

# ***How to Deal with Panic while Scuba Diving***

## **Scuba Diving Training**

**Learn what causes panic — and how to deal with it — to avoid dangerous situations underwater.**

Google sayings for “cool,” and you’ll find a plethora of results that could apply to people who strap on tanks, giant-stride off the back of the boat, and drop down into the ocean to explore its wonders: cool customer, cool as a cucumber, and cool, calm and collected. But when a diver panics underwater, you can throw those sayings — and the diver’s even-keeled demeanor — overboard.

You may have seen at least one case of panic in a dive buddy — a wide-eyed look, a desperate tug to get your attention, a rapid ascent. And if we’re being honest, most of us have personally experienced at least a momentary bout of anxiety. But if you feel panic rising, it’s important to keep small things from snowballing into an out-of-control disaster.

“Recognizing the warning signs is the best method to proactively defuse a panic situation,” says Kell Levendorf, dive accident investigator for Dive & Marine Consultants International in Florida. If you notice a buddy panicking, “you must be prepared and practiced to control the fight-or-flight mentality by securing the regulator, controlling buoyancy, and safely aborting the dive,” Levendorf says.

And if you are being overwhelmed by panic, “the best thing to do is stop what you are doing, take a deep breath, and start to think about what it is you are dealing with,” says Liz Parkinson, an instructor with Stuart Cove’s Dive Bahamas.

Sometimes this is easier said than done, and as David F. Colvard, M.D., and Lynn Y. Colvard, Ph.D., reported in “A Study of Panic in Recreational Scuba Divers,” there are important distinctions to be made in understanding panic.

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### **Losing One’s Cool**

The causes of panic underwater vary from divers struggling with equipment problems and task overloading to strong currents and dangerous marine life. Throw in things like poor fitness, peer pressure and fear of the unknown, and you’ve got the recipe for potential disaster.

“We were impressed with how eager divers and instructors were to talk about their panic dive experience and how much they wanted to help us understand what had happened to them,” says David Colvard.

Overall, 37 percent of female recreational scuba divers reported a panic experience during a dive, while only 24 percent of male divers reported one.

“We categorized the divers into two groups: those with a history of panic prior to diving and those with no history prior to diving. We subdivided them into those who had a panic on a dive, and those who had not,” says Colvard. “Age, years diving, certification level and lifetime number of dives were similar for each group.

The Colvards found that male divers with a prediving history of panic were 1.9 to 2.7 times as likely to panic than those without a prior history; females were 1.4 to 2 times as likely to panic than those without a prior history.



Divers who panic might bolt to the surface or forget basic and easy lifesaving techniques.

### **Why It Happens**

Panic is a sudden, uncontrollable surge of overwhelming anxiety and fear, often accompanied by wildly irrational thinking and behavior.

“It’s something that even a seasoned diver can experience,” says Parkinson. “Many factors can lead to panic — misplaced equipment, rough weather conditions, diving in a new location, losing your buddy underwater.”

The Colvards had to first define what they meant by “panic” before conducting their study. “Because panic can be an imprecise or vague term used in a casual sense, the survey defined a panic experience as ‘an intense fear of losing control or dying,’” says David Colvard. “Consistent with a panic attack as defined by the APA in DSM-IV, the essential feature of a panic attack is a discrete period of intense fear or discomfort that is accompanied by at least four of 13 somatic or cognitive symptoms ... often accompanied by a sense of imminent danger or impending doom and an urge to escape ... or desire to flee from wherever the attack is occurring.

In other words, part of what the Colvards wanted to know is whether the diver made a rapid ascent or another dangerous action in response to feeling panicked.

“Most divers who panicked during a dive reported they remembered their training in how to deal with panic, and used that training,” says David Colvard. “Eighty-five percent of those who panicked while diving did not make a rapid or uncontrolled ascent. Even among the 15 percent who made a rapid or uncontrolled ascent, only 5 percent of males and 4 percent of females reported suffering from symptoms of decompression illness.” That’s the good news. But the reality is that it’s a scary feeling to be panicked or to try to help a buddy who is panicking underwater. So how do you deal with it?

## **Scared Stiff**

“Divers who panic sometimes breathe too fast and hard, and may bolt to the surface or forget basic and easy lifesaving techniques that they learned in their Open Water Diver course,” says Jo Mikutowicz, managing partner of Divetech on Grand Cayman. Parkinson underscores Mikutowicz’s message: “You have the training, so use it.

Colvard recommends that instructors teach diaphragmatic or belly breathing. According to the University of Texas Counseling and Mental Health Center, “Diaphragmatic breathing allows one to take normal breaths while maximizing the amount of oxygen that goes into the bloodstream. It is a way of interrupting the fight-or-flight response and triggering the body’s normal relaxation response.” Says Colvard, “This way, you can make sure students and divers are calm and relaxed before getting into the water.”

Levendorf says that instructors are trained to recognize when a student is about to panic. “We recognize the deer-in-the-headlights look mere seconds before the novice diver spits out the regulator and bolts,” he says. “With coaching, this can usually be resolved before they dive in open water.”

But Levendorf says when panic happens in open water, “it’s a far more serious circumstance — the ultimate dive wrecker — and great care must be taken to protect both the diver and the instructor when trying to arrest a headlong flight to the surface.”

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## **Pro Tips**

If you have a history of panic disorder, you shouldn’t dive until the disorder has been treated and is under good control. “Likewise, claustrophobia or agoraphobia is a contraindication to diving,” says Colvard. “I once helped an instructor with an open water checkout dive student who had struggled in the pool. We dived, but she did not complete the

checkout dives. On the surface she told me that she had taken up scuba to deal with her claustrophobia. I told her she was doing it backward.”

But if your stress is not related to a disorder, what can you do when you feel anxiety building, and you’re no longer under the protective wings of your instructor?

“Stay current with your diving,” says Mikutowicz. “If it has been longer than a year, take a refresher before your next big diving adventure to get familiar with being underwater again, as well as how to properly use all of your equipment.”

“When you feel panic arising, concentrate on problem-solving techniques, relax yourself, regain your composure,” says Parkinson. “And if you are able to communicate with someone, do so.”

Karl Shreeves, technical development executive with PADI, adds extra emphasis to the importance of buddy diving.

“The problem with panic is that once it sets in, it usually requires intervention,” says Shreeves. “People rarely calm down and stop panicking on their own. This means a buddy or someone has to intervene, but only if you can do so without getting into trouble yourself, which would only make things worse for you and the diver.”

Instructors also teach this mantra: **Stop — Breathe — Think — Act**. Stop swimming for a moment. Slow down your breathing and take deep, even breaths from your diaphragm. Remember your training — such as what to do in an out-of-air emergency — and then act.

For more info: Visit the website <http://sites.google.com/site/divepsych/> and download the free training exercises for diaphragmatic breathing, and controlling stress and panic.

*– This handout is formally independent of any Diving Association –*



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