



WORTH THE WAIT

Singer Bonnie Tyler learned to swim at 69, says Nilgin Yusuf, who explains why women in their prime are perfectly poised to learn new skills

Like Bonnie Tyler, who recently revealed she'd learned to swim, I too came to swimming in late life. For Bonnie, the impetus came when she fell from her yacht and had to be fished out of the water. For me, it was the gift of lessons for my 52nd birthday from my husband – the potential to fulfil a long-held dream.

Now, in lockdown, it's one of the things I miss most. My local Victorian pool in south London, with its skylights and wrought-iron balcony, closed its doors to the public, and my thrice-weekly trips to this urban oasis were replaced with long park walks.

Swimming is the fitness equivalent of a full massage that soothes the mind, body and soul. The ability to glide through water, at will, creates a feeling of lightness like flying, and the sensation of being physically supported while mentally released, is heart-racing, muscle-firming, blood-pumping, brain-cleansing bliss. Equal to the palpable pre-swim anticipation is the post-swim serenity that floods my system. After 30 lengths: 10 each of breaststroke, front crawl and backstroke, I return home, to duties and deadlines, with glowing satisfaction and a sense of can-do capability.

I'm sure my personal experience is intensified by the fact I came to swimming later in life. At those Saturday

morning swimming lessons, I'd be put through my paces, gradually improving my breathing, technique and stamina. It took 18 months and plenty of practice but by 54, I was able to casually utter the words I'd dreamed of for decades; the words that kept me a weary gym hostage for so long: 'I'm just going for a swim.'

All those years of visualising myself as a swimmer, waiting for the right time to properly learn, and finally the tangible reality of becoming waterborne and conquering my fear of water, have contributed to a sense of profound joy. I wonder, if I'd been thrown into a pool as a baby and swam routinely, unthinkingly throughout my life, would I still be experiencing this delight?

It turns out there is a scientific reason behind the concept of delayed gratification.

THE WAITING GAME

Professor Carolyn Mair PhD, behavioural psychologist and author of *The Psychology of Fashion*, explains, 'Increased levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine are released during a period of working towards, or wanting, a desirable outcome. Dopamine is a hormone and neurotransmitter involved in many brain processes, including motivation to

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achieve. It's the effort, chase, search and striving that's pleasurable – and the reward that's most satisfying. Delayed gratification can be tough, but the reward is likely to be more fulfilling, and worthwhile.'

Like it or not, waiting is a quality we've all had to grapple with during the past extraordinary year. As birthdays, holidays, weddings, Christmas and christenings were postponed, we waited for one set of governmental restrictions followed by another. We waited in queues for groceries and for the results of Covid tests, our own or those of others. If positive, we waited to see if the virus would take hold and how severe the strain would be. Those with Long Covid waited for their former health to return. Some still wait. We waited for a vaccination to be developed, distributed and administered. When the Queen addressed the nation during the first wave, she twanged our heartstrings when she spoke of being reunited with loved ones, after this endurance of waiting, comparing it to sweethearts during the war.

Not all waiting feels positive. The agony of waiting for a bill you can't pay, a legal resolution, medical diagnosis, operation or funeral should not be downplayed. Before Covid erupted, patience was arguably an outmoded trait. Millennials – dubbed the Now Generation – probably find waiting the most torturous. They were born into a free-flowing, wraparound, 24/7, click-and-buy culture. But we're all guilty. Flicking through TV channels, buying online and swiping our phones, deciding in a nanosecond if something warrants our attention, usually based on a single, fleeting image – that's the old normal.

CONFIDENCE BOOST

My 20s and teenage years were characterised by wanting and waiting. In the pre-internet world, knowledge required a library trip, looking for books or waiting for them to be ordered. If you wanted something stylish or interesting to wear, it required resourcefulness, creativity and a well-planned expedition. Music would be hunted down in record

shops. To get something instantly was the exception, not the rule. So swimming has not been the only delayed thing in my life. In order, it was fitted carpets, boyfriends, music festivals, motherhood, wellington boots... I waited for them all – and enjoyed them all the more. And, perhaps, I'm not so unusual. Women's lives are shaped by biological forces – puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause – and there are numerous reasons for late blooming.

According to analysis of data from 165,000 people by *Psychological Bulletin*, the optimum age for confidence and self-esteem is 60*. At this later stage of life, women are not only in an emotionally, intellectually and, often, financially better place to realise goals and dreams, but they are more confident.

SEIZE THE DAY

Professor Carolyn Mair elucidates, 'Around the time of the menopause, women undergo huge physical and psychological changes. Although around 25% of women experience negative symptoms, many women see this as an opportunity to achieve what they have put on hold until now. Confidence and self-esteem peak during middle age, so after life's setbacks, disappointments and rejections, we know what's important and care less what others think. We're more likely to try things, jump at opportunities and look on the optimistic side while being realistic. We work hard and put in the effort, determined to achieve our goals, while we can.'

Yes, another unexpected gift via the pandemic is a heightened consciousness of life's finiteness and death's finality. So, the next thing on my list is learning to ride a bike.

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