The Polar Plunge

It's the New Year and while some choose to give up junk food, smoking, and other unhealthy habits, others take the opportunity to completely cleanse themselves of the past year. This significant cleansing event is known around the world as the Polar Plunge and brings together hundreds of thousands of brave swimmers who jump into freezing cold water in order to raise money for a charity of their choice. This year, the plunge was mostly dedicated to the Special Olympics Foundation where children with disabilities are able to compete in their own Olympic games.

Now, most of us would consider this to be the craziest idea they have ever heard; imagine jumping into water that is below 30 degrees Fahrenheit! Health officials warned participants what could happen if they enter the ice cold water. According to the rules of the Polar Plunge, no wet suits, dry suits, or other protective clothing is allowed, although footwear is legal and recommended. The participant must enter the water completely, meaning their entire body, including their head, must be submerged for a second or two. Due to these challenging rules, health officials warned that "sudden immersion in ice cold water can result in an involuntary gasp followed by one to three minutes of involuntary hyperventilation."

But these health risks did not seem to be a problem for the hundreds of thousands of people who took the Plunge. For some, the Plunge truly is a cleansing of the past year. "I live for this. It's an annual rebirth. Everything from last year is gone," said Jim Diquattro, a participant in this year's Plunge. According to some health experts, winter swimming is actually very therapeutic. The number of people who believe that outdoor winter swimming has therapeutic qualities is dramatically increasing. The benefits can be very great; it can stimulate mental processes, produce hormones which make the body able to cope with physical stresses, and can increase the level of mental awareness and a feeling of well-being. It can also release stress, remove aches and pains, increase vitality, and can keep skin looking younger. Apparently frost is a good thing!

This year, the event raised over three million dollars for the Special Olympics Foundation as well as thousands of dollars which will be used for scholarships for high school seniors who major in social work, psychology, or law enforcement, to name a few. So while some participants spent mere seconds in the water, leaving behind warm clothing in the rush to get out just as fast as they got in, others had a great time in the freezing water.