

Narcosis rears its ugly head

William Trubridge writes:

After switching from the Minima to Kerian's fluid goggles and suddenly being able to equalise as deep as I cared to go, I decided to start doing a few dives in Free Immersion to mix it up a bit from the CNF training.

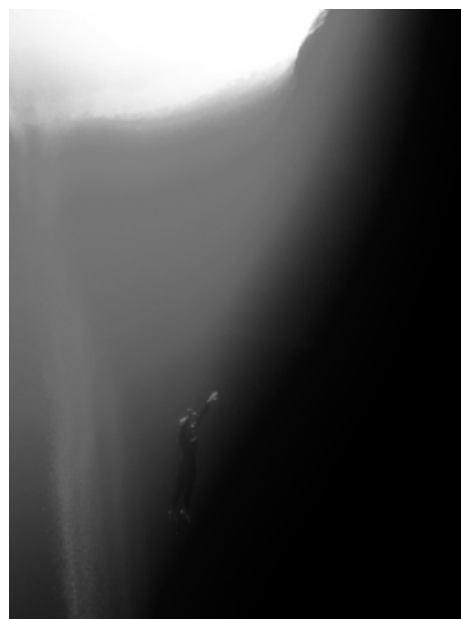
A couple of attempts took me into the 3 digit numbers and suddenly a monster that I thought I had dealt with back in 2006 jumped out from under my bed. Carbon dioxide narcosis can be a pleasant, relaxing and soporific sensation, but in its most extreme cases it becomes surreal and alarming. It is accentuated by the no-warmup style of diving that I employ as well as the lower light levels deep down in the Blue Hole.

The general sensation is of becoming more and more detached from your body, and an affected vision which can become hallucination. On a recent dive during the ascent I am watching my hands come up past my face, grab the line, then pull past me as the other hand crosses for its stroke. To relax I close my eyes... and see exactly the same thing. To make sure I squeeze my eyes closed so that I can feel the eyelids pressing against each other, then open and shut them but it makes no difference to what I see, which is a hallucination of what my body is doing.

Today I spent 14" below 100m, and when I turned I knew straight away that I was in for a ride. Very quickly the narcosis became overpowering and for the first time I worried about a deep water blackout caused by excessive ppCO₂. Slightly alarmed I began pulling harder on the rope, ensuring at the same time that the rest of my body is kept relaxed. At these depths if you panic and try to get to the surface as quick as possible then you will use all your oxygen long before you even reach your safety diver.

Now my vision is starting to white out completely, and this is something that I have never encountered before, which worries me further still. Suddenly out of the whiteness there is a human form, that of my safety diver Julie Gautier, and I wonder if I am hallucinating that as well, then I am on the surface, recovering and doing the safety protocol. The narcosis has stayed with me all the way to the surface, and the whiteness that I thought was my vision closing over was just the returning light of day.

I first experienced when I passed 60m CNF in Dahab in 2005. These days I have done so many dives in the 80's that I don't experience narcosis until past 90m, but it will be a while before I develop any kind of tolerance to the extreme level of exposure I am experiencing in a 100m+ dive.



Guillaume Nery writes:

Narcosis in freediving can be our friend or our worst enemy. The first time I experienced this phenomenon was in VWT dive to about 80m in 2001. At this period I was able to dive around 70m in constant and I decided to dive at least 10m deeper because I was assisted by the sled and because I didn't have equalisation problems. I thought it wouldn't be a problem. But the depth is not just a question of time and equalisation, it's also a problem of narcosis. This dive was one of my worst dives ever. At the bottom, it was as if the cable was moving around, my mind was not clear at all and I was narked until the first breath.

Fortunately most of the time narcosis is a better experience. In CWT, I can feel it over the 80m when I am not that trained and over the 95/100m when I am close to a record or a competition. "Narcosis is the salt of freediving" Julie Gautier (girlfriend of Guillaume and french record holder in constant weight -65m) says. I feel surrounded by cotton, I feel comfortable and I don't need to breathe. The limit between good and bad narcosis is very thin so it's important to keep quiet and to appreciate this sensation. It's very hard trying to understand the reason of narcosis. Why is it stronger today than yesterday? Why can it be stronger at a shallower depth? There are just many reasons to explain narcosis: depth, time at depth, cold, fatigue, dehydration, etc etc..

The easiest way to avoid bad narcosis is to improve step by step, to respect the adaptation of your body and to listen to your sensations.

You guys stay safe down there! Will you be trying for the WR in FIM, Will?

by *DN* on 2008-03-22 21:03:48

Stay alive, Will. You are mortal. rnrnPS. Haluccinating about Julie Gautier is totally normal.

by *Sebastian* on 2008-03-27 04:51:24