



A safe, trusting swim environment usually improves both performance and mental health, while a toxic one can damage confidence, focus, and even long-term love of the sport.

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## **For swimmers: safety, performance, and leaving**

### **How a safe space helps performance**

When swimmers feel psychologically safe, they are more willing to take risks in practice—try harder sets, accept honest feedback, and experiment with race strategies—because they are not afraid of being shamed if they fail. They bounce back from bad practices or races faster, which supports steadier improvement over a whole season instead of yo-yo results.

Safe spaces also lower constant anxiety, shame, and fear of punishment. Without that background stress, more mental energy is available for pacing, stroke mechanics, breathing patterns, and in-the-moment decisions during a race. Feeling valued as a whole person (not just as “a time” or ranking on a heat sheet) is linked with better motivation, persistence through plateaus, and long-term athlete retention.

### **Pressure and the option to leave**

Swimmers sometimes feel trapped by “important times,” scholarship hopes, or the fear of letting coaches, parents, or teammates down. That pressure can make them stay in environments that feel unsafe or demeaning. In reality, changing groups or teams is often healthier for long-term performance and wellbeing than staying in a toxic setting; athletes usually train and race better when they trust the people around them and believe their safety matters more than one season’s results.

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## **For coaches and peers: trust and how to build it**

### **Why trust matters**

Trust between swimmers and coaches is often described as the bedrock of success because it allows honest feedback, consistent effort, and mutual commitment. Swimmers are more likely to follow challenging plans, admit when something is wrong, and share early signs of injury or burnout when they trust that adults will respond with care.

Teams with high trust communicate more openly, resolve conflicts faster, and can handle high-pressure meets without turning on each other. Peer trust—friendships and respect between teammates—is just as important; feeling included and supported on a team predicts stronger motivation, better attendance, and a deeper sense of belonging.



### **How coaches can create trust**

- Show consistency: set clear rules, apply them fairly, and respond predictably instead of with sudden anger, sarcasm, or favoritism.
- Invite voice: ask swimmers for input on goals, check in about training load, and schedule regular times when athletes can share concerns without punishment.
- Model vulnerability and respect: acknowledge your own mistakes, avoid shaming, and focus criticism on behaviors or skills, not on identity (say “That turn was off” instead of “You’re lazy”).

### **How peers can create trust**

- Challenge toxic “norms” like making fun of slower lanes, body-shaming, or gossip; replace them with celebrating small improvements, effort, and personal bests at every level.
- Practice bystander actions: if a teammate seems upset or uncomfortable, check in privately, offer to walk with them to talk to a coach, parent, or trusted adult, and avoid spreading their story around the team without permission.

### **Reflection Questions:**

Have everyone silently respond (on paper or mentally):

- One thing that makes me feel safe in practice is...
- One thing that hurts my confidence is...
- One thing I can do this week to improve team trust is...