Shelly Scuba arrives at her favorite tropical dive resort after a long and exhausting flight. As she arranged the trip at the last minute, she made the trip alone. The next day, having no one to dive with, she was assigned a buddy named Billy Bubbles. Billy seemed like a nice enough guy, but soon into the dive, Shelly realized he was not a very competent diver. This presented Shelly with a dilemma: Should she become a mother hen to Billy, or turn her attention to enjoying her well-deserved vacation?

In an perfect world, one might contend that Shelly had a moral obligation to sacrifice her own enjoyment and play big sister. On the other hand, Shelly gets only one vacation a year and spent several thousand dollars to get there. Choosing the latter consideration to guide her decision, Shelly concludes, “I’m not his mother,” and swims off, leaving Billy to fend for himself.

Regardless of how you may feel about it, this scenario is not uncommon. In fact, you may have been involved in some version of it yourself. But value judgments aside, the story does help explain why divers sometimes ignore, or merely pay lip service to, what’s often called the “second most important rule” in scuba diving — never dive alone. Just how you can avoid being in Shelly or Billy’s situation is the subject of this article.

Psychological Considerations

Too often we base discussions regarding the buddy system solely on practical issues, such as suiting up, remaining together, or knowing what to do when problems occur. While these are certainly vital considerations, the most important aspect of the buddy system is psychological.

First and foremost, the buddy system is doomed from the outset if the buddy team members don’t share a common concern for one another. Unless you care about the person you’re diving with, maintaining the proper degree of vigilance can be difficult. This may be hard to believe but the fact remains that Shelly and Billy’s story is repeated every day on dive boats around the world.

The best buddy teams are those in which the buddies have some form of personal relationship. It’s common sense; the more someone cares about his partner, the less likely he will be to let anything happen to him.

But there can also be a downside when partners are on very close terms and one is overly dependent on the other. A buddy system exists only when the team’s individuals have the desire and capability of looking out for each other. If one buddy is unable to assist the other, trouble may only be a few breaths away. (For more on diving couples and dependent diving practices, you’ll want to read July’s “Women & Diving” column or August’s “Diving Couples” article. — Ed.)

But what about situations — like Shelly and Billy — in which two people who have never met are paired together?

Certainly, problems are much more likely to occur when two unfamiliar partners dive together. But with a little foresight you can decrease the chances of something going wrong. If you know you’re diving with someone you’ve never met, don’t wait until you’re ready to enter the water before you introduce yourself. And do more than a simple introduction. Take a few minutes to get to know your new buddy. Find out how much diving he’s done. Ask when he was diving last and if he’s ever made a dive like the one you’re about to make.

But don’t confine your conversation to simply planning your dive. Get to know your buddy. Where’s she from? What does she do for a living? Are there any other sports or hobbies that are common to both of you? By talking about your backgrounds, you and your new buddy will discover some common experience or attitude. And this can help you form some kind of bond. This will go a long way in maintaining an effective buddy system once you hit the water.

In essence, forming this bond helps create the psychological foundation for the upcoming dive. Regardless of how skilled we are, diving causes some degree of stress and anxiety in all of us. Good buddies give their partners the reassurance of knowing that someone else is looking out for them and shares their concerns. Poor buddies just cause more stress. Their lack of caring or
It's said that two heads are better than one. In reality, two heads are worthless if neither is thinking; the benefit lies in two people utilizing their brains. As in most situations, the problems we're likely to encounter while diving are predictable. If they're predictable, then they're also avoidable. This is why a pre-dive safety check is so essential to effective buddy diving. It's amazing how often we think we're ready to enter the water only to have an astute buddy turn on our air, connect a low-pressure hose, or fasten an unsecured strap or buckle.

I once was teamed with a diver from Europe who spoke very little English. Halfway into the dive, he began making a gesture that I had never seen. Upon investigating the situation more closely, I discovered he was very low on air and was signaling to use my octopus regulator. The moral of the story: Anytime you dive with a new buddy, review communications as part of your pre-dive plan. Although most divers learn the same signals to deal with the most common or significant problems, not all do. Confirm your assumptions before you take the plunge, not after.

A prime time for buddy system failure is during descents and ascents. When we descend, we're often distracted by anxiety, adjusting equipment, or dealing with equalization problems. Buddies may unintentionally become a secondary priority, and we arrive at the bottom alone. During ascents, we often begin our return to the surface assuming that our buddy saw us or is probably ascending as well because he is low on air, too. If you've ever reached the surface without your buddy, you know how wrong this assumption can be. Proper descent and ascent procedures require that we maintain buddy awareness, and confirm that both we and our buddies understand

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**Buddy System Check List**

1. **Discuss and agree on an objective for the dive.** Try to avoid conflicting objectives, such as one diver spearfishing while the other is taking pictures.

2. **Often there is no objective except to sightsee.** In this case, determine who will lead the dive, how deep you'll go and how much time you'll spend at depth (check your tables). Also decide exactly how you plan to stay together (swimming formation, buddy line, etc.) and how often you'll exchange information.

3. **Sometimes, regardless of your plan, it's your air supply that dictates when your dive is over.** So, in addition to planning your bottom time, also agree at what minimum air pressure you'll terminate the dive. (Don't forget — this part of the plan is worthless unless you check each other's air supply regularly.)

4. **Always review the meaning of hand signals.** Some signals are standard, others aren't. And even the standard ones can be forgotten. Be sure you agree on communicating for all possible situations. This is particularly important if you are diving with someone for the first time.

5. **Review emergency procedures.** Confirm that both of you have some form of alternate air source device, and know how it's used. (You might consider practicing for a few minutes after you enter the water.) Discuss the possibility of entanglement and how you'd deal with it. Also, buddy separation should be considered an emergency procedure, even though it might not be life-threatening. Decide what to do about it before it happens.

6. **On the first dive of the day review some basic diving skills — like alternate air source use, buoyancy control and mask and regulator clearing — with your buddy.** Reviewing these skills is just as important for buddies who dive together on a regular basis as it is for buddies who have just met.
and agree on each other’s intentions. The key is to pay attention at all times, not just when you’re on the bottom.

While you are on the bottom, consider that your position relative to your buddy will make it either easy or hard to keep an eye on you. Try to remain side by side rather than play follow the leader. It’s easier to see someone that way. And the easier you make it for your buddy to keep an eye on you, the more likely it is that he will.

Selecting a dive objective that involves both of you will help you and your buddy maintain visual contact. Remember what we said about the buddy system being an interactive process. If you interact, then it’s unlikely you’ll lose sight of one another. For example, you might develop the habit of showing your buddy items of interest, such as marine life. Another technique is to ask him questions at regular intervals, such as, “How much air do you have?” and “Is everything OK?”

One way to make the buddy system an interactive process is by practicing important skills, such as out-of-air emergencies or buoyancy control, during the dive. Some of the best buddy teams I’ve ever seen — whether they dive together on a regular basis or have just met — are those that regularly practice alternate air source use or “hovering” (remaining absolutely motionless in mid-water). Doing so enables them to maintain a very high level of skill proficiency, and generates a feeling of confidence. Each buddy knows that in the event of an emergency — or if things just get tough — their partner can handle whatever arises. After all, the real test of the buddy system is how well the team can handle problems.

Hopefully, you’ll avoid the need to ever use out-of-air procedures by practicing good air management techniques. This, too, is part of becoming a good buddy. The status of their air supplies is one of the most important pieces of information a buddy team shares. Get in the habit of exchanging air supply status often. As you dive deeper, you’ll use air more quickly, you should, therefore, check each others air supply even more frequently than when you dive at shallower depths. Also, never assume that your buddy uses air at exactly the same rate as you do. Although he may have a similar air consumption rate as you under normal conditions, he might encounter situations that drastically alter how fast he uses his air. The only way to know how much air your buddy has is to check it.

The most important factor affecting air consumption is, of course, your level of exertion. Good buddies keep a close eye on not only to see where their buddy is, but also so they can evaluate his physical and psychological state. Is your buddy’s breathing rate comfortable and regular? Is his motion slow and purposeful? Is he attentive to you and the task at hand? If you answer “no” to any of these questions, it’s time to do something. Most often the answer lies in having him slow down or stop all activity completely. If that doesn’t resolve the problem, then it’s time to calmly head for the surface. Diving is great, but it’s not worth risking your life. You can always dive another day.

One advantage of diving with the same buddy on a regular basis is that you’re able to establish a base line for normal behavior. This provides a reference that allows you to evaluate his reaction to situations as they change. Any changes to what you consider “normal” behavior, of course, warrant close attention. For example, let’s assume your buddy is usually attentive and stays close to you. One day while deep diving, you notice that he’s paying little attention and tends to wander off. This could be an early sign of a problem, such as narcosis. Yet, if you didn’t have this insight into his behavior, you might not realize that a problem was occurring until much later — perhaps too late.

The ultimate breakdown of the buddy system is when divers separate and cannot find their way back together. This isn’t necessarily a serious problem, if it’s handled properly. “Properly” means that you realize very quickly that your buddy is gone and that you react appropriately. Unfortunately, divers often don’t even realize their buddy is missing for quite some time; sometimes, not until they’re ready to surface. This is a sure sign of a very “noninteractive” buddy team.

Appropriate action for a missing buddy is simple: Find him! This is sometimes easier said than done. The most common rule is to search for one minute, then ascend and wait. (Be sure to look up and around; it’s amazing how often a “lost” buddy is just above your head.) If your buddy, in turn, does the same, he should either be at the surface already or will join you shortly.

On deeper dives (anything deeper than 66 feet/20 m) you may want to follow a little different advice. For optimal decompression safety, you don’t want to ascend to search for a lost buddy, then descend again. For this reason, you must be especially careful in maintaining buddy awareness when deep diving. Stay closer together than normal and monitor your air supply more frequently.

Another useful deep diving technique to assist in a buddy separation is to use a descent line. Agree that if separated you will both return to the descent line and wait a few minutes before surfacing. If your buddy does the same thing, you’ll be able to find each other and continue the dive rather than having to ascend. Keep in mind that the ascent line recommendation only works in relatively good visibility. The best advice is still to remain attentive and stay close to each other at all times, particularly when deep diving.

A topic that inevitably comes up when
discussing the buddy system is what to do if you find yourself diving with an incompatible buddy. It doesn’t matter whether your buddy is your best friend or a complete stranger, you might feel that diving with that person is such a rotten experience that you’d rather not dive — or might be tempted to try diving alone. What do you do in this situation?

Give your buddy another try — but attach some conditions. Before the dive, take a moment and think about specific buddy system-related problems or diving techniques that are interfering with your dive. Once you have identified specific problem areas, diplomatically take your buddy aside, express your concerns, and offer some way to compensate for those difficulties.

For example, imagine that your buddy has a tendency to swim off as soon as you enter the water. Since it takes you a while to clear your ears, and you don’t want to get separated from your buddy, you feel pressured to clear your ears too quickly. You’re concerned that you might actually suffer an injury if this practice keeps up. You’d feel a lot more comfortable if your buddy would be a little more patient and swim at a slower pace. Before the next dive, you take your buddy aside and tactfully explain what you see as the problem. You suggest that you would appreciate it if your buddy would slow down and dive at your pace.

Once you have voiced your concerns and offered your solutions, listen to your buddy. Often you’ll find that your buddy is simply unaware of the problem. He might also have an alternative solution to the problem. Once you have both expressed your concerns, you can agree on specific actions to take during the next dive to avoid problems. If you communicate with your buddy in this manner, you’ll find that, in most cases, subsequent dives will be much more enjoyable — for both of you.

However, if your buddy refuses to adjust his diving techniques, don’t be afraid to look for a new buddy. It can be another diver who shares your interests, dive experience, and dive style, or, on a charter boat, it can be the divemaster or instructor. There’s no law that says you have to dive with the same person all the time — or even for the entire day. But since you should always dive with a buddy, it’s in your best interest to find a compatible one.

**Conclusion**

Taking on the role of a dive buddy is a heavy responsibility. To agree to be someone’s buddy but not properly fulfill the role is irresponsible, and could be life-threatening. Exercise your duty seriously and with appropriate planning. Follow the guidelines we’ve discussed, and continue your diving education. Probably the best thing you can do is to take the “ultimate dive buddy course” — become a Rescue Diver. Your buddy will appreciate it.