



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



By Bob Arrington

## 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 acci-

dents 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. □