

## Staying Safe on the Water (from page 9)

Enhancing this technique with a simple trash bag will extend survival time even longer.

A 3-mil contractor's grade bag can be slipped on over the feet and works like a "poor man's wetsuit". Instead of heating the whole ocean, your body warms only the water in the bag. Trash bags are lightweight, take up little room, and can be stowed easily in or on a life vest. Many brands of vests have pockets that will accommodate a large bag. If yours doesn't, use rubber bands or zip ties to secure a bag to your vest.

Get entirely inside the bag, including arms, elbows, and the lower lobes of the life vest, with just your head exposed. It is not a perfect solution, you will still lose heat to the water. However, because of the reduced surface area of skin exposed to the water, this technique can keep body core temperatures elevated far longer compared to other techniques.

You cannot effectively move in the HELP position, but saving energy is the point. Minimizing movement also will keep water from sloshing in and out of the bag and wasting heat. Stay in the HELP position inside the bag and just go with the flow.

In general, the warmest part of the water column is usually the 12 inches. Depending on the body of water and the conditions the difference in the temperature between the first foot of water and your feet can be more than five degrees Fahrenheit. That is a critical amount. A one- or two-degree difference can mean life or death. This is why the HELP technique is so beneficial: It keeps the person in the warmest part of the water and minimizes movement.

Contractor's bags are most often black, restricting visibility to rescuers, so consider investing in a large Halloween/pumpkin style orange leaf bag. This tip may be the most important and easiest survival advice for boaters and anglers. Bring a trash bag or two with you on any trip, land or water.

If you are immersed with multiple survivors, the recommended group hypothermia mitigation technique is the Carpet Formation. The Carpet Formation allows the body core to float at the surface where the water is warmer. Survivors link arms to those on either side and interlock their legs with the person across from them to share as much body heat as possible. (Give a right leg, take a right leg.) Grab the feet from the person



**The HELP technique by adopting a fetal position can lessen heat loss. Also, a 3-mil or thicker contractor's grade trash bag can be slipped on over the feet and works like a "poor man's wetsuit"**



**The Carpet Formation, whether it's two survivors or twenty, is the best technique to conserve energy and live longer.**

in front of you and put their feet on your chest. To avoid wasting heat, don't let feet/legs dangle.

There are a number of excellent benefits to this particular formation. The position is comfortable, energy is saved, and survivors can last far longer. Because there are so many points of contact it keeps the group together, which raises morale. In fact, multiple members of the group can fall asleep or go unconscious and still keep the formation together.

This formation also makes a larger target for rescuers to find. It is much easier to see 3 to 5 people huddled together making a big blob on the surface than to try and find five little heads poking above the waves spreading away from each other.

The Carpet allows for 360-degree skyward visibility, which means survivors can keep watch for rescue vessels or aircraft.

It also creates a platform for an injured survivor or someone without a life vest to rest on. Though this person is not fully out of the water they can be "floated" by the rest of the group.

The Carpet is recommended above other group formations. There is an older US military technique called the "Huddle" or "Star" formation in which survivors float vertically in the water, interlocking arms to form a big circle. However, this puts people in a position where the trunk of the body and legs are in a colder section of the water column; body

heat is not utilized. In the Huddle when just one person goes unconscious, the entire formation begins to break down and scatter survivors.

### About the author...

**Ben Rayner is a former underwater-egress and sea-survival instructor. He is also an award-winning investigative journalist as senior staff writer at Shore Publishing in Madison, Connecticut. His articles and features have seen print in a wide variety of publications, including *Sailing magazine*, *Air Beat magazine*, *Atlantic Coast Fisheries News*, and the *Block Island Times*.**

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