

Introduction

My passion is the water, and I've had that passion for as long as I've had memories. I learned to swim on Long Island Sound and the rivers and creeks that feed it. I learned to surf and ride waves on the Rhode Island shore, and five decades later I am still flopping around in the surf. Like many who grow up on the water, I actively fish, surf, boat, paddle, scuba dive, and darn near everything else you can do in or on it. I have been lucky enough to have traveled to some exotic destinations, from Michigan to South America, and my fascination and respect of the water has never ebbed. I like to think I am a beach advocate, and I encourage everyone to take advantage of our waterways, learn to swim, and get wet, whether it's in a backyard pool or on a stretch of remote coastline. But this precious, ubiquitous liquid, essential for human existence, is, unfortunately, sometimes deadly. Fueled by my love of the water, I have made it my life goal to try to prevent these needless tragedies. The statistics are sobering. According to the Centers for Disease Control, drowning is the leading cause of accidental death in children under fourteen years of age, and it also ranks among the top causes of death for young men in their teens and twenties. When a life is lost to accident—vehicle, aircraft, drowning—there is a ripple effect that can last for generations. Children are never born; sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, and grandkids never come into the world as the result of a brief, seemingly innocuous decision. In this book you will learn how to prevent the emergency and, if that fails, how to survive by utilizing both your mind and body to gain an edge over Mother Nature. In my previous job as a survival instructor, I learned a great deal about safety, risk, and human psychology. I began intensive research into how people learn and how they retain knowledge, and believe me—there are enough theories out there to fill a library with books on the subject. As a result, I strived to focus this guide yet still make it accessible to the novice and experienced adventurers. The goal is to inform across all levels of water experience, from the single mom who wants a little confidence when she takes her kids to the beach, to the experienced navigator who has already faced water emergencies. My hope is that everyone will take away a better appreciation of the environment and its dangers, as well as a set of skills they can implement in an emergency.

So what happens when you fall into fifty-degree water and you can't get out? What do you do? Unfortunately, even if you know how to swim, even if you have water experience, your survival time in temperatures below fifty-five degrees Fahrenheit is not measured in hours or even minutes; it's often measured in seconds. In fact, a majority of drownings occur in less than a minute! Victims can be actively drowning in less than thirty seconds. Regardless of the water temperature, a significant percentage of drowning victims perish fewer than six feet from shore, a dock, or other structure.¹ Roughly 3,500 people drown every year in the United States, and many of these deaths could have been prevented.² I have had the sad experience of being on scene at several drownings, so I know firsthand how devastating these tragedies can be. It is a misconception that drowning victims scream, splash, and cry for help. Most victims slip below the surface unheard and undetected by anyone. Every day in this country, people drown within an arm's length of another person. That may sound unbelievable, but it is an absolute fact. I want to emphasize that. I have studied real-life films and witnessed real drownings and near-drownings, and counter to common sense, victims usually slip below the surface without a sound, often drowning within feet of parents or other adults. (See *On Drowning by Water Safety Films*,

Inc. Compiled by Frank Pia, a former lifeguard and water-safety expert, the film shows footage of Long Island beaches in the 1970s and 1980s that demonstrates this phenomenon.)³ In 2011, a mother of two drowned at a YMCA pool in Fall River, Massachusetts. This tragedy gained national attention because, sadly, her body was not discovered for several days. Lost in the headlines was the fact that there was security video of this tragedy. The victim came down a waterslide, briefly surfaced, and then disappeared. Two lifeguards and dozens of people were within close proximity, and no one noticed because there were no screams, no splashing, and no cries.⁴ I have trained countless clients from across the aviation and marine industries, and I have interviewed numerous survivors. Many of these survivors possessed vast experience, spending more time on the water in a week than most do in a year, yet they still found themselves, despite their knowledge and background, at the mercy of the environment. Again and again I have come across very skilled and very experienced watermen (and women) whose training did not prepare them for avoiding a water emergency or for surviving one. In my interviews with these survivors, those who spent months battling the water and those who spent only minutes, the overarching emotion they express is always humility. They speak of a profound gratitude for surviving but also of a deep humbleness born of gazing upon the uncaring face of Mother Nature.

So why all the gloom and doom? I say this to shock you into focus because I know from personal experience that there is no more debilitating or frightening event than to be in trouble in the water with no one to help you. The physical and mental impact can kill even the hardest and most experienced waterman very quickly. The decisions you make in the first few seconds can determine your fate. The good news is that you can survive. There are very basic and simple procedures you can adopt that will lower your chances of facing an emergency and will increase your chances of survival if you do. The information in this guide will allow you gain that knowledge and, hopefully, avoid the emergency altogether. The easiest way to survive an emergency is to never face one. However, even the most skilled and highly trained person can find himself or herself in a life-or-death emergency, so you need to know what to do if you do find yourself alone in the water.