

THERAPY: FLOATATION THERAPY**CONDITION:** Depression**ARTICLE LINK:** <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29394251/>

Examining the short-term anxiolytic and antidepressant effect of Floatation-REST

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February 2018

ABSTRACT

Floatation-REST (Reduced Environmental Stimulation Therapy) reduces sensory input to the nervous system through the act of floating supine in a pool of water saturated with Epsom salt.

The float experience is calibrated so that sensory signals from visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, thermal, tactile, vestibular, gravitational and proprioceptive channels are minimized, as is most movement and speech. This open-label study aimed to examine whether Floatation-REST would attenuate symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression in a clinical sample.

Fifty participants were recruited across a spectrum of anxiety and stress-related disorders (posttraumatic stress, generalized anxiety, panic, agoraphobia, and social anxiety), most (n = 46) with comorbid unipolar depression. Measures of self-reported affect were collected immediately before and after a 1-hour float session, with the primary outcome measure being the pre- to post-float change score on the Spielberger State Anxiety Inventory.

Irrespective of diagnosis, Floatation-REST substantially reduced state anxiety (estimated Cohen's $d > 2$). Moreover, participants reported significant reductions in stress, muscle tension, pain, depression and negative affect, accompanied by a significant improvement in mood characterized by increases in serenity, relaxation, happiness and overall well-being ($p < .0001$ for all variables).

In reference to a group of 30 non-anxious participants, the effects were found to be more robust in the anxious sample and approaching non-anxious levels during the post-float period. Further analysis revealed that the most severely anxious participants reported the largest effects. Overall, the procedure was well-tolerated, with no major safety concerns stemming from this single session.

The findings from this initial study need to be replicated in larger controlled trials, but suggest that Floatation-REST may be a promising technique for transiently reducing the suffering in those with anxiety and depression.

Trial registration: ClinicalTrials.gov [NCT03051074](#).

Conflict of interest statement: *Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.*