENTENCE

Floatation-REST created a distinct non-drug state with stronger body awareness, softer body boundaries and a greater feeling of unity.

A new way to study consciousness

What happens when the brain receives much less information from the outside world? A new study gives a detailed answer. It shows that floating can change how people feel their body, their surroundings and even their sense of self.

The study was published on 26 August 2026 in Neuroscience of Consciousness, a journal from Oxford University Press. It included adults who were seeking help for anxiety and depression.

The researchers call the float-induced state aquahenosis. The word describes a feeling of becoming one with the water. It is not simply sleep, and it is not the same as taking a psychedelic drug. It is a specific state created by buoyancy, warm water and very low sensory input.

Why this matters

Modern wellness often adds more: more screens, more data, more stimulation and more technology. Floatation-REST works in the opposite direction. It removes stimulation and gives the nervous system a quiet environment. This makes the study relevant to recovery, mental wellbeing, longevity practices and some forms of biohacking.

Study type: Randomised controlled feasibility trial, secondary analysis

Participants: 75 adults assigned to three groups; 57 completed all six sessions

Main focus: Conscious experience, body awareness and emotional change

HOW THE RESEARCH WORKED

Six sessions in three different groups

The participants had clinically elevated anxiety and anxiety sensitivity. Most also had major depression. Some had generalised anxiety disorder, social anxiety, PTSD or panic disorder. They were placed at random in one of three groups.

1. Floatation-REST with a fixed plan

Participants completed six 60-minute float sessions over six weeks. They floated without clothing in warm water with a very high concentration of Epsom salt. The room reduced light, sound, touch, temperature differences and the feeling of gravity.

2. Floatation-REST with personal choice

These participants also completed six sessions. However, they could choose the timing and length of each session. A session could last up to two hours, and the programme could continue for up to twelve weeks. The average session was about 75 minutes.

3. A zero-gravity chair

The comparison group rested in a reclining chair in a quiet room with reduced light and sound. They remained clothed, and the room was at normal room temperature. This gave them rest, but it did not remove sensory input as completely as the float environment.

IMPORTANT DETAIL

The study compared a complete float environment with quiet chair-based rest. It did not compare one commercial float tank brand with another.

What the researchers measured

Before and after the sessions, the researchers measured anxiety, depression and positive and negative emotions. They also asked about body signals such as breathing and heartbeat.

After the sixth session, participants completed a widely used questionnaire for altered states of consciousness. This scale measures experiences such as unity, changes in body awareness, visual effects, anxiety and a feeling called Oceanic Boundlessness.

What is Oceanic Boundlessness?

It is a research term for a positive and expansive state. A person may feel peaceful, connected and less separated from the world around them. The normal border between 'me' and 'everything else' may feel softer. This does not automatically mean losing control. In this study, it was mainly connected with positive emotion.

WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

The strongest result was a positive sense of unity

Both Floatation-REST groups reported much more Oceanic Boundlessness than the chair group. The difference was largest among people who could choose the timing and length of their floats.

The float groups also reported more Experience of Unity, Spiritual Experience and Disembodiment. Disembodiment means that the usual feeling of having a clearly located and clearly bordered body became weaker. Some participants felt as if the body had faded into the environment.

The researchers used the word aquahenosis for this combination: stronger awareness of internal body signals, a softer border between self and surroundings, changes in the felt location of the body, and less attention to the outside world.

The body became both clearer and less solid

At first, this may sound like a contradiction. Participants felt their breathing and heartbeat more strongly, but they also felt that the border of the body was less clear.

The researchers suggest that these effects may be connected. When outside stimulation becomes very weak, breathing and heartbeat become easier to notice. At the same time, skin-temperature water and near-weightlessness remove many signals that normally show where the body ends. Internal signals become clearer while the outer border becomes softer.

A link with positive emotion

Oceanic Boundlessness was statistically linked with greater positive emotion and lower depression scores. It was also connected with feeling refreshed, relaxed and free from pain.

However, this result must be read carefully. All three groups improved in mood, depression and anxiety. The study did not find clear group differences in the main clinical outcomes. The analysis therefore suggests a possible pathway, but it does not prove that Oceanic Boundlessness caused the improvement.

THE CAREFUL CONCLUSION

The study shows a clear difference in the experience created by floating. It does not prove that floating is a cure for anxiety or depression.

Is floating like psilocybin or ketamine?

Only in some ways. The researchers compared the float reports with data from earlier studies of psilocybin and ketamine. There was overlap in unity, bliss and the softening of body boundaries, especially when floating was compared with low-dose psilocybin.

But the experiences were not the same. Psilocybin and ketamine produced much more visual imagery, altered perception and audio-visual effects. Floatation-REST mainly produced changes in body awareness and self-boundaries, with few strong perceptual changes.

LONGEVITY, BIOHACKING AND MODERN RECOVERY

Where does this study fit?

The study did not measure lifespan, biological age or ageing biomarkers. It cannot show that floating makes people live longer. Still, it is relevant to longevity because recovery, emotional balance and stress regulation are important parts of long-term health.

Longevity is also about healthspan: the years in which a person can function well and enjoy life. Sleep, pain, mood and recovery can influence healthspan. This study adds knowledge about how a low-stimulation environment may support some of these areas.

A different kind of biohacking

Biohacking is often linked with wearables, cold exposure, supplements and continuous measurement. Floatation-REST is different. It removes input rather than adding it.

There is no screen and no score to improve during the session. Warmth, buoyancy and silence allow attention to turn inward. For people who live with constant information, this 'less is more' approach may be especially relevant.

Why personal choice may matter

The strongest effects appeared in the group that could choose session timing and duration. Longer sessions may give the mind more time to settle. Personal control may also make it easier to feel safe and let go.

This may matter for spas, wellness centres and private users. The study does not give a final ideal session length, but it supports more research on flexible and longer sessions.

What we still need to learn

The sample was modest, and the altered-state questionnaire was completed only after the final session. The psychedelic comparison came from other studies. Larger studies are needed to test clinical effects, session length and long-term results.

Even with these limits, the study offers a new view of floating. Floatation-REST is not only passive rest. It can create a measurable state in which the body is felt differently and positive feelings of unity can appear.

FINAL THOUGHT

In a world built around more stimulation, Floatation-REST may be valuable because it creates space for less.

Source: Tobel T, Cone A, Choquette E, et al. 'Aquahenosis: a non-pharmacological altered state of consciousness induced by floatation-REST in individuals with anxiety and depression.' *Neuroscience of Consciousness*, 2026(1), niag044. Published 26 August 2026. DOI: 10.1093/nc/niag044.