



A WELLNESS WAVE

LONG ISLAND FLOAT SPAS OFFER A UNIQUE WAY TO DE-STRESS

BY DAYSI CALAVIA-ROBERTSON

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Spalike businesses that are fostering the resurgence of “floating,” a practice that first made a splash in the ’70s, are finding a ready market on Long Island.

In the past five years seven float centers, from Rockville

Centre to Riverhead, have opened on the Island, with at least two others set to open later this year.

Customers pay up to \$100 for 60-minute “float sessions” in which they lie on their back, floating in pitch-black darkness and silence, inside a clam-shaped pod, or womblike tank or room, filled with about 12

inches of body-temperature water and about 1,000 pounds of pharmaceutical-grade Epsom salt. Some commit to paying about that much a month for a membership that allows them to float routinely.

Some floaters, such as Mike DiLeo, 46, of Brookhaven, pay more than \$400 a month to float twice a week.

“I’ve floated more than 100 times in the last year,” said DiLeo, who owns an e-commerce business. “Floating helps me focus.”

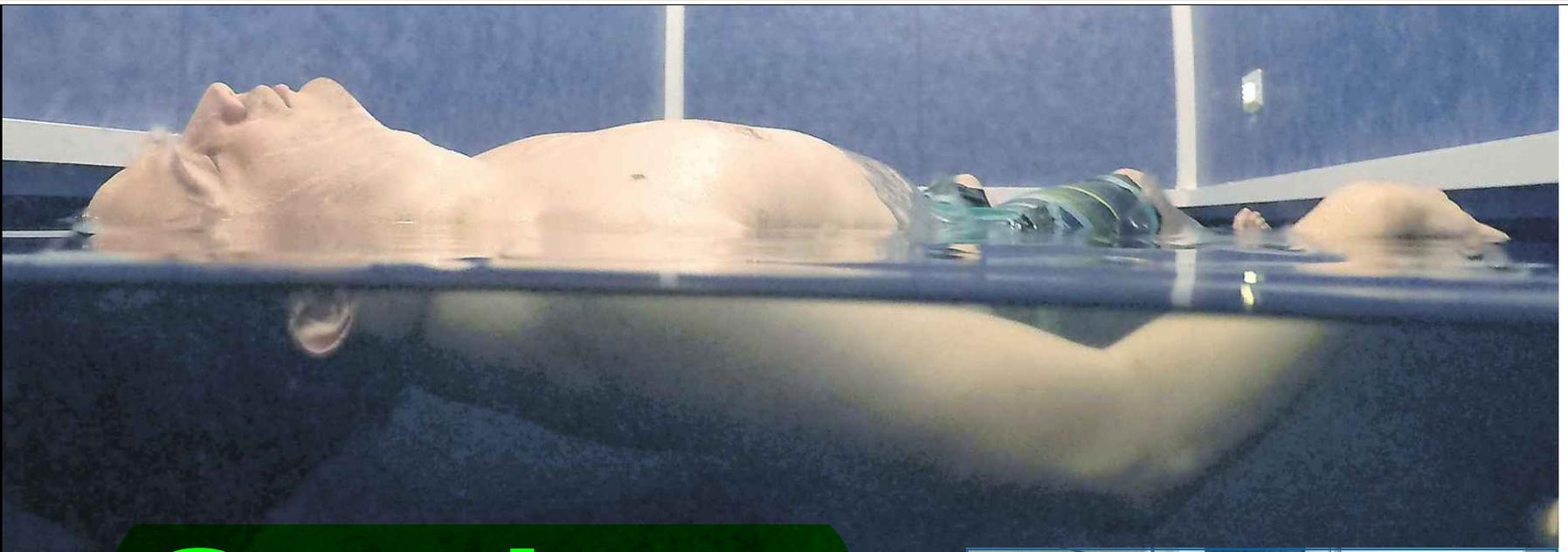
Floaters often seek stress relief, pain relief, or both. But many are seeking simply to relax.

Floating, which is also known as sensory deprivation

therapy or restricted environmental stimulation therapy (REST), was developed by Dr. John Lilly of the National Institute for Mental Health in Maryland in the 1950s.

It had its heyday two decades later but fell off suddenly in the ’80s. Many industry insiders at-

See FLOAT on A34



Catching a wellness WAVE

Spas are finding there's profit in floating your cares away

FLOAT from A33

tribute the decline to the AIDS scare and public wariness over contracting HIV from the water in float centers.

Movies like 1980's fantasy-drama "Altered States," in which the main character combines sensory deprivation experiments with hallucinogenic drugs and soon loses his grip on reality, didn't help either, said Thomas H. Fine, an associate psychiatry professor at the University of Toledo, in Ohio, who conducted flotation therapy research early in his career.

"But now, floating is getting its second wave, and it seems as though the tide on this one is even stronger than the first," Fine said. "It's hard to believe, but there was a time when mas-

sages, acupuncture or yoga were not as popular and widely acceptable as they are now. People are increasingly becoming more open to the idea of wellness and self-care."

Nanda Viswanathan, marketing professor and assistant dean of Farmingdale State College's School of Business, cited two reasons why float centers are catching on here.

First, "technology and social media have made our lives much more connected but also much more hectic. It's hard to find a place to get away from it all," he said.

If businesses that offer floating can provide a space for

people to decompress, they can get past the novelty factor and gain long-term sustainability, Viswanathan said.

"Stress is a genie that you can't put back in the bottle," he said. "It's a great target audience. Everyone is stressed."

Second, Long Island's relatively older and wealthier demographic makes a good market for an activity that is somewhat expensive and can benefit "aches and pains," he said.

Faith in floating

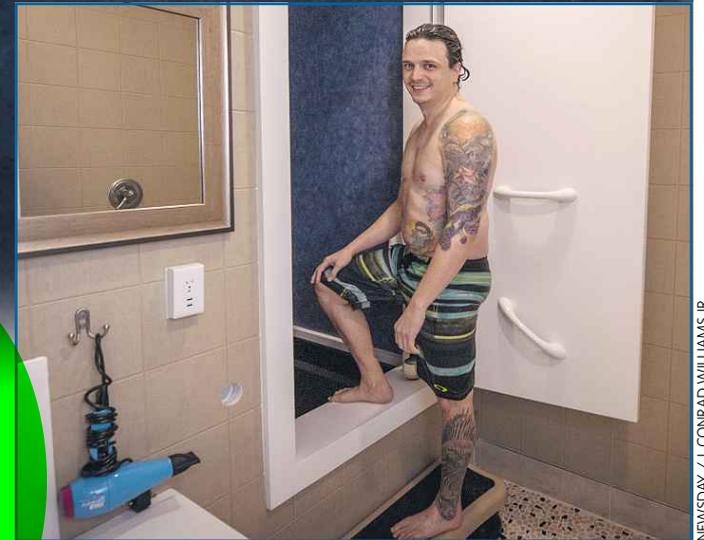
Five years ago Medford resident Thomas Wunk, 35, didn't know what floating was.

He now co-owns The Float Place, a flotation-therapy business with locations in Deer Park and Patchogue.

Last year company revenues neared \$500,000, said Wunk, who after floating only twice

ON THE COVER

Roberto Hinojosa of Astoria, Queens, is shown at Hope Floats in Williston Park.



Mark Deturris of Shoreham, ready for a session, says floating lets him "unload and let go" of the "overstimulation" of everyday life.



The Float Place co-owners Thomas Wunk, left and Hardy Patel

spent almost \$3,000 on an old tank he found on Craigslist, gutted his basement, installed it and began running an at-home float center.

"My initial build-out costs were about \$35,000. I maxed out all my credit cards," he said.

"I just, after floating, felt so great. I went all in. I put all my faith in floating and that the business would just kind of work itself out, because I passionately believed in it and its benefits."

His business partner, Hardy Patel, 38, of Holbrook, was one

of Wunk's first patrons, in 2013. After a few floats, Patel also became a fervent advocate. He says floating alleviated symptoms of sluggishness and depression, and helped him make healthy dietary and lifestyle changes. Patel approached Wunk about opening the business in a retail space.

The Float Place's Patchogue location, a 1,500-square-foot venue, features five private float rooms with names like "transcendence" and "serenity." Patrons in the post-float room relax on a couch, drink green tea, jot down floating reflections in a notebook for others to read, and talk enthusiastically to each other about their experiences floating.

Dominick Ricciardi, 40, a photographer who has been a Float Place customer for about two years, said floating is a "de-stress hack," a way for him to "creatively unblock."

Mark Deturris, 34, of Shoreham, learned about floating a couple of years ago through a podcast by "Fear Factor" TV host and stand-up comedian Joe Rogan. Deturris said floating allows him to "unload and let go" of some of the "overstimulation" of everyday life.

David Dreyfus, 49, of Carle Place, who said he has spinal herniations as a result of a 2015 car accident, and Susan Greening, 54, of Patchogue, who said a slip and fall injury tore a hamstring and inflamed a hip, laud floating as a portal to "pain relief" and "self-healing."

Limited research

A 2006 study published in the International Journal of Stress Management said that floating provided relief of stress-related pain from anxiety, burnout, exhaustion, insomnia and whiplash injuries.

Roderick Borrie, a licensed psychologist with offices in Selden and Setauket, said obtaining medical recognition for floating is "an uphill battle." Borrie and Toledo professor Fine wrote a review of research in the field titled "Flotation REST in Applied Psychophysiology," published in 1998 in Biofeedback Magazine, an outlet of the Association for Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback. They wrote that floating appeared to be effective in treating anxiety and stress-related pain.

Borrie went on to conduct a 2011 case study to determine

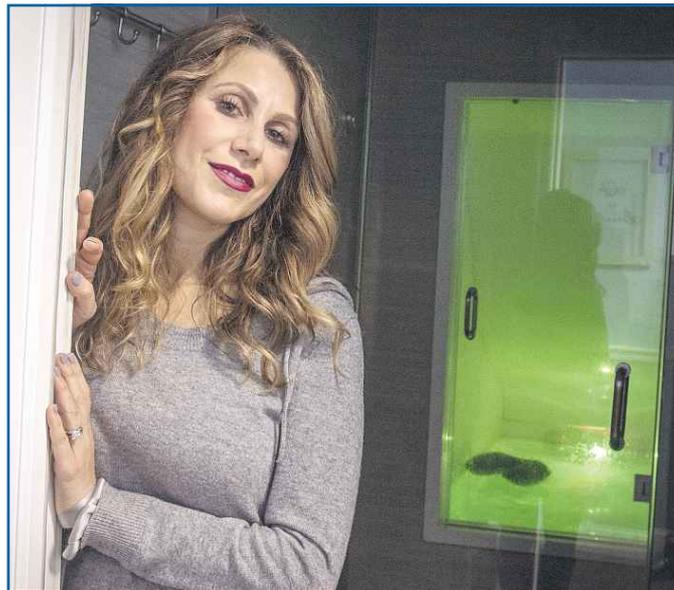


At Peconic River Salt, managed by Emily Harsch, right, people pay \$75 for an hour float in the dark. (Lights were on for the photo.)

RANDEE DADDONA



RANDEE DADDONA



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Owner Inga Fruman says her cryotherapy and flotation center in Bellmore brings in about \$10,000 a month in flotation sales.

whether floating is an efficient treatment for people diagnosed with fibromyalgia, a disorder of musculoskeletal pain with fatigue, sleep, memory and mood issues.

Flotation centers in five countries offered free float sessions to people diagnosed with fibromyalgia; 80 subjects floated once a week for three weeks.

According to the study's website, fibromyalgiaflotation-project.com, the results provided evidence that flotation REST can decrease fibromyalgia patients' pain, muscle tension, anxiety and stress.

Float centers don't need a license in New York State and aren't regulated. Owners say the high salt content in the

water helps to keep it sanitary. And they say they pay strict attention to cleanliness, filtering the water, exposing it to ultraviolet light to kill bacteria, and taking other sanitary measures. Clients must shower before floating.

For hippies and housewives

Kimberly Boone opened float business Hope Floats in her hometown, Bethesda, Maryland, in 2013.

In October 2016, after a friend told her to "check out Long Island" because the "business would do very well" in the area, she opened a second location, with two tanks, each a little larger than a twin-size bed, in Williston Park.

Boone, who said for many



CHRIS WARE

Kimberly Boone, owner of Hope Floats in Williston Park

years she was a "typical soccer mom," said floating in a sensory deprivation tank helped her deal with alcoholism-related anxiety and depression.

"Hope Floats grew out of my desire to help other people who were going through similar issues," she said. Company revenues for 2017 were in the \$350,000 to \$400,000 range, she said.

Boone's business also features an infrared sauna, which produces lower temperatures than a traditional sauna by using infrared light instead of a heater and stones to warm the air. Deals on the company's website package a 60-minute float session with 30 minutes in the infrared sauna for \$95.

Other businesses, such as

Cryocure Cryotherapy and Flotation Center in Bellmore, Peconic River Salt of Joshua's Place in Riverhead and Emerge Yoga and Wellness in Massapequa, offer memberships and package deals that bundle floating with other wellness industry services such as acupuncture, cryotherapy (treatments using freezing cold temperatures, a salt lounge, massages and yoga).

At Peconic River Salt executive director Emily Harsch said about 10 people, each paying \$75 for an hour session, float in the center's two pods daily.

At Cryocure, owner Inga Fruman, who is a licensed acupuncturist, said floating alone brings in about \$10,000 a month in sales.

Fruman cross-promotes services among clients and said despite advertising in local newspapers and on social media, word of mouth is the most efficient form of marketing for wellness businesses.

"Some people come for the cryotherapy and stay for the floating," she said. "Or float and then go into the infrared sauna. They leave here relaxed and then tell their friends."

Interest in floating is becoming more mainstream, researchers and owners say.

"It's not just for hipsters by any means," said Hope Float's Boone. "It's a concept that seems kind of out there, but after trying it people realize it's not *that* out there, it's for everyone. Hippies and housewives."