

Swim Teachers Guide - Why Even Good Pool Swimmers Get into Trouble in the Ocean

Teaching Ocean Skills to Pool Swimmers

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Good swimmers still get into trouble, some drown, and here is why.

You are walking along the beach and you see a swimmer in trouble out to sea. You do the right thing and jump in to help. When you get near the person you find that you are also now in trouble. How did this happen? You are a good swimmer in the pool!

There is a common **misbelief** that an okay swimmer in a pool will be okay swimming in open water. While this is usually true in calm water it is often proven to be false when the conditions are less than perfect. Of the tens of thousands of rescues each year, the majority of the people rescued could swim.

Just the thought, “I can swim okay” is enough to give a person confidence to enter a rough ocean, or jump in to try and save someone caught in a rip or to try and swim out of trouble. It is not the swimming that is the problem but the fact they are in an environment they do not have experience with when something goes wrong. Things can change quickly and it can become like the difference between riding a bike along a smooth path and careering down a mountain bike track with no brakes.

When you get in trouble in open water it is both a mental and physical issue. You need a plan on how to get out of trouble, avoid panic, avoid exhaustion, plus have some swimming skills that are different to what you do in the pool. It has been documented that a panicking exhausted person can drown in 60 seconds.

Here are the factors that can cause fear and panic that are the last things most people are thinking of when having a swim:

Being Overtaken by Fear and Panic by Unpredictable Situations:

- A feeling of helplessness and loss of control of the situation. Eg caught in a rip or caught in a big swell
- Physical exhaustion:
 - Swimming too far and the shore is still far away

- Lactic acid build-up
- Cold water muscle fatigue
- Adrenaline and exhaustion trying to rescue someone
- Medical issues from cramps to heart attack
- Alcohol involved activates
- Fear of getting hurt by big waves near the shore
- Creatures that bite and sting in the ocean
- Difficulty in breathing:
 - In choppy water
 - Swallowing water and coughing
 - Having to dive under multiple waves
- An event that activates a past trauma
- Fear of being washed onto rocks
- Being hit by watercraft
- Cold water shock that takes the breath away
- Fear of deep dark water

It is quite a list. When they occur, they come suddenly as a big shock that can lead to panic and exhaustion.



So, what can you teach to help with the difference between Ocean and Pool Swimming?

Giving students a plan and some skills if they do get into trouble could well save their life.

The first thing to teach them is how to avoid fight, flight or freeze when they feel they are in trouble in the ocean:

Have them:

- ⇒ Acknowledge they are worried or are heading towards fight, flight or freeze mode. This is an important step.
- ⇒ **STOP** swimming and use the “Float to Survive” - back float scull position. This is essential to avoid exhaustion.
- ⇒ Take a couple of deep breaths.
- ⇒ Take time to calm down and reassess. What is your next step?
- ⇒ Signal for help by raising their arm above their head.
- ⇒ Repeat to themselves, “I can float, I am okay”.

It is not enough to read this; you need to give them some form of practice so that when it is needed it is the first thing they think of, rather than their mind going blank and panic taking over.

Breath Holding - Practice

Being held underwater is frightening but if they have practiced holding their breath it is possible to remain calm. Test how long they can hold their breath on land (never in the pool). One minute is a good length of time but if breathing or neck muscles start to spasm then stop the breath-holding practice **immediately**.

Pool Practice

The best option is for people to attend ocean swimming workshops but these are not held in many locations and most people don't think they need them. A good second option is converting some of the pool laps into practicing some of the ocean swimming skills. Yes, this is possible.

Start by having students practicing swimming 400 metres in a pool without stopping. Knowing this will give them more confidence in the ocean.

Get the Breathing Under Control - Practice

You need a wide range of breathing options in the ocean. In the pool we breathe regularly when we need to. In the ocean, you need much more control over your breathing and get used to breathing irregularly, if not you can end up swallowing water and exhaustion can come quickly.

Have students:

- Swim some laps trying to look first before breathing in (to save them from swallowing water in choppy water) then breathe on their right side for a lap and then on their left side for a lap. Breathe looking backwards over their shoulder for a lap then repeat all these skills.
- Practice breathing irregularly by breathing in every 2, 3, 4, 5 strokes and then repeat.
- Swim some laps duck diving and swim a few strokes of breaststroke underwater every few strokes. **Do not do** prolonged breath-holding in the water.

Sighting - Practice

Build open water sighting into their breathing. Stopping and restarting swimming is tiring. Without stopping their swimming get them to, lift their head, look forward to the end of the pool and then turn their head to the side as they take the breath.

Understanding Fear and Panic - Practice

Fear and panic are caused by a sudden situation that could endanger your life that the brain does not know how to handle. The solution to this is to have practiced some scenarios and the solutions so that in a crisis the brain has something to work with. Talk through some scenarios and get students to visualise issues and what they would do to get out of trouble.

Have students:

- Practice swimming a few laps as hard as they can until they are out of breath. Then swim a couple laps of “Float to Survive” back scull float until they get their breath back. Have them imagine they are in a rip and just focusing on going with the rip and using the minimum amount of energy. Have them try signalling for help as they do this practice.

- Practice floating in a relaxed manner with as little movement as required to stay afloat. This is a ‘saving your energy’ practice.
- Learn the mantra, “I can float, I am okay”.

These give the mind some tools it needs to handle the situations that may arise in the ocean.

A little advanced preparation will go a long way to helping keep people safer in open water.

If you would like my free booklet “Ocean Swimming Skills You Can Practice in the Pool” which has a comprehensive guide that can be offered as a swimming workshop, please email me at grahamdietrich@bigpond.com

