

Man Overboard!



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If you fall off a boat, or spot someone who does, a life hangs in the balance. What you do, or fail to do, has monumental consequences.

I often take young boaters out for seamanship exercises, and start the man-overboard drills with an example. I bring the boat up to 20 knots and ask one of them to throw a fender overboard, and then count to 10 before yelling “Man Overboard!” During those 10 seconds, the fender disappears behind the boat (well over a football field behind), and the observers’ faces turn white while their jaws drop.

My point is to illustrate that, clearly, the best defense is not falling overboard. I stress that as federal regulations prohibit limbs outside the boat while underway, there’s no “bow riding” (sitting up on the bow with feet dangling over the side), and no sitting on the gunwales (the edge of the boat), even if you are holding on tight. If the skipper takes a wake too hard, you are airborne. If you land in the boat, it is a small miracle! Otherwise, you end up in the water. Even if the prop misses you as the boat whizzes above, it is likely you’ll be knocked unconscious.

A good rule of thumb is to have three parts of your body in contact with the boat at all times (such as two hands and one foot). Try toppling over a three-legged stool and see how much more stable this is than a two-point system.

If good contact isn’t maintained and you go over, attract attention quickly. I never go on a boat without a knife, flashlight, and whistle on my person. The light and the whistle are to attract attention. The knife is to cut me away from any tangled line that is dragging me underwater. If the boat continues to steam away, start saving yourself by conserving energy and

heat. Don’t panic and waste life-sustaining energy; eventually, someone will start to look for you. Assume the heat exposure lessening position (“HELP”) by floating with your arms across your chest and your legs crossed. If the water isn’t too cold, you can do this for hours.

If you’re in the boat and see someone fall overboard, you must do two things simultaneously. Shout “MAAAAN OVERBOARD” at the top of your lungs, while never taking your eyes off the person in the water. Point at the person in the water constantly! If you lose sight, you may never see him again, as it is unbelievably difficult to find a head sticking up out of the water. Someone must throw the victim something to swim towards and hold onto: a cushion, fender, life jacket – anything and everything!

The boat driver should bring the boat to neutral, then determine what side the victim is on, and turn the boat to the same side. This keeps the victim inside the turning radius of the boat, and keeps the propeller moving away from the person in the water. Once you get alongside the victim, turn off the engine. Those props are potentially dangerous. Stop the engine entirely, especially

if you are bringing the victim back aboard via the swim platform.

Radio the U.S. Coast Guard and tell the watch stander you have a “man overboard!” The victim may be injured, swallowed a lungful of water, and might be having a medical emergency such as a heart attack.

Try the 10-second exercise one day with your crew, and after the fender disappears astern, hold a “man overboard” drill immediately. 🚤

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