

BSAC branches. Additional copies may be obtained free of charge from HQ.

The scheme covers all sports diving incidents in the UK and those involving BSAC members overseas. An incident is considered to be any event involving divers or diving equipment, in or out of the water, where the diver is killed, injured or subjected to a greater-than-normal level of risk.

All information received is treated confidentially and the names of those involved are never made public, except where an act of rescue or lifesaving merits recognition.

Immediate notification of an incident, submitting brief details, should be made on a Preliminary Incident Report Card. Physical injuries, or damage to property, should be reported to HQ at the earliest opportunity. Further details of the incident should then be supplied on an Incident Report Form, a copy of which is sent to all those who submit Preliminary Incident Report Cards.

Forms and cards are available from BSAC HQ, and should be returned there on completion.

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THE EXTRA WEIGHTS WE CARRY

The psychology of dependency

Freelance writer Annette Cheatham recently submitted a piece illustrating the serious problems of a buddy-dependent diver. It begged, however, for outside commentary, so we asked her whether she would discuss the situation with a long time diving buddy, who happens to be a psychologist, and permit him to comment on the relationships she described. She agreed, so here is her story, followed by a commentary by Dr Michael H. Smith.

As a newly certified diver with eight dives under my belt (the deepest to 51 ft or 15 m), I felt confident and

adventurous. Ready for a *real* dive, I was game for anything. Gathering my husband, kids, gear, and lunch, I set out for Blue Grotto in Williston, Florida.

Upon our arrival, we checked into the office and paid for the privilege of diving. Their introductory speech described our site as 110 ft (33 m) of 72°F (22°C), crystal clear water with 110 ft (33 m) visibility. The lecture proved to be a mixture of information and scare tactics, describing the four levels of descent and the skill necessary to go to each depth.

We all nodded in agreement and signed the liability waiver. As we geared up, I was unimpressed by the small, pond like opening complete with ducks. Where was the danger our host had warned us about? This pool looked about as dangerous as my bath tub.

After planning our dive and setting my Sherwood Source computer, three of us hit the water. Descending to the first level, a wooden platform at 15 ft (4.5 m), we gathered our bearings to continue to the second level at 60 ft (18 m). At that depth, my comfort level was under more pressure than my ears and I was ready to ascend. Being the brave men that they are, my husband and son pointed down and gave me the old "come on" wave. I decided to hang at 60 ft (18 m) and watch some students do their check out dives while the guys continued down to investigate. Ten minutes later, they returned and we headed to the surface.

During our 90 minute surface interval, I was subjected to the jokes of the guys calling me a wimp and sissy. Not being timid, I agreed to venture the full depth with them on our second dive and ignored the little voice in my head saying "Check your dive plan".

Hitting the water for our second dive, we descended slowly to the third level at 80 ft (24 m). I paused on a limestone-shaped peace sign, and felt the icy fingers of fear crawl down my neck. I had to consciously think: calm, quiet, breathe slowly. The guys pointed down into a narrow crevice that disappeared into the darkness of the fourth level, the cavern. Having second thoughts, I paused to regulate my breathing and clear my mind. As I looked into my son's eyes, I let pride rule, grabbed the guideline, and followed him down.

The descent was slow. With every foot, the darkness became a blacker shade of black. When we reached the bottom, my console grazed my hand, nudging me to check it. A small red beacon of warning blinked from my computer. We were at a whopping 110 ft (33 m). As if dropping the console would erase the readings, I let it go like a hot iron. Looking around, I found myself in a narrow horseshoe shaped passage that was totally enclosed by limestone. The only light was artificial. I thanked God for the almighty dive light and promised to buy stock in Eveready if I ever saw the light of day.

My heart beat became a staccato beat of fear, my mind played games, and my breathing raced to keep pace with my body and mind. I was no longer in open water, an emergency ascent was impossible. Anxiety now turned to mild panic. My rapid, shallow breathing gave new meaning to the term “hoser”. When I thought it couldn’t get any worse, my son took the light out of my hand to explore an opening that branched out about five feet from the guideline. My light gone, my son out of sight and no clear path to the top. Panic became sheer terror. Forgetting that my husband was behind me, I began to flail my free hand, not letting go of the guideline, and smacked my husband’s regulator out of his mouth.

My husband cleared his head, replaced his regulator and grabbed me with both hands. My son came back to the line and I focused on the guys and my breathing. We were finally ready to begin the ascent, eager to see the light. We found our way into open water and made three minute safety stops at both 30 ft (9 m) and 15 ft (4.5 m).

Climbing out of the water, I unhooked the clips on my BC. But, I felt a sudden rush of dizziness, like I had been smacked in the head with a bat. I dropped down on my knees and dropped my gear. I was disoriented and weak. Blood started to trickle from my nose as I lay on the deck like a dead fish.

After five minutes, I made my way to the table where our gear was, wondering why the guys hadn’t helped me. They too, had experienced the dizziness and bloody noses. I checked my computer. The flashing red light told me that the second dive had been to 110 ft (33 m) for 22 minutes. Not only had I broken a single dive limit, I had made a 60 ft (18 m) 35 minute dive before that.

For the next three days, the three of us suffered frequent nose bleeds, horrible headaches, dizziness and stiff joints. We denied that we had a problem, and did not seek medical help. Finally, I called a dive buddy who is a registered nurse and cried on her shoulder. After talking to a doctor friend of hers who specialises in dive medicine and accidents, my buddy informed me that we had been mildly “bent” and that everything would be all right in a few days. She said to consider ourselves lucky that our stupidity hadn’t killed us.

The Blue Grotto experience cost me three days off work due to illness, as well as the loss of confidence in my diving abilities. I did not follow my dive plan. I had failed to check my gauges. I had not taken responsibility for myself, and had panicked.

Diving after my bout with the bends was a frightening ordeal of constantly monitoring my computer in shallow depths. Not very enjoyable but necessary to restore my nerve. After numerous “safe” dives with family and friends, I am once again enjoying the wonders that the

sport has to offer. Following dive plans, checking gauges and saying no to anything that makes me uncomfortable has allowed me to continue to dive and live.

Commentary by Dr Michael H. Smith.

Diver error is the most common cause of diver deaths. Diver does something stupid, diver dies (in this case almost dies). Yet because Ms Cheatham survived we can ascertain what really happened. As we peel away the story’s layers, we can become more aware of the unseen psychological weights she carried, perhaps many of us carry. Weights that can kill.

Layer 1 The Basic Skills

For experienced divers, and even those not so experienced, there are some glaring errors: a novice diver doing a cave dive: no cave diving training: second dive deeper than the first: vague dive plan: lack of buddy agreement.

Any of these mistakes by itself can kill. The author told me that her training was excellent and she trusted her instructor. Except for cave diving, Ms Cheatham believes that her errors had been covered in her certification training. So, let us proceed to other layers for the real causes.

Layer 2 The Weight of the Couple

Pairing up with someone else is fraught with inherent difficulties. As in any attempt at teamwork, good buddy diving requires training, practice, and a compatible meshing of personal styles, factors not often discussed in training.

Since we now accept that buddy breathing is passe and that self survival is critical, a case can be made for relying very little on your buddy.

Diving with a spouse compounds the complexities. The buddies bring their marital relationship and its full ramifications to the dive. In this case, we have a self admitted, husband-dependent woman who, she told me, was told to “learn to dive or be left alone”. Her husband was the experienced diver and he would lead the team.

This volatile mix of demands with authority is a recipe for disaster. Serious inexperience coupled with fear of assertion (or fear of abandonment) seems to have prevented Ms Cheatham from exercising independent good judgment.

Layer 3 The Weight of Family

This story is further compounded by a mother diving with her child. Concern for a child's safety is a deep-seated parental instinct. Research has shown, however, that most parents will only risk their lives to save children if there is a real chance of success. This case falls within this framework: there was enough of a threat yet not a suicidal mission.

Another issue is the parent's age and the relationship between all family members. The child was 15 and the parent 31. Ms Cheatham told me that she felt competitive with her son, and that "if he could do it, I could too." Research shows that parents who have children in their 20's or younger have much greater difficulty separating their own identity from their child's.

This competitiveness was exacerbated by the teasing from the son and stepfather pairing together and calling the author "a wimp." The teenage son bonded with the stepfather and stripped the mother of authority and self-confidence over herself and her child. Independent good judgment was again impaired.

Layer 4 The Weight of Personal History

Ms Cheatham told me that: "My father threw me in a pool when I was six and told me to swim. I almost drowned and was rescued by a lifeguard. That was one of the nicer things he ever did for me. My father was arrested." Such a parental relationship can foster deep-seated insecurity and dependency, preventing a true independent self from emerging. In addition, the drowning trauma, untreated, raises the possibility of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms that may explain the fear and panic on the dive.

Conclusion

Each of us brings our own psychological weights to every dive. What we can learn from this case is that diving is much more than a technical equipment-based sport. It is equally social and psycho-historical. Every diver needs to understand what brings him or her to the water and how to manage the unseen weights that we all carry.

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HUMAN GUINEA PIGS:

What our readers tell us about their computers

In 1988 and again in 1992, we offered a questionnaire to our readers, asking about their experience with computers. Based on the results of our latest survey, computers have indeed come of age.

In 1988, a number of computer users behaved as if the computers were Godlike in their ability to forecast safe dive profiles. They believed that if their computer said they were diving safely, they were. Unfortunately, many who went to the limits paid with a bends hit. Several of those divers shared their experiences in these pages.

Getting Bent

A San Diego diver got bent using a Suunto that "was in its error mode, so it wasn't functioning as a computer." He reported that he "usually took it to its limits" and had another incident, using a Beuchat and a Skinny Dipper, which "shut off during the first of two dives." He followed a 20 minute dive to 76 m (253 ft) (+40 minutes decompression) with a non-decompression dive (48 m (160 ft) for 8 minutes then 24 m (80 ft) for 20 minutes) three hours later. "One hour after surfacing, I had decompression sickness, blockage of artery supplying nerves to the inner ear."

A Delaware diver reported skin bends "after doing a second decompression bounce dive following the first decompression dive, back to back, with no surface interval." And a Colorado diver who got bent admitted: "My fault. I wanted to take the computer to its limit."

A Honolulu woman said that "it appears that my physiology is such that by running my diving close to the extreme margin of Edge safe diving, I subject myself to more of a chance of becoming bent than by using the Navy tables. Bent once in Palau using the Edge, I discovered when I stopped using it my almost permanent back pain while repetitive diving went away."

One reader said that "in the Maldives in 1985, my Edge suddenly went black after two dives to the 12-18 m (40-60 ft) level. The divemaster prescribed a 36 m (120 ft)