

How the Aquatic Community can best serve those who fear water

Fear can be a powerful motivator, rather than a painful deterrent, that is unless the person with that fear is never offered the opportunity and resources needed to help them overcome that fear and reach goals they never thought possible. This situation applies to a large group of people who, as a result of their varying degrees of fear surrounding water, might never be able to enjoy the many emotional, physical and recreational benefits that result from participating in a wide range of aquatic activities. While their fear may vary in degree from mild to paralyzing, they often sit silently on the outside of the aquatic community looking in.

As aquatic professionals, we need to ask ourselves; “Are we accurately identifying and appealing to a population of fearful swimmers and fully recognizing just how serious the consequences of that fear are. Fearful swimmers remain an extremely high risk for drowning and in most cases powerless to help someone else who is? Do we offer fearful swimmers the special types of programs and resources that this unique group needs and deserves in order to feel comfortable, competent and safe in water? Finally, as the professionals in this dynamic, are we getting the type of training and support from both within and outside of the aquatic community that will enable us to maximize our efforts with fearful swimmers? “

Estimates suggest that over 40% of the adult population suffers from some level of fear of water. This total does not include adult swimmers who are not afraid of water, but just never learned how to swim. This number exclusively reflects how many adults either never even tried to learn how to swim or tried and were unsuccessful as a result of both their fear and/or the lack of available and effective resources specifically designed to address their fear of water.

All too often the problem comes down to a matter of vision and economics. Can an organization look beyond the traditional learn to swim and aquatic exercise formats that they have profited from in the past and see a profitable future in programming that services a population that is currently not very visible to them? Can enough pool space be dedicated to justify the expense of marketing new programs in new niches and recruiting and training staff in hybrid skill sets that requires input from professionals outside the aquatic community. Once an organization has committed to helping fearful swimmers, the first step is finding experienced and dedicated professionals that will embrace that passion and purpose, whether they be aquatic staff or not. Secondly, the organization must provide these staff members with the professional training that is required to provide their clients with important knowledge regarding the “Who, What, Why and How’s” of anxiety, fears and phobias, specifically related to water. Aquatic therapists and instructors who work with this population must fully understand the entire scope of cognitive, emotional and physical help that fearful swimmers

need and accept the fact that it is almost impossible to teach a fearful swimmer how to swim unless they first address the fear factor.

This effort requires skills that therapists use in their offices to help their clients understand, manage and overcome many types of fear. Unfortunately, not many of those therapists hop into the pool with their clients and continue the healing process within the environment where the fear exists. Therefore, aquatic professionals need to learn how to use not only aquatic skill building techniques, specific to fearful swimmers, but skills that will enable them to provide emotional support, both in and out of the water, as needed. The therapeutic rapport that is established between instructor and client is the critical part of this process. With the use of effective skills that include reflection, empathizing, behavior modification, desensitization, positive imagery and relaxation techniques, in addition to strong communication skills, clients can then move forward and learn the various aquatic skills that will allow them to increase their comfort zone and independence in water and ultimately become active members of the aquatic community.

Many of us center our lives around water, both personally and professionally and cannot imagine living any other way. Unfortunately, for far too many people, as much as they want that lifestyle for themselves, their fear of water prevents them from doing so. ? As aquatic professionals, we have accepted the huge responsibility of protecting and nurturing lives, all lives within the boundaries of an aquatic environment.

Thankfully, national organizations such as Aquatics International, the National Swimming Pool Foundation, USA Swimming and the National Drowning Prevention Alliance, as well as other local and national water safety programs, swim schools, parks and recreation departments and fitness centers are embracing this challenge and connecting with fearful swimmers, but we need more, we need the following:

Partners with a plan- we need to continue to build bridges between the aquatic and mental health, health and wellness and the financial communities, and develop a global strategy to address the issue of fearful swimmers, water safety and health and fitness.

Promotion- we need more visibility and louder voices who can speak to the value of programs dedicated to helping fearful swimmers.

Pro-Active- we need to bring this help to the people who need it the most-children, parents, grandparents, professional caretakers, camps, the military, schools, community programs, parks and recreation departments. If we wait for them to approach us, tragedy might strike first.

Promise- we need to make a promise to everyone, regardless of age, fitness level, financial status, geographic location or life experience that the aquatic community will continue to provide resources to anyone that suffers from the fear of water in an effort to make this world a happier, healthier and safer to place to swim in.