

Helping Fearful Divers

Great tips to help a fearful person learn to dive or
“Water sports for people who are not water people!”

by Cathy Church



Do you know someone who would like to dive with you, but is ‘not a water person’?

Whether they are anxious around water, the creatures, or the depths, have them read this helpful article. Cathy has helped a lot of people who are frightened by the thought of diving and by working through the problems with them, she has helped many people learn how they can enjoy the water and the amazing sea life in spite of their fear. Watch her TEDx talk, or other YouTube testimonials. Search for Cathy Church fearful.

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Do you know someone who would like to go diving with you but is afraid to?

If so, then pass this article along to them after you have read it yourself. In my thirty years of diving I have seen many people conquer their fear and go on to love SCUBA diving. But, I have also seen many instructors and spouses destroy the possibility of a frightened person ever learning to dive. This article is for three people: the frightened student diver, the supportive friend, and the instructor. Often the roles I describe will overlap. Read them all to see which pertain to you and to help assure that everyone is doing the best they can to improve the odds that the frightened student will become a comfortable diver. (While I use the words him, his and he in the following, I, of course, mean him or her, he or she.)

It takes courage

The first step that all three of you must recognize is that it takes courage for a person to do something that frightens them. It takes no courage for me or for most of you to dive, because diving didn’t frighten us in the first place. Anyone working with the frightened student must try to know how they feel. To do this, think of something that is harmless but that frightens you. For example, I would not like to put my head into a bag full of spiders—even if they were guaranteed harmless. When I think of how I would feel, I can now empathize with the frightened diver. Almost everyone can find something—a room full of snakes, rats, cockroaches—that produces a fear reaction. Hold on to that feeling when you are tempted to say something inane like—“Go ahead and jump into the water, it’s perfectly safe, don’t be afraid.” Then substitute for yourself “Go ahead, put your head into that bag full of spiders...” Try adding, “Hurry up and put your head into this bag...” Would this simple statement help you summon the courage to do it? I doubt it. So let’s see what will help.

The role of the friend/spouse

You are important to the progress your friend makes, but your role will vary with your friend’s individual needs. In most circumstances don’t make plans contingent on your friend’s completion of the SCUBA class. Only rarely would a fearful student benefit from any external pressure to complete the course.

Some spouses should stay away from the student during classes. If he feels your subconscious disappointment at his slow progress or the waste of money on lessons, he may quit. In other cases, the support of a friend holding their hand as they enter the

water may be good. The best way to know what is right is to ask them what they want you to do.

Students in some types of relationships may want to keep the lessons a secret to avoid hearing someone say “I knew you couldn’t do it.” Also, there is a difference between being supportive and trying to cheer them on. A cheering section is just more pressure. Support is acceptance; encouragement can be pressure. As a friend, you want to offer support without pressure. Pressure is “I know you can do it.” Support is “Thank you for even wanting to dive with me. I know it frightens you, and I’m glad that you even considered it.” Wow, you have made them feel successful just for thinking about trying.

If your friend trusts you to help, then abide by the rules of that trust. If they want to try to snorkel into deep water and they trust you to come back with them when they need to return to shore, then GO BACK IMMEDIATELY on their first signal. This is no time for you to say “Try to stay out here in deep water a little longer.” Encouragement at this time is a breakdown of trust. Going back is acceptance and support.

Regardless of the outcome of the classes, you must accept any steps as success even if they quit before they finish. If they become comfortable snorkeling but not diving, then accept the snorkeling. In a few years they may become comfortable and want to try SCUBA again. It’s not over until it’s over so be patient.

Once your friend becomes certified, your role becomes even more important as your buddy is probably more prone to panic than many other newly certified divers. You should avoid encouraging him to do any but the easiest dives. Even the diver who is afraid not of the water but of the creatures, can panic easily at the slightest hint of a dangerous animal real or imagined.

If you don’t mind doing an easy dive, do the simplest possible dives with your fearful friend. Stay in shallow water so that even a fast ascent can be done relatively safely. Take some responsibility for keeping your buddy away from panic producing situations. Don’t encourage him to wait for you when he signals his air is low, even if you think 1500 P.S.I. is plenty of air for a 20 foot ascent. If you resent having to miss your action dives to “baby-sit” your fearful buddy then your buddy will probably know this and will feel better if you leave to do your own dive. In the best arrangement, do some of each. The beginner probably doesn’t want to do as many dives a day as you do anyway so take turns choosing the dive sites. An action dive just for you, usually the first, deep dive of the day, could be followed by one that is more appropriate for your buddy. If this is your spouse, you are probably so delighted at the progress of your loved one that you will prefer to dive together every time, knowing that you can do the tough dives some other time, and probably together.

Role of the instructor

If someone tells you that they are too scared of diving to try, try to find out what specifically frightens him. If he isn’t sure, use questions: Is he afraid of the water itself? Is he afraid of being submerged in deep water? Is he claustrophobic? How does he feel in elevators? Could he hide in a closet? Is he afraid of creatures underwater—unseen ones, sharks, others? Is a parent afraid in the same way? Is he afraid of the equipment failing? Is he afraid of relying on his regulator? Each type of fear will require a different teaching approach.

If possible, identify the source of the fear. Did he almost drown as a child? Did he see the movie “Jaws”? If the source of the fear can be identified, then some distance can be placed between the original event and the act of learning to dive. You can avoid dupli-

cating the scenario of the cause, such as an older brother pushing him into a pool or swimming in an area that has sharks.

Many fears are inherited from a parent's behavior and some don't seem to have a particular or rational cause that can be remembered. Don't dwell on finding the cause as it is handy to know but not mandatory.

Once the fear is identified, discuss ways to minimize experiencing the cause of the fear. For example, people who are afraid of unseen creatures feel better in a full suit such as a dive skin or neoprene suit before entering the ocean. They may want to climb down the ladder and look around first before jumping in. They may need others to get in first and make sure that there are no sharks or barracudas. There must be no shark jokes with these divers! Claustrophobic students should have large clear masks and stay out of water with poor visibility. Students who are afraid of deep water can stay in shallow water and can enjoy diving forever without going deeper than thirty feet. Some students may have to stay in just three feet of water for a while.

Make the first open water experience feel safe. For most fearful students, their first ocean dive should not involve jumping off the back of a boat. It should be done along a quiet sand beach where they can stand up as soon as they need to. Those with a fear of the regulator breaking can hold on to a companion who has a spare. Students who are just learning to snorkel should wear an inflated vest if they fear sinking. They can even remain standing on the bottom rung of the boat ladder while looking down on a shallow reef. Make it clear that they can participate in this sport at whatever level they want. We in the SCUBA industry must welcome anyone who wants to peer beneath the sea and enjoy its wonders. We should accept those who can do a quick peek while holding on to the ladder as equally as those who complete open water certification. Anything that helps friends enjoy their vacations together is a plus and we should all strive toward that not just to help our industry grow, but to help people to be happier and enjoy themselves more.

Make your student comfortable by letting him know that fears are commonplace and understandable. Diving can be dangerous, and his fear is not totally unreasonable, but with training and practice it can be safe and wonderful. Let him know that not everyone sails through their training with no problems, that many people need extra time and that being a good diver does not depend on his being a great swimmer.

Stress that the goal of SCUBA is to have fun, so help them to slow down until they can relax. At each sign of tension, such as before the earliest head-under-the-water exercises, have them close their eyes and breathe slowly until they are relaxed.

Keep the trust

Your student must trust you. If you have agreed to teach the frightened diver, then you have agreed that he can trust you and that you will support his needs. Don't demand his trust with the famous "Trust me" line. Earn his trust by waiting patiently and not breaking your word as you lead them to performing each new skill. Avoid any line that sounds like "Nothing to it. It's a piece of cake." It's insulting and belittling. Remember—it is NOT easy for this student. Spend your time instead, explaining in detail, what the next steps will be. Your student fears the unknown, so offer clear instructions and detailed demonstrations ahead of time.

When your student arrives at a part that frightens him, such as his first ocean dive, set up the rules ahead of time. Promise him that you will take him back at any time. If he just wants to stand in the water at the beach, that's fine. If he gets to the point where he can

actually swim submerged for a short distance, fine. But agree on the signals for going back. Don't swim beyond him so that he can't signal. Hold hands, if he wants to, so that the signal can be felt instantly. Do not question the signal, or delay your reaction. Don't try to encourage him to go just a little further. Signal a big OK and give him an approving smile and go back with him immediately.

Remember, you promised you would support him and you must not break that trust. If you learn nothing else from this article, learn this one thing. Earn and keep his trust.

At no time during the lessons is this the time for the macho instructor to unexpectedly yank off the student's mask or shut off his air. If you feel that you must test him with an unexpected problem, then discuss it ahead of time. You may, however, need to extend the training time to assure that your student really is ready. It is very important for fearful people to have more than the usual amount of practice so that they are confident and secure in their skills.

For students who are afraid of the ocean creatures rather than the water itself, the first part of the lessons in the pool may go quite quickly and easily. However, be prepared to shift gears from fast to slow when you finally arrive at the point where fear sets in. Each student will be different, so adjust these tips to fit the situation. Each added task can bring on a new problem that could not be predicted, so maintain an on-going evaluation of how the student feels. No one can make any assumptions about the outcome of each step. Since these experiences are new to the student, he can't know what new fears may emerge.

Don't underestimate the power of fear. For one student I interviewed, for example, ANY water on his nose felt like the first stage of drowning and brought on panic. It took a while for this student to get over this response and to be convinced that this water is not a near-death experience. Using a purge valve helped him. Each step may require you to be a problem solver. But that is the challenge that keeps the job of teaching so interesting. It will be your job to help the student over each hurdle that fear throws in his way.

Expect something unexpected. Your student may be doing just fine in the water but anything can happen. One student I interviewed, for example, was doing fine, but unbeknown to the instructor and to him, he equated time underwater with the increased risk of drowning. An internal clock set off the alarm and he bolted for the surface. When tasks elicit panic, try going back a step and think baby steps. For this type of fear, for example, have him stand in waist deep water and just breathe through a snorkel or regulator with his face in the water until he becomes comfortable. Progress to kneeling with his head just below the surface. If you know that the next step elicited panic, then take your time here. Watch for him to relax, then take a little longer. Let him repeat just this step next week if he wants to. If you don't have any idea how long he needs, ASK HIM. Other causes of fear may require a different solution. But you are a good instructor—you will be able to design your own "baby step."

For example, if you have no beach for your first open-water dive and you must dive from a boat with a student who is afraid of water, put a line down from the boat ladder to a shallow reef, in an area without current, waves or surge. It would only cause mental anguish and a big setback to try anything more vigorous with a student whose fear involves the water itself. Don't even ask. When the student is ready, holding hands if they wish, descend a few inches at a time. Stop to look down at the reef or fish mid water. Accept a two-foot descent as a praiseworthy breakthrough, even if they do no more diving that day or even that week. The good instructor will think of many more ways to make his fearful student more comfortable. For example, avoid starting in cold water that

requires a wetsuit and a heavy weight belt. Further, using the same pieces of equipment for each lesson helps to build confidence in the equipment.

You must allow the student to control the learning environment and you must be sensitive to the student's pace. No one should be waiting for the student to perform a task. Other students should not even be in line, waiting their turn to do the task. You cannot set a time limit to master the task, but you can set a time limit for the lesson. If the class is at a dive shop, the student could opt to go slowly while the instructor performs other chores or works with other students.

If the class starts to go too fast and your student finds himself beyond his comfort level, panic can set in and they can easily experience a major set back. With the wrong attitude, the incompetent instructor can permanently lose this student as a potential diver! The good instructor can help the student to back up, regain control, renew his dignity and try again.

I have more than one friend who has been hurt by a macho attitude where the brave instructor laughed at, sneered at, or ridiculed a student for not being faster, better or braver. One acquaintance needed professional psychological therapy after a Caribbean dive instructor ridiculed her for being afraid and refused to cater to her need for extra time to overcome her fear. He laughed and said that she could never become a diver. After therapy she found a proper instructor and she now is a competent diver with a divemaster rating.

If you lose patience with your student, remember that the student has just done a very courageous thing. Even if they only went down four feet, they have gone down deeper than they ever thought they could. They have done something that frightened them. Remind yourself of your own fear and match their courage—put your head in that bag of frightful things we talked about earlier!

If you cannot be patient, if it bothers you to work with frightened people, if it is below your dignity as a SCUBA instructor to sit quietly while your student gathers up his courage, then gently, without causing harm, get another instructor to take your place.

Role of the student

The desire to dive must be your own. If you are learning just to be with a spouse or friend, good for you, but it would be easier if you also really wanted to dive for yourself. Many people who start just to be with a friend soon find out how beautiful it is underwater and are glad that they learned. If you aren't really interested in SCUBA diving, and your spouse is pushing you anyway, it may be impossible to become a safe diver. There must be a strong, internal pull toward diving to overcome a strong fear—it can't be done by someone pushing you.

Once you decide to try, you should give yourself every possible chance to do so. After reading this article, look for a good instructor. Ask him if he has taught fearful divers before and make sure that he also understands the ideas presented here and will agree to let you set the pace.

Choose an instructor who cares. The casual ego-centered instructor, male or female, who feels like he's the brave one because he can dive, who shows ridicule or lack of patience will make your lessons miserable, and you may never want to try again.

Laughing at the student is a terrible blow. I have listened to groups of dive instructors after work berating inadequate and scared students. If it shows up in their jokes, it will

manifest itself in their body language while they are teaching. Their lack of sincerity will become painfully obvious. Avoid these people like the plague. Search for the instructor who is really a teacher and not just a person who relates the facts and techniques. The good instructor must be able to let you, the student, control the learning situation. Many instructors cannot do this, so be sure they can before you start.

For many male students, a female instructor may generally be a better choice. The female instructor can provide a more nurturing atmosphere without threatening a male ego that is already taking a beating for the fear that he is exhibiting. (This is, by no means, a blanket endorsement of female instructors. When they belittle a male student for his fears, it can be even more devastating. And if they over-do the empathy, it makes him feel even worse. The good instructor must develop a caring, neutral tone that comes from a real, sincere desire to help this student become a diver.)

Be patient with yourself without setting time limits. Forgive yourself if you can't charge through the lessons without a few setbacks. Some people, (you type "A" folks know who you are,) are driven to complete tasks in a set time. If you fall behind, be as patient with yourself as your instructor is. You may become intimidated but avoid the temptation to feign bravery rather than ask the instructor to go slower.

Don't sign up for a two day quickie certification course especially if the water itself causes your fear. Arrange for extra time, or even private lessons. With classes spread out over several weeks, you will have more time to practice and become comfortable. Don't let your instructor rush you. Make it clear how much you are comfortable doing and at the first sign of nervousness, back up, slow down, check that YOU are in control and signal your instructor. Don't be reluctant to quit working with an instructor who won't meet your needs. I have seen many frightened students quit trying with the average instructor.

If you are afraid to put your face in the water you will need more preparation time before you can even start the SCUBA part of the lessons. Try sitting on the pool steps. Hold on to a railing and with a mask, but no snorkel, hold your breath, look down at your knees and then look up. When you are ready, and that may be weeks or more away, but when you feel like it, add a snorkel. If you fear slipping below the surface and drowning, then any time you are near the water, wear an inflated vest so that you know that there is no way you can sink. With the vest inflated, venture further into the water. Whenever you have a chance, snorkel in shallow water. Have someone nearby whom you trust to allow you to quit at any time.

Two of the most difficult tasks for frightened divers are swimming or snorkeling into water over their head, and, with SCUBA, descending into deep water. A supportive friend can help when an instructor's time becomes too expensive and you need a long time to get comfortable doing a simple thing like swimming across the pool and breathing through a snorkel. Safety and liability can become an issue; you may not be able to be alone even sitting on the steps of the pool. You may wish to practice elsewhere on your own with a friend.

Plan your course so that your first ocean dive is in clear, calm, shallow water. With your instructor, start into deeper water. Hold hands, if you like. When you are ready to turn back, do so. If the water is cold, murky or rough just say "NO." Do your pool and book work in your home town and on your next warm water vacation, while your friend is off diving or the family is at the beach, you can start your open water lessons.

Getting your certification card will be a wonderful accomplishment, but it may not mean that you have become as safe a diver as a non-fearful student will be. You may have

learned to control your fear, but not to eliminate it. Dive within your limitations, and talk with your buddy—he is still important. Once you experience the joy of diving, your fears will melt away and you can become a terrific diver.

There is no failure

The supporting friend, the teacher, and the student must acknowledge that ANY progress is success. Failure does not exist. If a frightened person does even one single portion of a step it is success. Don't ever say "Too bad you couldn't learn to dive." Say instead "Congratulations—you put your foot into the pool. Wow." That is a plus, period. It is success even if they go no further. The student must leave saying "I did it!" I put my foot in the pool. That's enough for today. Maybe later I'll stand in it up to my waist."

Role of the employer

A side note to the employers of SCUBA instructors: watch how your instructors treat their students to pick out that rare gem who can teach the frightened student. They will have a nurturing nature which has nothing to do with how many specialties they finished at their instructor school. You must be sure of this person before you trust a frightened student to them. And when the word gets out (because you will advertise it) he will always have students to teach.