

Panic is about as voluntary as a heart attack. Fortunately, it can be prevented.

Never Panic Again

It starts slowly and gains momentum until it's nearly impossible to stop. The good news: Panic is almost always preventable.

BY JOHN FRANCIS

WHY DO divers sometimes panic? It's an important question because panic may be the single most common cause of death among divers. James Jones put it well in his novel *Go*

to the Widowmaker: "Panic was the biggest danger, enemy, the only danger that there was in diving." But you don't have to take it from a novelist. Drs. Arthur Bachrach and Glen Egstrom, who are among the leading authorities on panic in diving, said the same thing in their 1987 book, *Stress and Performance in Diving*: "Most of us in diving research believe that panic is the overwhelming cause of the majority of injuries and fatalities in diving." Any experienced

dive guide or instructor will tell you the same thing. But it doesn't have to happen to you. Though dangerous, panic is generally preventable.

Why Divers Panic

DR. DAVID F. COLVARD is a Raleigh, N.C., psychiatrist specializing in mood and anxiety disorders, a clinical investigator and a diver for more than 30 years. In 2000, he surveyed more than 12,000 readers of this magazine



who had experienced panic while diving to discover why. The result was not what he expected. Respondents were offered a list of 43 possible causes of panic like “sharks,” “darkness,” “out of air” and so on—virtually every scary threat a diver could imagine. They were arranged in three categories: dive conditions, equipment problems, and physical or psychological problems. Divers were asked to check those threats that were present when they had their panic attacks. Out of all 43 possible threats, the three boxes checked most often were the last in each category: “Other.” So the event that most often triggered an attack of panic didn’t even make the “Top 40” scary threat list. In most cases, apparently, the cause that made a diver panic was something mundane or routine, something that in a calm moment none of us would ever think was a reason for panic. “Figure out what causes panic in diving and you’ll win the Nobel Prize,”

says Colvard, only half kidding.

In fact, panic almost always seems in retrospect to have been unnecessary. When you read the Divers Alert Network reports on injuries and fatalities in diving each year, it’s striking how often it seems the dive could have ended happily if only a diver had kept his head and remembered the most basic elements of training. For instance, “Don’t hold your breath and rocket to the surface.” You read the narratives of dives gone bad and tell yourself, “I’d never do anything that dumb.”

But don’t be too sure. A panic attack is about as voluntary as a heart attack. Panic is not cowardliness; it’s not a lack of guts. It’s an involuntary reaction to a massive secretion of adrenaline into your bloodstream by your sympathetic nervous system, a primitive part of your brain that evolved when saber-toothed tigers ate Homo sapiens, and fight or flight were your hardwired respons-

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es. When faced with an overwhelming threat, your heart rate, your body temperature and your blood sugar all shoot up. You feel “butterflies” in your stomach or nausea. You start to sweat. Your skin may flush or turn pale. You breathe faster, shallower and in an irregular pattern. Something called “perceptual narrowing” takes place. Your visual field may narrow to something like tunnel vision so that you don’t see what’s right next to you. Most important, you feel flustered and can’t think clearly. As a result, you become so focused on one problem that you fail to see another—and so focused on the wrong solution that you don’t see the right one.

Given the right conditions, anyone can panic. “If I gave you a really big shot of adrenaline right now, you would panic,” says Colvard flatly. And once a full-blown panic attack is underway, there is little the rational, “executive” part of your brain can do to stop it immediately because it takes your body several minutes to metabolize that adrenaline. Like a driver on top of a rampaging elephant, you’re pretty much along for the ride at that point.

So let’s summarize: Panic is the big underwater killer, nobody knows what causes it, anybody can get it, and once you do, you probably can’t stop it before you do something stupid. But don’t rush to eBay with your dive gear just yet. The situation is not that grim. As mysterious as its causes may be, panic can almost always be prevented.

A Telltale Symptom

HOW? THERE’S A CLUE in the Colvard survey that seemed so inconclusive at first. Though divers were all over the map on

what they thought had caused their panic attacks, they tended to agree that they began hyperventilating before they felt panic. And hyperventilation—rapid, shallow, irregular breathing—is a classic sign of anxiety. Anxiety is just an accumulation of everyday stress to the point you're afraid you can't solve problems and begin to feel helpless. It's the uncertainty, worry, fatigue, frustration and fear that are so much a part of modern life.

So here is what probably happens: The diver, like most of us, is stressed before he even gets wet. Maybe he remembers his last dive as difficult or scary and is tense about this one. Maybe dive conditions today are unusually challenging. Or maybe he just stayed up too late last night, got held up by traffic this morning and had to sprint for the dive boat carrying 50 pounds of gear. Now he can't seem to mount his regulator right side up or get that office project out of his mind, and where's that other damned glove? By the time he hits the water, he's harassed, irritated, half-exhausted, less able to cope and therefore easily frightened. He's breathing harder than normal, taxing his

regulator more than usual, when something unexpected happens—his mask comes off, maybe, or his fin gets entangled. He hyperventilates, but can't seem to get enough air. Now he thinks he's suffocating and about to drown, and panic is next.

Of course, not every diver who gets held up in traffic in the morning panics that afternoon. There's evidence that some people are more anxious about stress than others and are more vulnerable to panic. Our individual panic threshold may even change from day to day.

What should be reassuring in this picture is that an underwater panic attack is rarely sudden, like a saber-toothed tiger leaping from behind a bush. In most cases, stress has been building for hours and even days. Finally, one more challenge is too much, the diver feels overwhelmed, and fear of failure triggers panic. He's like a juggler with three plates in the air, then four, then five. Finally, one more plate is one too many, and they all come down in a shower of crockery. The cause of his loss of control is not the sixth plate; it's having too many plates in the air. Any of them, like any of a hundred under-

water threats, can be the trigger.

Panic can be prevented, therefore, by taking some of those plates out of the air—by reducing the stresses you take into the water with you and not adding unnecessary new ones.

Give Pause

ONE OF THE BEST WAYS to reduce and avoid stress is to build a series of pauses into your dive day, when you stop what you're doing for a couple of minutes, rest, take stock of the situation, and think through what you're going to do next. Schedule those pauses for the natural transition points in the day. When you've parked your car but before you unload it, pause a minute or two and relax. When your gear is aboard but before you gear up, pause. When you're ready to dive but before you step off the boat, pause. When you're in the water but before you submerge, pause. And so on throughout the dive.

There are at least three good reasons why frequent pauses reduce stress and prevent panic. First, regular pauses reduce your fatigue by giving you short rest breaks.

SEVEN MORE STRESS BUSTERS

1. BE OVERTRAINED.

Under pressure, we remember only the skills we know best, the ones that come almost as second nature. All of us learned survival skills like air sharing and emergency ascents in open-water training, and most of us filed them away "for future reference" in our mental filing cabinets. But when the alarm goes off and panic approaches, we're going to grab what's already on the desktop. That's the value of practicing the essential skills over and over, and mentally

rehearsing what you would do, so you can quickly lay your hands on what you need.

2. BE PHYSICALLY FIT.

Develop the muscular strength to handle weights and tanks without too much strain, and develop your cardiovascular efficiency so you can fin into a current without huffing and puffing. Get enough sleep the night before a dive, and don't start the day with a hangover. When you have greater reserves to meet the physical challenges of diving, you are less likely to find yourself

unable to cope. Almost as important, you feel more confident.

3. STAY WARM. Cold saps energy, increases fatigue and leaves you with fewer resources to deal with a current, say, or an entanglement. Discomfort itself is stress.

4. CHECK YOUR GEAR DAYS AHEAD. You'll need time to replace that missing glove, or to change the batteries in your dive light. Organize your gear bag so gearing up is simple.

5. LEAVE HOME EARLY

SO YOU DON'T SWEAT ABOUT MISSING THE BOAT.

Gear up early and get to the briefing early so you always feel you have plenty of time. Don't be playing catch-up.

6. TRY TO LEAVE SHORE-SIDE WORRIES ASHORE. "Leave your cell phone in the car," says John McFadden, a PADI course director.

7. MINIMIZE TASK LOADING. Don't try to cope with a new camera and a new BC and a new dry suit all on the same dive. Give yourself just one new challenge at a time.

They let your adrenaline level subside, your heart rate slow, your breathing get slower and deeper, and your carbon dioxide level decline toward normal. Second, pauses are chances for a mental rest as well—moments without stress when you can slow down the rush of events, catch up with the demands on you and

take stock without more new demands presenting themselves.

Finally, frequent scheduled pauses are opportunities to think about the next task and plan how to do it. Your next step is to gear up? Before jumping into it, pause and think what you'll do first. Run down your mental checklist.

Or maybe this is going to be a challenging dive? Use the pause to visualize problems that could arise and review your training. "Visualize a problem occurring," says PADI Course Director John McFadden. "And visualize yourself dealing with it. That's a pretty powerful technique."

These pauses can also be an opportunity to get your breathing under control. Colvard is one of many psychiatrists and counselors of anxiety patients who believe that rhythmic breathing with your diaphragm, not your chest, will itself go a long way to reduce anxiety. "Breathing with your chest wall is energy-intensive," he says. "You're using the wrong muscles. But breathing with your diaphragm is the natural way to breathe, the way babies breathe. It produces a relaxed state." Yes, it sounds odd at first, but it seems to work. To practice breathing with your diaphragm, Colvard suggests putting one hand on your stomach and one on your chest. When you inhale, your stomach should push out, but your chest should not expand.

In any event, it's critical to keep your breathing under control because hyperventilation is known to lead to anxiety and then panic. It's impossible to suck as much air from your regulator as you can get by open-mouthed gasping on the surface, and when you can't get as much air as you want, the fear of suffocation and drowning, always in the background under water, sets off alarm bells in your sympathetic nervous system.

Finally, when a dive doesn't feel right, don't do it. When you have that queasy feeling about a dive, when you just don't want to do it for some reason you can't identify, don't. Don't let peer pressure force you beyond your comfort level, because you'll be starting the dive already stressed and already more susceptible to panic. If it's hard to "just say no," claiming your ears won't equalize is a face-saving out. SD

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DOMINICA

Live Area

w: 4.625

b: 7