

Fear – A Powerful Motivator

By Jeff Krieger, MS

Throughout the aquatic community they are “The Forgotten Ones”, the widely diverse group of silent sufferers who are aqua phobic, also known as hydrophobic. Sadly, they are unable to enjoy the many emotional, physical and social benefits resulting from participating in an aquatic lifestyle. Aqua phobia is defined as an abnormal and persistent fear of water. It is a specific phobia that involves a level of fear that is beyond the individual’s control or that may interfere with daily life. People demonstrate aqua phobia in many ways and may even recognize that the water poses no imminent threat. They may avoid such activities as bathing, boating or traveling over bodies of water. The most common aversions for aqua phobics include putting their face in water, entering water over their heads and swimming in any way, shape or form.

Some of the more common physical reactions of aqua phobic’s when near or around water include increased heart rate, nausea, headache, uncontrollable shaking, sweating, as well as the inability to think clearly or react normally. All of these symptoms are the result of high levels of emotional and physical stress that the body endures during a phobic episode. This phobia knows no boundaries and can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, and fitness level or life experience. It is estimated that one out of every ten people suffers from some degree of this phobia. This fear may prevent them from ever stepping foot in water, other than a shower, let alone learning how to float, tread or swim, or being able to help themselves or somebody else in need of assistance while in water. In addition to these physical barriers, there are many emotional wounds and scars that result from being phobic, such as diminished self esteem and confidence; feelings of guilt, shame or failure; internal problem-solving conflicts; as well as a decreased willingness and ability to confront new challenges. Furthermore, aqua phobics may endure a lifetime where their fear impacts relationships with family and friends.

The process begins during childhood. While most children are enjoying time with friends and family in the water, an aqua phobic may find themselves on the outside looking in. This experience is never more painful than when a child, who is aqua phobic, is sent to a summer camp where the highlight of the day is a trip to the pool or waterfront. Many parents may not fully understand the depth of their own child’s fear. Or, if they are aware, may unfairly expect the camp’s aquatic staff to effectively help their child overcome this fear. On the other hand, the camp might convince parents that they have the professional resources to help the child deal with this traumatic experience. Unfortunately, most camp and recreational staff members do not understand the origin and process of this specific phobia. You cannot smile, bribe or encourage it away. You can, however, ignore or deny it and this is exactly where the process goes terribly wrong.

Concerned and dedicated parents may choose not to ignore the issue and enroll the child in a local “learn to swim program”. Unfortunately, this experience, much like the camp experience, may result in deeper feelings of fear and anxiety, in addition to another layer of self-doubt, decreased self-esteem, frustration and an overall unhealthy view of what should be a very healthy resource, water. This occurs because most learn to swim programs for children are not equipped to handle this type of very delicate and emotional process. Organizations with years of experience and a wealth of resources are very clear on their criteria and techniques for teaching swimming. It is a very technical approach and the

instructors are keenly aware that emotional support and positive reinforcement are important parts of that learning process. However, many programs do not recognize that working with an aqua phobic is a completely different process, requiring different teaching styles, skill sets, time lines, expectations, results and rapport between instructor and child.

This is the point when a large percentage of children become part of “The Forgotten Ones”, youngsters whose parents make the difficult decision to withdraw from swim lessons and change family activities in an effort to help their child avoid water and the painful consequences of aqua phobia. Unlike other phobias that can prevent a person from pursuing an education or result in serious and severe short and long term emotional and physical health problems, a child can avoid an aquatic lifestyle and still lead a productive and healthy life. However, this is unfortunate and unnecessary. Aqua phobia does not need to be a lifelong sentence and can actually offer an opportunity for a child to overcome a significant obstacle and experience the feeling of personal pride. With the right support, guidance and program, a child can overcome that overwhelming and paralyzing fear and move on to enjoy a lifestyle that includes swimming, boating, scuba diving and many other aquatic activities.

It remains unfair to this group of children and their families that effective resources are few and far between. Many aquatic organizations, as well as community swim programs, seem to ignore the situation. Two primary arguments exist – either their learn to swim program is equipped to handle children fighting this phobia or that there is not a large enough population of aqua phobic’s to justify dedicating pool time and expenses. Either way, these views and decisions result in aqua phobic youngsters remaining part of “The Forgotten Ones.”

The fear of the water may become dormant until these individuals become parents themselves. Then, once again, this monster rears its ugly head. They hope that their own children will not demonstrate and develop an abnormal fear of water. They want their children to enjoy the wide range of benefits that result from participating in an aquatic lifestyle. Yet, most importantly, they wish that they could get in the water with their child, help them to learn how to swim and enjoy aquatic activities as a family.

Parents who are aqua phobic not only revisit the bad childhood memories associated with their phobia, but they are concerned that their own fears will impede their parental responsibilities. Naturally, it is at this point in their lives, that they again make an effort to confront and overcome their fear of water. However, the lack of effective resources is even more difficult to find for adults than for children

Many adult learn-to-swim classes are designed to help adults who do not fear water, but who never learned proper stroke technique. Adult aqua phobic’s who begin swim lessons without first dealing with the internal emotional struggle that their fear generates, will often be unsuccessful in learning to swim. As adults they may be more prepared to handle the disappointment, anger and frustration, yet the fact remains that they may not conquer their fear of water, learn how to swim or enjoy an aquatic lifestyle. This is again unfortunate and unnecessary.

There are very specific aqua phobic water adjustment skills and transitional swim techniques in existence. For success, these must be part of a strategy that also includes emotional support, both in and out of the water. This emotional support is best offered by a mental health professional through behavior modification and relaxation techniques. A clear

presentation of exactly what a phobia is, how it works, and what is required to overcome it are also important.

It is true that fear can serve as a powerful motivator, rather than a painful deterrent. Fear remains an important part of our mental arsenal that protects us from making unhealthy choices and avoid dangerous situations. However, an abnormal fear that disrupts one's ability to make safe choices and pursue healthy activities is a barrier to achieving all that is possible in life. In most cases, therapists who treat phobias are not trained and accomplished swim instructors. It is also unfair to expect that all aquatic professionals understand the emotional component of aqua phobia. The good news is that there are hybrid professionals, trained both as mental health and aquatic professionals, who are aware that helping "The Forgotten Ones" requires a strategy that combines both components.

It is time that the aquatic community stops ignoring "The Forgotten Ones" who, as a result of their phobia, are unable to enjoy the many experiences and benefits of water. For those of us who share a passion for water, aqua phobia may be a difficult concept to fully understand, but that does not exempt us from accepting part of the blame for this problem. We can learn to play a much larger role in solving the problem and eliminating the growing number of "The Forgotten Men, Woman and Children" who suffer from aqua phobia.

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