

Riding the Wave of Swimsuit Season

By Sally E. Smith

With Memorial Day receding into memory, we've officially entered swimsuit season. This means that many of us are confronted with an annual dilemma: will we spend the summer standing on the shore, or will we take the plunge and enjoy the sun and water?

Many of us are hesitant about wearing a swimsuit in public, and some of us even avoid the backyard pool because of negative body image and low self-esteem. It's understandable that plus-size women have a hard time navigating the waters of self-acceptance, particularly since many (or maybe most) of our average size sisters are drowning in self-hatred.

Over the years, when I've given presentations about the size acceptance movement to audiences of average size women, I've witnessed a constant wave of swimsuit anxiety. To illustrate the oppressive culture plus-size women face, I often ask how many of the average size women in the audience have avoided donning a swimsuit because of their weight. Invariably, at least half of the women raise their hands. If women who are size 8, 10, or 12 avoid beaches and pools due to self-consciousness, is it any wonder that those of us who are size 24, 34, or 44 would do the same? After all, in addition to the body image issues we might have, we subject ourselves to potential ridicule from others when we're at the beach or public pool. With those kinds of sharks nearby, it's enough to make anyone want to stay indoors on a hot summer day.

Yet, when we don't give ourselves permission to frolic in the sun and surf, we miss out on so much –not the least of which is the surreptitious, joyful relationship that large women have with water. We possess something that our thinner sisters will never experience: natural buoyancy. While others thrash around treading water in the deep end of the pool, we effortlessly and serenely stay afloat. In the water, gravity is no longer an issue, and the discomfort or pain that we experience on land disappears. Indeed, for many of us who are super-size, the water gives us freedom and grace – and the opportunity to incorporate movement into our lives without the risk of injury.

If you're ready to take the plunge this summer, think of these tips as a compass that will help you navigate your journey through uncharted waters:

1. Start with a great swimsuit. Feeling good and looking good is half the battle. Making it Big offers nine – count `em, nine – gorgeous swimsuits, from simple tank suits to skirted suits to two-piece suits with swim shorts. Find a swimsuit that gives you the coverage you need and the style you deserve.

2. Dip your toes in the water. You may not be ready for a weekend trip to a public beach, so start with a backyard pool (yours or a neighbor's). If you live in an apartment complex, go to the pool late at night or early in the morning. Remember that, like all things in life, wearing a swimsuit gets easier with practice.

3. There's power in numbers. Ask one or two plus-size friends to go swimming with you. Although a group of plus-size women draws more attention in public, that's offset by the empowerment you'll feel as a group.

4. Find a port in the storm. Check out your parks and recreation district's water aerobics classes. Drive by and take a look; the chances are good that there will be many plus-size women in attendance. Similarly, see if there are any group swims in your area that are specifically for plus-size women.

5. Claim your audacity. Donning a swimsuit can be both a personal and a political statement. Wear it with pride. Feel the power that comes with giving yourself permission to fully participate in the summer fun.

6. Share your lifeboat. When you're comfortable in your suit and in the water, invite less empowered plus-size women to join you. You can provide the swell that lifts other women up and helps them to live their lives to the fullest.