



Risk Management Tips

Drowning May Not Look Like You Think

If you think drowning involves someone screaming, gasping, and waving for help as commonly seen on TV—think again. The visible images many people associate with drowning do not have much in common with what real drowning looks like, according to Navy/Coast Guard veteran, Mario Vittone. That's because of an automated pattern of responses that appears to be hard-wired into humans called the Instinctive Drowning Response. This pattern emerges whenever someone feels like they are suffocating in water. It is the person's final attempts to avoid actual or perceived suffocation in water before sinking.



Frank Pia, Ph.D., also a lifeguard, was the first to describe the Instinctive Drowning Response. He explains that it may not be obvious that the drowning person is in distress. In fact, the lack of visible panic with their movements is because they are incapable of making other gestures or calling for help at this point. **Drowning is often a deceptively quiet event.** The following information describes why drowning may not look like you think:

- Except in rare circumstances, **drowning people are unable to call out for help** Breathing must be fulfilled before speech occurs. Drowning people's mouths alternately sink below and reappear above the surface of the water. They are not above the surface of the water long enough for them to exhale, inhale, and call out for help.
- **Drowning people cannot wave for help.** Nature instinctively forces them to extend their arms laterally and press down on the water's surface. Pressing down on the surface of the water permits them to leverage their bodies so they can lift their mouths out of the water to breathe.
- **While drowning, people cannot voluntarily control their arm movements.** Struggling on the surface of the water prohibits them from performing voluntary movements such as waving for help, moving toward a rescuer, or reaching out for a piece of rescue equipment.
- From the beginning to the end of this response, the body remains upright in the water with no evidence of a supporting kick. **Drowning people can only struggle on the surface of the water from 20-60 seconds before submersion occurs.**

Additional information on this important subject can be found at http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/lifeguard/06_Patron_Surveillance%20.htm.

If you have a safety or risk management question or a suggestion for a topic, please contact Markel's Risk Management Department at safety1st@markelcorp.com.