Butterflies in your stomach? Channel that energy toward productive solutions while out on the water.

SEAMANSHIP

Boating Butterflies

When it comes to safety, a little anxiety is good for you.

I've been on boats my whole life, worked as a professional captain and traveled thousands of nautical miles, yet I still get a little nervous each time I head for open water. There, I admitted it. And you know what? It feels good to let others in on my secret. And just in case you feel the same way, it doesn't mean you and I are less capable boaters; as a matter of fact, it could mean just the opposite.

Feeling nervous or anxious when undertaking an activity that involves some risk is normal. In fact, it's hardwired into our brains as a life-saving mechanism. Nervousness can be a signal, alerting us to potential dangers, and it takes many forms: muscle tension, rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms and queasiness are just a few of the symptoms people experience. This can happen regardless of how much you enjoy the activity or are looking forward to it.

We tell children it feels like they have butterflies in their stomachs when they are anxious about something. Well, I think butterflies can make us better boaters.

Is your anxiety an asset or a liability? It depends on how you deal with it. A study published in the *Journal of Individual Differences* examined people's reactions to stressful situations and found that individuals who perceived upcoming events as a challenge as opposed to a threat were more motivated by feelings of anxiety, which, in turn, improved their overall performance. Or, put another way, if channeled correctly anxiety can be used to your advantage.

The research also showed people performed better when they admitted they were anxious rather than denying it. People who identified their feelings and accepted their anxiety were more focused and more capable in such activities. Taking a boat into open water involves risk, and every year there are needless tragic accidents involving boaters who are unprepared, careless or worse—complacent. Hubris on the water is an open invitation to disaster. Preparedness, on the other hand, can hold disaster at bay.

Take, for instance, a comparable activity to bluewater cruising: flying. I asked an airline pilot friend with years of experience if she still gets nervous during a flight. "The day I stop feeling that is the day I stop flying," she told me. According to research by Arne Öhman conducted at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, where he is professor emeritus in psychology, "One of the most powerful things anxiety does is harness focus and redirect attention where it's needed most. With so many competing demands for our attention, and the targeted effort it takes to focus, anxiety can give us the boost we need to step up our performance." Up there on the list of activities that demand near-perfect juggling of multiple demands is taking a boat to sea. Preparing the boat, monitoring weather and sea conditions, navigating ocean inlets and accommodating guests are just a few things that tend to jockey for our attention at any given time. It would be silly—and dangerous—to pretend that they don't exist.

My advice? Embrace it. Just like the pre-flight checklist pilots are required to perform, a pre-departure checklist spoken out loud between the captain and crew goes a long way toward creating a safe day on the water. Regardless of your level of experience, don't be embarrassed by your nervousness. Instead, use it to focus your attention on preparations and seamanship skills and Slow. It. Down. Rushing to get out or back from the water happens—we've all been there. Take a beat, check your engines, the tide, wind and most importantly, check in with *yourself* and remember that complacency can kill. Then, once you set out, let those butterflies fly away. ❐

Seeing red: Many times diagnosing an issue on board your boat requires active listening and a watchful eye.

SEAMANSHIP

Don't Be Alarmed

Understanding all your boat's bells and whistles can save time when it matters most.

Mark and Stacy were so excited for their first weekend out—the yard had finally finished the overhaul of their dream boat. Bought used and having received a major refit, their new-to-them boat turned out even better than they hoped. They were using this weekend as a way to familiarize themselves with it and inspect all the new systems.

They were sleeping soundly when an alarm suddenly woke them. Scrambling from their cabin into the open galley-salon, they looked around for the source of the disturbance. To their surprise, the alarm was a propane detector they didn't know they had. The galley had been completely renovated; the old propane stove and oven had been replaced by a new electric one. This added a wrinkle to the whodunnit: There were no propane appliances or even a propane tank on the boat. Clearly the yard forgot to remove the detector, which was malfunctioning. With a sigh of relief, they disconnected the detector and went back to their cabin.

They had just drifted off to sleep when another alarm startled them out of bed. This time it was the carbon monoxide detector. Confused but now afraid something really could be wrong, they searched until they came upon a hissing battery in the house bank under the salon floorboards. The hydrogen sulfide escaping from the overheating battery had been the cause of both alarms.

Buzzing, beeps, bells and whistles—there are myriad sounds that can emanate from the helm, engine room or salon of even the smallest motoryacht. There are over 40 different alarms on my Ocean Alexander trawler alone, including GPS, autopilot, AIS, main engine and generator sensors, hydraulic system, high water, carbon monoxide, smoke and temperature alarms, to name a few. And this doesn't even take into account the notifications on our ever-present personal devices. It would challenge the most attentive boater to memorize the sound of each alarm and instantly know its source. However, the consequences of time lost while trying to figure out if it's the exhaust-temperature alarm or the water boiling in the tea kettle are considerable.

Beyond getting to know your alarms, there is a good reason to test them periodically. The annoying alarm that sounds each time you turn the key to the start position is more than just a frivolous disturbance. Upon starting the engine, as soon as the oil pressure comes up to specification it silences the alarm, but that initial sounding tells you the oil pressure sending unit is working. And that's important.

There is another fact about alarms I hate to admit, but I'm forced to every time my wife says, "Honey, your phone is ringing." My hearing is not what it once was, and there have been several occasions when my wife hears an alarm on the boat that I didn't hear. If you fall into this category, make the effort to change. Some alarms can be easily adjusted to louder tones, or to a higher pitch or frequency. Another option is to wire an LED light into the alarm circuit and position it at the helm where it can be seen. John Harries, who writes the popular Attainable Adventure Cruising blog, couldn't find the source of an alarm he was hearing until he noticed a text message on his phone. Upon reading, he realized the local Emergency Alert organization was testing their new mobile phone alert system, and he happened to be wearing his new Bluetooth hearing aids, linked to his phone.

An alarm is like insurance: Both can be a chore to maintain and we hope we never need it, but we'd be crazy to go without. Take the time to familiarize yourself with your alarms and test them regularly, especially those with a life-saving consequence and those protecting major boat components. You'll be glad you did. ❐

When most of us think of drowning we imagine dramatic storms and huge seas. The real danger lurks in a sea of complacency.

No Way Out

Boarding ladders can be the difference between life and death.

Rob and Megan are eager to get ashore; the couple have been underway since early morning. Securely moored in the harbor, they ease the dinghy into the water. All loaded, they're making their way toward the dinghy dock when Rob realizes he's forgotten his phone and wallet. "I'll drop you off and I'll run back out and get them," he tells Megan.

Out of Megan's sight, Rob stands in the dinghy, bow line in hand as he approaches the swim platform. Bumping into the back of the boat is all it takes to send him careening over the side, just missing the swim platform as he splashes into the water. He pops to the surface, more angry than hurt. At least his phone and wallet are dry on the boat instead of soaked in his pockets. Now all he has to do is get out of the water, change quickly and call Megan. He can already hear her laughing at his impatience, but she will be thankful he's safe. *This is why they say always wear a life jacket*, he thinks. Maybe he will actually start wearing one from now on.

Rob has boarded his boat countless times while anchored off his and Megan's favorite beach. But it occurs to him now, as he approaches the ladder, that he has always deployed it before going into the water. Right now, when he needs it most, the ladder is neatly stowed under the hinged teak cover on the swim platform. It's apparent to him, from his lowly position in the water, that he won't be able to raise the lid, and even if he can, he probably can't release the ladder to flip it into the water. Forcing himself to relax, Rob takes a few deep breaths and thinks strategically. He had tied the dinghy to the cleat on the corner of the swim platform, which he thinks he can reach. With the dinghy secured, it might be easier to re-board the inflatable, he thinks. Unfortunately, this proves equally difficult, and he is unable to pull himself over the slippery rubber tubes.

Falling overboard from a dinghy is a scary situation that occurs more frequently than you might think. Perhaps it's the close proximity to the water or the inflatable nature of the boats, but many boaters don't give these craft proper respect. You might have the upper body strength to pull yourself up and throw a leg over the side, but is that the case for each of your guests? What about your children?

Luckily, Rob's startling experience had a happy ending that day: A boater on a nearby mooring saw his plight and rescued him from the water. But this simple scenario has happened to other boaters, sometimes with a much more harrowing outcome.

Most boat manufacturers build vessels to a safety standard that addresses items such as boarding ladders. Organizations like the ABYC, NMMA and their European equivalents provide specific safety requirements for boat manufacturers to follow.

The ABYC section on boarding ladders states among other criteria: "The re-boarding means shall be accessible to, and deployable by the person in the water. The first rung of the ladder must extend to a minimum of 22 inches below the waterline, and there must be hand holds." Many older boats do not comply with this standard and even some new boats made to European standards may have variations in the guidelines.

Wise boaters won't wait until they're in Rob's position to know whether they can safely re-board their boat. It requires a surprising amount of strength to pull yourself out of the water, especially fully clothed. Make sure any family members who regularly boat with you have the strength and reach to safely do the same. Wear your life jacket and test your boarding ladder while anchored in calm conditions, away from a dock or marina and disconnected from shore power. Use care to stay away from engine or generator exhausts when near the stern. One day, these preparations might just come in handy. ❐