

## Drowning Doesn't Look Like Drowning

By Retired U.S. Coast Guard Chief Warrant Officer 2 Mario Vittone, Norfolk, va. September 23, 2013



FORT RUCKER, Ala. (August 23, 2013) - The new captain jumped from the deck, fully dressed, and sprinted through the water. A former lifeguard, he kept his eyes on his victim as he headed straight for the couple swimming between their anchored Sportfisher and the shore. "I think he thinks you're drowning," the husband said to his wife. They were splashing each other and she had screamed, but now they were just standing on the sand bar in neck-deep water. "We're fine, what is he doing?" she asked, a little annoyed. "We're fine!" the husband yelled, waving him off, but the captain kept swimming hard. "Move!" the captain barked as he hurried past the stunned owners. Directly behind them, not 10 feet away, their 9-year-old daughter was drowning. Safely above the surface in the arms of the captain, she burst into tears, "Daddy!"

How did this captain know - from 50 feet away - what the father couldn't recognize from just 10? Drowning is not the violent, splashing call for help most people expect. The captain was trained by experts to recognize drowning and had years of experience. The father, on the other hand, learned what drowning looks like by watching television. If you spend time on or near the water (hint, that's all of us) then you should make sure you and your crew know what to look for when people enter the water. Until she cried a tearful, "Daddy," the girl hadn't made a sound.

As a former Coast Guard rescue swimmer, I wasn't surprised at all by this story. Drowning is almost always a deceptively quiet event. The waving, splashing and

yelling that dramatic conditioning (read: television) prepares us to look for is rarely seen in real life.

The Instinctive Drowning Response - named by Francesco A. Pia, Ph.D. - is what people do to avoid actual or perceived suffocation in the water. And it does not look like most people would expect. There is very little splashing, no waving and no yelling or calls for help of any kind. To get an idea of just how quiet and undramatic from the surface drowning can be, consider this: It is the No. 2 cause of accidental death in children ages 15 and under (just behind vehicle accidents). What's more, of the approximately 750 children who will drown next year, about 375 of them will do so within 25 yards of a parent or other adult. In some of those drownings, the adult will actually watch them do it, having no idea it was happening. Drowning does not look like drowning.

Pia, in an article in the fall 2006 issue of the Coast Guard's On Scene magazine, described the Instinctive Drowning Response like this:

**1.** Except in rare circumstances, drowning people are physiologically unable to call out for help. The respiratory system was designed for breathing. Speech is the secondary or overlaid function. Breathing must be fulfilled before speech occurs.

**2.** Drowning people's mouths alternately sink below and reappear above the surface of the water. The mouths of drowning people are not above the surface of the water long enough for them to exhale, inhale and call out for help. When drowning people's mouths are above the surface, they exhale and inhale quickly as their mouths start to sink below the surface of the water.

**3.** Drowning people cannot wave for help. Nature instinctively forces them to extend their arms laterally and press down on the water's surface. Pressing down on the surface of the water permits drowning people to leverage their bodies so they can lift their mouths out of the water to breathe.

**4.** Throughout the Instinctive Drowning Response, drowning people cannot voluntarily control their arm movements. Physiologically, drowning people who are struggling on the surface of the water cannot stop drowning and perform voluntary movements such as waving for help, moving toward a rescuer or reaching out for a piece of rescue equipment.

**5.** From beginning to end of the Instinctive Drowning Response, people's bodies remain upright in the water with no evidence of a supporting kick. Unless rescued by a trained lifeguard, these drowning people can only struggle on the surface of the water for 20 to 60 seconds before submersion occurs.

However, this doesn't mean that a person who is yelling for help and thrashing isn't in real trouble. They are experiencing aquatic distress. Not always present before the Instinctive Drowning Response, aquatic distress doesn't last long. But unlike true drowning, these victims can still assist in their own rescue by grabbing lifelines, throw rings, etc.

Look for these other signs of drowning when persons are in the water:

- Head low in the water, mouth at water level
- Head tilted back with mouth open
- Eyes glassy and empty, unable to focus
- Eyes closed
- Hair over forehead or eyes
- Not using legs, vertical
- Hyperventilating or gasping
- Trying to swim in a particular direction but not making headway
- Trying to roll over on their back
- Appear to be climbing an invisible ladder

So if a crewmember falls overboard and everything looks OK, don't be too sure. Sometimes the most common indication that someone is drowning is that they don't look like they're drowning. They may just look like they are treading water and looking up at the deck. One way to be sure is to ask them, "Are you all right?" If they can answer at all, they are probably OK. If they return a blank stare, you may have less than 30 seconds to get to them to safety. And parents, children playing in the water make noise. When they get quiet, you need to get to them and find out why.

Editor's note: Mario Vittone retired from the U.S. Coast Guard after 22 years in maritime operations. He now directs the maritime division at VLinc Corporation.