



# Beyond the Rescue

## SUPPORTING DIVERS AFTER A CRISIS

By Shannon Hunt

Witnessing or being involved with a real-life incident can carry a psychological impact that lingers long afterward. Psychological first aid gives divers the tools to continue assisting when the impact goes beyond the physical.

**DIVE TRAINING STRONGLY EMPHASIZES WHAT TO DO PHYSICALLY IN AN EMERGENCY.** Open-water divers learn skills such as how to share air with their buddies, tow a tired diver, and perform an emergency swimming ascent.

As divers earn more certifications — such as rescue diver, solo diver, basic life support, and emergency oxygen administration — they build stronger emergency management skills.

Some divers may go their entire dive careers without needing to use these skills. But risk is an inherent part of diving, and the chance that a dive incident will occur is always present. That reality is why we teach these skills and practice them throughout dive training.

What we don't often discuss during diving or first aid training is what happens after an emergency ends.

Witnessing or being involved with a real-life incident can carry a psychological impact that lingers long after the situation is over.

During an incident, the body experiences an acute stress response, commonly referred to as the fight-or-flight response. The brain perceives a threat and sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus. This signal prompts the adrenal glands to release adrenaline and cortisol, which in turn cause the heart to beat faster, breathing to speed up, muscles to tighten, and a cascade of other physiological reactions to occur.

While this response can be lifesaving in the moment, the intense stress surrounding an incident can contribute to psychological trauma and, in some cases, lasting changes in the brain's structure and function.

There is not a singular indicator of how people involved with an incident will be impacted, whether they were an injured party, rescuer, dive buddy, or bystander. Factors such as the incident's severity, their past experiences, and their relationship to those involved can affect how someone feels after an incident, but none of them provide certainty.

People can experience the same incident and walk away with different emotional responses. Some people may become quiet and withdrawn, others may respond with loud or aggressive behavior, and some may appear to not be affected at all. No reaction is right or wrong. Every response is valid, and everyone involved may need something different to process the trauma.

Psychological first aid is one of the most widely used tools to help individuals manage the immediate stress and trauma of an incident. Three basic action principles guide

how to assist someone after a dive incident: look, listen, and link.

- **Look:** Just like in first aid training, the first step is assessing the scene. A responder should evaluate if a scene is safe, both physically and emotionally. After determining an environment is safe, the next step is identifying who most needs assistance.
- **Listen:** Once it's clear who needs support, initiate care by approaching in a respectful manner, introducing yourself, and offering assistance in whatever they need. Not everyone will want help, and you should respect that choice. If they are open to support, be an active listener. Avoid interrupting or judging them, and be fully present in the conversation.
- **Link:** When providing care to someone in distress, it's important to understand your role. The goal is not to fix what happened but to provide compassion and

validation while helping the person access additional support. Encourage them to connect with trusted family and friends. When appropriate, guide them toward professional mental health resources.

Together, these three action principles provide a framework for responding to the distress of an incident with support and validation. Psychological first aid is intentionally practical and approachable. Divers can learn more through the new DAN e-learning course, *Surface Support: Navigating Trauma After a Dive Incident*.

Dive and first aid training prepare divers to respond when something goes wrong. Psychological first aid gives divers the tools to continue assisting when an incident's impact goes beyond the physical. Together, these skills ensure divers are prepared for not only the emergency but also the recovery that follows. **AD**

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