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# Rescuing the Rescuers

When a drowning or other traumatic incident happens, your staff needs a cool hand and a practiced plan to get through it. Here's how to make sure you're ready when the time comes.

Your lifeguards turned out a top-notch performance. They made a major rescue. The victim has been cared for and now the staff needs your attention. You know the backboard needs to go back on the wall, and where to find dry clothes, but what can you do for your shook-up staff? You can handle this difficult situation confidently if you plan for debriefing.

To start, that means making debriefing part of your emergency action plan. Do not just tack the word "debriefing" to the bottom of your plan. When the time comes, and your heart is racing, you will want some clear guidelines. Know, and use, the

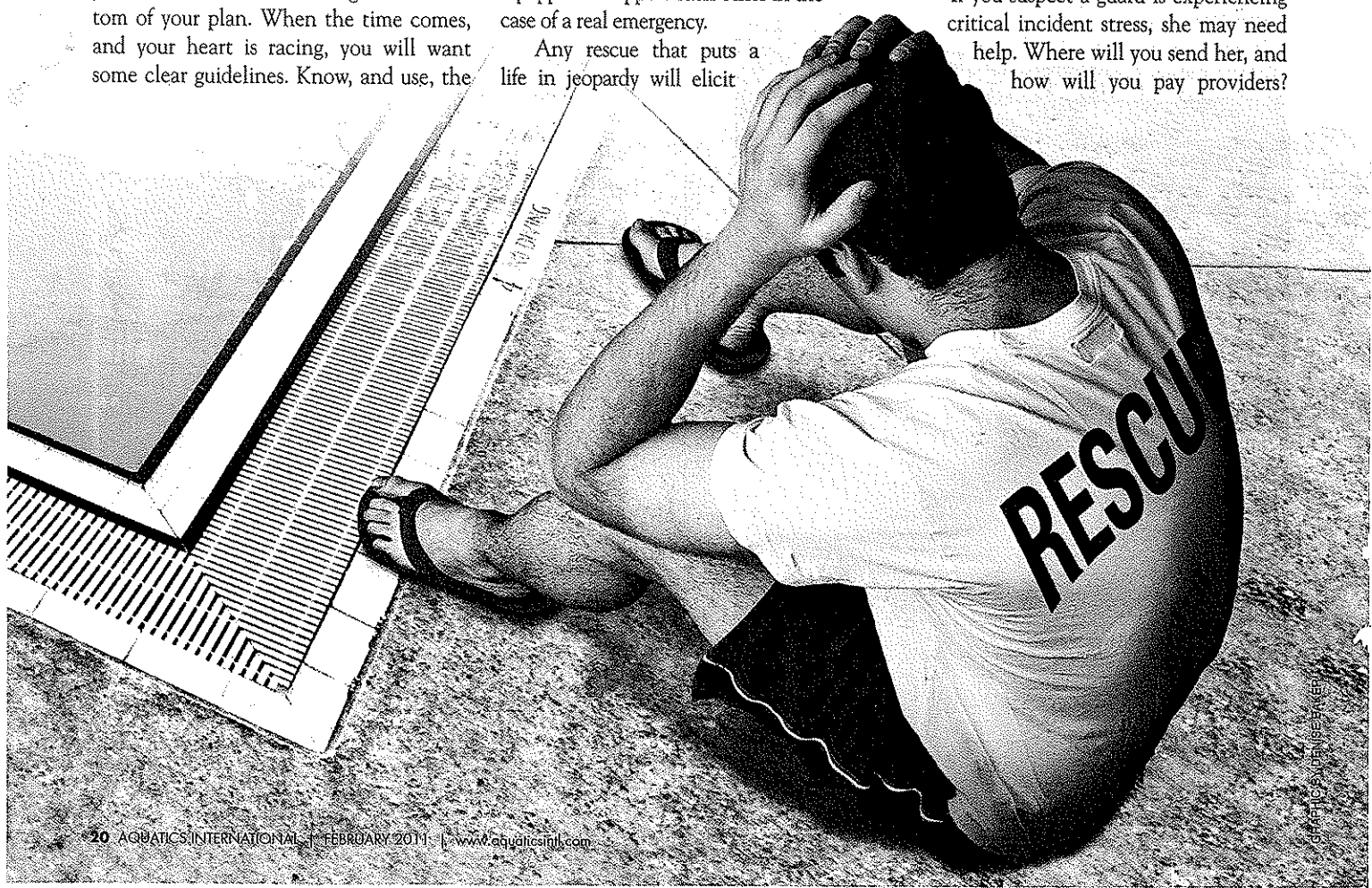
recommendations of your training agency and the advice that follows. Write each step in your EAP.

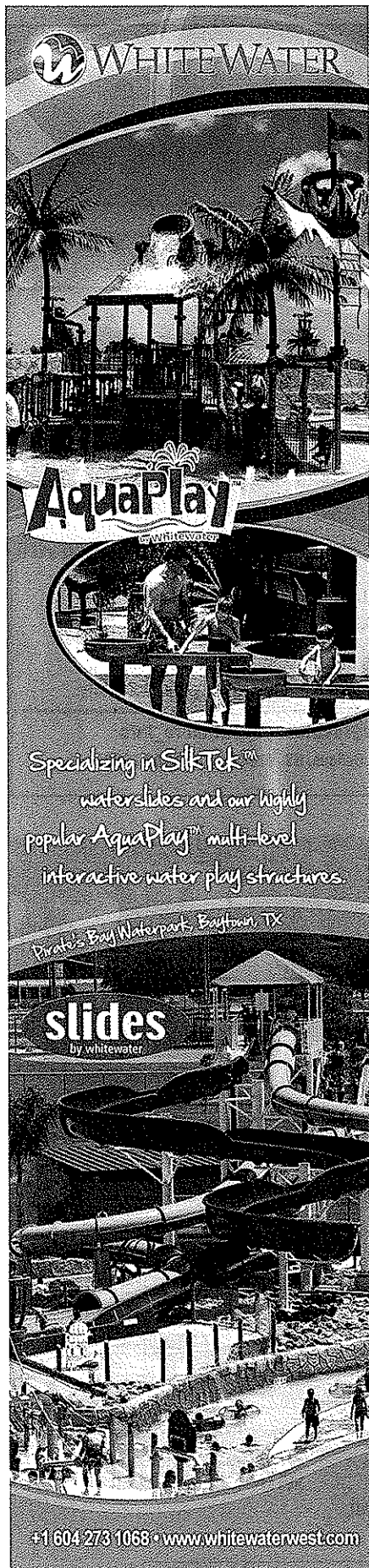
Practice at in-service. At the end of a mock rescue, have everyone assess what went right and wrong, how it could have gone better, and how everyone felt about the rescue. Let your staff get comfortable talking to each other, analyzing effective choices and actions, and learning from one another. A team that trusts one another will be better equipped to support each other in the case of a real emergency.

Any rescue that puts a life in jeopardy will elicit

strong emotions from a lifeguard, regardless of how well he performed. After dealing with a major incident, sometimes responders feel the effects of critical incident stress. You and your team should know the symptoms. They include any behavior that is out of character, but particularly confusion or a hard time concentrating, denial or guilt, depression or anger, or changes to appetite and social interactions, unusual quietness or excessive humor.

If you suspect a guard is experiencing critical incident stress, she may need help. Where will you send her, and how will you pay providers?





## RISK MANAGEMENT

Someone already on staff, such as a pastor or counselor, might play a role. An existing employee assistance program might work. Identify the unique resources of your community, and work with management to make sure they are accessible.

Make healthy stress relief part of the work culture at your facility. Encourage lifeguards to drink enough water, get fresh air on breaks and exercise. Many are juggling work with school, sports, family or another job. They need these skills now as much as after a rescue.

Communicate your plan to your team. Stress management tips, signs of critical incident stress and available resources should all be a part of your guards' initial training, and in your aquatics handbook.

Even with planning, it will be a stressful time after a real incident. Frazzled lifeguards need your support. The media may be knocking. You will have many important decisions to make. First, though, everyone needs to take a time out.

Immediately following an incident, your team needs time (about an hour) to absorb the events. Let them take a walk, or offer to buy coffee. Let them talk to each other, about anything, before moving forward. Then decide whether to debrief now, or at the end of the day, according to your team's needs.

Now you are ready to debrief. Essentially, debriefing is a meeting with your staff after an incident. Debriefing should answer six questions: What happened? What did and did not work in your EAP? What will help avoid a similar situation in the future? What was the emotional response? What is critical incident stress? What resources are available for your staff?

Get your team together at your pre-arranged meeting place. Tell them your goals: to get information and deal with stress. Assure them the meeting is confidential. Give everyone a chance to speak, but do not require it.

Guide the discussion so it stays informative and supportive. This is not a chance for everyone to say, "Jimmy didn't get the AED fast enough." You might conclude that it took too long to get the AED, but perhaps it was too far away. Use the

collective wisdom of the group to determine which changes to make in your plan, or its execution.

One guard might find that her training came right to her when she needed it, even though before she felt shaky about her skills. That is incredibly empowering. Another may fail to see that by getting his swim-lesson kids out of the pool quickly, he made it possible for the rescuers to work efficiently. That is a major contribution. Recognize all the successes.

As the discussion winds down, remind your staff of the signs of critical incident stress, where to find more help if they need it, and healthy stress relief techniques. A handout with this information makes it easy. If you are reopening the pool, make sure everyone is ready to be out there.

When the meeting is over, your job is not over. You have some important tasks in the next few weeks.

Your staff needs your ongoing support. Make time for them to talk to you privately, and listen. Let them know that you are proud of them. Acknowledge their dedication and skill. Keep aware for signs of critical incident stress.

A guard may need to take a break from lifeguarding or choose not to return to the stand at all. Is there somewhere else in your organization that he can work? Another may renew her commitment to saving lives, and enroll in paramedic training. Everyone reacts differently. Allow each guard to choose his or her own path.

Finally, assess the incident honestly. What worked in your EAP and what did not? What needs to change? Did you prepare your staff well enough? Do you need to address any performance issues? Integrate what you have learned.

While you care for your staff, and plan to prevent future accidents, don't forget to care for yourself. This is a trying time for you, too, so pat yourself on the back, and use the resources you worked hard to put together. ■

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