

# Staying Attached to the Boat

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*By Chris Edmonson*

Greetings from the land of safety!

When I was learning to sail my instructor's first question to the group of us student types was, "How many of you can swim?" He then defined "swimming" as staying afloat for a minimum of 5 minutes by any means possible. He didn't give a fig for form or style. My reaction to this was deep down and heart felt. Like most of the students there at the time I just wanted to learn how to sail. Why was the first issue about whether or not I could survive apart from the boat?

The class proceeded and we often ended up in the water... wearing Personal Floatation Devices (PFD's) and staying afloat for 5 minutes. This was not because we were doing anything "wrong" but rather the instructor was putting us in situations that would have us righting the small boats we started with. So, we would go out a little ways from shore and dump the boat over and work like the dickens to figure out how to get it upright again. We did this in ones and twos until we could do it almost blindfolded. That was sort of what the goal was in learning to tie certain knots too. We did it until we could do it without thinking about it AND with our eyes closed. Now understand, he didn't MAKE us do it this way... it just seemed like a good idea that we learn it that well. He made that clear. His theory was that if we could do these things in all conditions and automatically we would be better sailors. At the time it seemed like a good idea and still does.

Now page forward a few years and you find yourself going cruising on a larger boat. In getting ready to leave the dock you rig jack lines and all the control lines are led to the cockpit and the roller furling is first rate. The lazy jacks are rigged to reef the main. You have radar aboard as well as both VHF and SSB radios as well as GPS and EPIRB. You have an autopilot and a bunch of time on your hands to go somewhere. You talk it over with your spouse... what are the issues when we leave the dock for the last time in a while? "Well," she says, " If you go out on deck at any

time you need to be wearing a harness and/or better yet you will only go out in daylight." The thought behind that was to translate as, "I don't want to finish this trip by myself, wondering what happened to you." Fair enough although not completely practical.

The issue was (and is) I needed to stay ON the boat. Not near it or in the vicinity but definitely ON the boat. Now let's talk about what sorts of accidents can separate one from the boat. A leading cause, if you believe some sources, of getting separated is stepping to the leeward stays and relieving oneself and losing your grip in the process. This is when you're a long way from shore... often at night... occasionally with a sea running. The reason one would do this is not wanting to go below and disturb the crew or just not wanting to go below period. Another of the things that can happen is to go forward to fix something that is caught or over wrapped or otherwise not functioning properly. This too can lead to going overboard. Getting knocked over by the boom or some other contrivance. You know all this already. You vow to not put yourself in a situation where the odds are even slightly higher that you would go overboard. In other words, you won't do those things that could result in an accident. Risk avoidance. That was why you had all the lines set up to be worked from the cockpit wasn't it? That is why the emergency gear is in a handy place, yes? Even in good lighting you agree with your spouse to use the jack lines and when you set them up you made sure they ran from the stern all the way to the bow without interference. Risk control. You don't want to go overboard almost as much as your first mate doesn't want you to. To name the risk is not the same as thinking about it when a need arises.

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So there you are, many days out of San Diego, heading down the Baja coast. It is the midnight watch and your crew has gone below leaving you to manage for a while. The wind is picking up and you have all sail up except the stays'l. Time to put some sail away. You start by reefing the main. The line jams and you put one foot out of the cockpit and grab the line led along the boom... one good yank and everything is working again. The main is then reefed. You then start to pull in the roller furling

line for the genoa. It jams... there is probably an over wrap at the base of the furler. You are wearing your SOSpenders (PFD and harness) with the clip on tether so you clip onto the jack line and go forward to the bow. Sure enough there is a wrap that has the furler not functioning. Still clipped on, in the dark, you feel for the line and start working to free the jam. About the time you get it released you hear your spouse (crew) frantically calling your name and looking back you see her searching the sea BEHIND the boat. "Maybe I should have thought about this before I went forward," you are thinking as you call out to let her know you are okay.

When you get back to the cockpit you see more than concern is clouding your first mate's eyes. There are dark, dark clouds there and they are not going to be dispelled in an instant. "Yes, I know I promised... yes, I know it wasn't a good idea... yes, I will call you up on deck if there is a next time... yes, I will turn the deck light on... yes, I was on the tether..."

A few minutes later she has gone back down to sleep. The genoa is reefed and things have settled down. You check your position and figure out you are about 40 miles off the coast. It would have been more than a 5-minute "swim" if you had been taken overboard. Very sobering.

Page backwards a few years and you recall the night on Lake Pleasant during the Governor's Cup when you almost went overboard in the middle of the night. The wind had come up all through the day and around midnight you wanted to take down the jib because there was even more wind building. No jack lines, no tether, just walk forward and take the non-furling jib down. After all, this is a lake. You aren't off shore. The boat lurched and you grabbed air as you tried to steady yourself. Fortunately on a small boat you are never far from something to grab and the second reach finds the lifeline. You find your balance and are saved the experience of going into that dark cold (very cold) water. "Yes, I should have known a few years later to not tempt fate off Baja," you will later think.

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Having equipment does not mean you are being safe. Using the equipment, in and of itself, does not mean you are being safe. Thinking about what you are doing helps. Controlling risk is something that isn't always possible, or at least, it should be understood that the unexpected is probably broader than you have thought about yet. That's part of the definition of an accident isn't it? On a boat just having the equipment means you have taken a step forward but the possibility of that equipment malfunctioning is still there as well as the circumstance being more than could have been anticipated and thus overwhelming the equipment. On a few occasions I have found myself out of the cockpit bouncing down with the bow into the water as I work on something there. It's cold, it's wet, it's dangerous and it's part of sailing sometimes. These days I tend to have a lot of stuff with me to minimize the risk. As stated before, I make use of the jack lines, tether, PFD/harness, life lines; man overboard kit (throw-able device), lines led aft and anything else I can put on the boat to make it safer. It does not eliminate risk.

What is on your list of safety items on the boat? How have you prioritized these things? Where are they? Do you forget about them from time to time? Staying on the boat is not on the list but it's certainly the first issue. Cover that one and lots of the other issues don't have a chance to develop into a problem.