

Oh, No! The Captain's Incapacitated!

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The U.S. Coast Guard mandates certain lights configurations for various conditions of vessels. A boat without a skipper is determined to be a "NUC," which stands for Not Under Command. The light configuration is two red lights in a vertical row, which can be committed to memory with a poem: "Red over red, the captain is dead."

Of course that is a nightmare scenario. However, it does happen that a recreational skipper blithely ventures out for the day with family or friends in tow, only to encounter an emergency. If the crisis

concerns the captain, or calls him or her away from the controls, what happens if the Gilligan crew has no idea what to do? As with many things in life, preparation and calm thinking are keys to surviving the unexpected.

Medical Emergency

In case of incapacitation, do you call for help immediately? If the skipper is in the midst of a life-threatening medical situation, such as a heart attack or choking, you must address the situation. Someone must assess the issues and take charge! While one

person performs the Heimlich or chest compressions, another should be told, "Get on the radio and call the U.S. Coast Guard – STAT!"

When I train new mariners on radio use, I ask them to take a walkie-talkie, go in the next room, and imagine that there is a dire emergency aboard their vessel, and call me for help. They must convey the basic level of emergency information:

- Who you are,
- What the nature of your distress is,
- Where you are and what the boat looks like, and
- How many people are aboard (so when the U.S. Coast Guard arrives, they don't leave anybody behind).

The trainee's results are so poor that it takes them three or four tries to get it right, and that's without the pressure of a real emergency! So before heading out for a day of boating, practice calling for help before you need it.

Fire in the Hold

A skipper may have to leave the helm to address an emergency, such as a fire. Again, someone must be designated to get the vessel to "a slow bell" (just enough underway progress to control the boat, but not so much as to create a windstorm). He or she must steer so that the fire is now downwind of the rest of the boat (it is hard for a fire to make progress upwind). These maneuvers should be discussed and practiced before heading out. The passengers and crew must know where the life jackets are stowed, a take-charge person must order everyone to put them on in case it becomes necessary to abandon ship, and someone must call the U.S. Coast Guard for assistance.

Man Overboard

Given a second of inattention, the captain can fall overboard as easily as anyone else can. Those on board should practice what to do beforehand. Bringing a powerboat around to make a pickup isn't the most difficult task, as long as you don't forget to put the engine in neutral once you are alongside (you don't want to turn the skipper into fish food with the prop). Turning a sailboat about and bearing down on a head bobbing up, however, is a skill that requires a lot of training. No matter the vessel, everyone on the boat should know to throw a life jacket or a cushion (or anything that can be used to stay afloat) while never taking his or her eyes off the person in the water. As in every other situation, be sure to call the U.S. Coast Guard to relay vital information. ⚓

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