



BATTLEFIELD BOAT

The weather forecast might be all clear, but when there are storms brewing on deck, even the most pleasant of cruises can turn into a marital marine minefield

BY DIANE SELKIRK

WITH A CLANG AND A RATTLE THE ANCHOR WAS DOWN and the accusations started. “We’re too near that blue boat.” I told my husband Evan. “If you’d listened to me we’d be fine.” This was countered with Evan pointing out (not too nicely I might add) that my driving had left something to desired and the boat was nowhere near where he wanted it to be.

Most of the time we anchor without issue (which is good, considering we’ve been out cruising for the past two years and at anchor for most of it). But anchoring, along with breakdowns, storm management, scheduling delays and surprise expenses tends to bring out the worst in our marriage—and we’re not alone.

At a recent yacht club potluck the conversation turned to the trials of boating. A few people claimed that weathering gales or dealing with mechanical failures are the toughest issues they contend with, but the consensus was that the biggest boating challenge is coping with your partner. “It’s not like

you can go for a walk and clear your head,” one long time motorboat owner explained. “You’re stuck listening to them, no matter how wrong they are.”

“There are lots of good reasons why boating can bring out the worst in a couple,” Janna Cawrse Esarey, author of *The Motion of the Ocean: 1 Small Boat, 2 Average Lovers, & a Woman’s Search for the Meaning of Wife* (Simon & Schuster) says. “For starters, let’s just be honest about one thing: Boating can be dangerous. It’s a real-life endeavour with real-life consequences.”

Cawrse Esarey discovered just how hard boating is on a couple when she and her husband set off across the Pacific on ▶



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their honeymoon. Before they left they were told if their marriage could survive the voyage, it could survive anything. This turned out to be true—but she had no idea just how difficult things would get before they began to improve. “The things that make boating so challenging—and sometimes bring out the worst in us—are the same things that make boating so rewarding—and also bring out the best in us,” she said. “Fear requires compassion. Break-downs both mechanical and emotional require patience. Changing conditions require flexibility. Mistakes require forgiveness.”

CLEAR COMMUNICATION That transition—from worst to best self, where we actually work in-sync with our spouse rather than in opposition—

BREAKDOWNS, BOTH MECHANICAL AND EMOTIONAL, REQUIRE PATIENCE

takes work. “Communication, always a challenge, is even more crucial when in stressful situations,” explains Jan Harrell, PhD, co-author of *Love Again—Creating Relationships Without Blame* (Inner Peace Press). She says our differences (which are typically why we were attracted to our partner in the first place) mean that each person will have their own solution to a problem. “Most of the time, each person’s idea would work out just fine—just differently.”

“Regardless of how similar or well-matched a couple is they pay attention to different details,” Harrell says, which leads to different opinions. And those differences can be shocking, she explains, “We tend to expect our spouse to be just like we are, and it’s our differences that can lead to hurt or anger.”

Harrell offers some concrete tips for improved on board communication:

1. Assess who has which strengths. When both members of the couple are equally skilled it may work well to take turns being captain. But, it’s important to keep in

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mind that getting our way in non-essential decisions is less important than working as a team.

2. Have a morning meeting to talk about plans and expectations for the trip. Identify the decisions that will be faced that day. If a crisis occurs, agree that whoever is captain that particular day will be the decision maker.
3. Have an evening meeting to assess how things went. Have each person assess what they could have done differently to make the day even better.
4. In the moment when a decision needs to be made, if there is no crisis, look at the options. Each person can share their ideas and engage in a creative problem solving process together. Think "team," there is no "i" in crew.

BETTER BOATING While any relationship can benefit from improved communication, some boating relationships may require even more help. Especially when there is an imbalance and one person is much more skilled or confident than the other.

Inexperienced boaters are not only unsure about what's required of them, they may also not know what is normal or what is dangerous. So when the wind blows, something breaks or conditions change they can experience fear. The easiest way to combat this fear is knowledge. But depending on the dynamic, asking questions or trying to learn from your spouse may not work.

"I've met women who have boated with their husbands for 30 years and they still don't know how to turn on the engine," says Marla Hedman, an instructor with Cooper Boating. She explains this leads to an unequal dynamic where the women can be left feeling insecure, her husband can become domineering and arguments occur. "Teamwork keeps people safe on board, while arguing takes attention away from the safety of the boat and the crew."

Hedman suggests that lessons or personal coaching can really help. "When all members of the team know how to do all aspects of boat handling; docking, navigation, sail trim, manoeuvring under sail, it builds trust, companionship and admiration for each other," she said.

Taking lessons, or trying to develop new skills, can be challenging for a couple though. Hedman says one of the pitfalls comes when the partner >

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BOAT BETTER TOGETHER

1 In a calm setting (or with a coach) make a list of the high-stress, argument provoking moments on your boat.

2 Brainstorm the root of each problem. Do you need clearer communication, does one partner need more experience, does one person need to take charge?

3 Run through the scenarios and see what needs to change—when we anchor we have simple hand signals we use, but on our anchoring argument day we had been lazy about using them.

4 Plan in advance how you will tackle the problem in the future. Cawrse Esarey and her husband solved their docking conflicts by analyzing conditions aloud—wind direction, wind speed, current, that huge luxury yacht they wanted to avoid—as well as the specific strategy for those conditions.

5 Saying “I told you so” feels great in the moment, but it undermines all your other hard work when it comes to communication. And honestly, your spouse already figured out that reducing scope so you could fit in a tight anchorage was a bad idea.

6 Accept that stuff happens, things break and you’re in it together. Blame doesn’t fix what happened when your partner mixed up the throttle and the gear shift, but compassion may encourage them to keep boating.



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that is most keen, or has the most experience, starts telling the less secure partner what to do, rather than letting that person try the task on their own—letting them fail, or succeed on their own terms.

As an instructor, Hedman says she has her students explain aloud the task they are being taught and “review the steps on their own, no partner interrupting them.” Then she gets them to begin the task, talking themselves through, coaching them further as needed. Finally she asks them do a critique of how they did and where they see they might need more information. Meanwhile, she says, “I am very specific in assigning the partner his or her own responsibilities.”

BECOMING A TEAM It sounds simple—if we know what we’re doing aboard and communicate our thoughts clearly, boating will be more fun. But as Evan and I argued about our anchoring predicament, it took one of us to quit with the accusations and say, “I could have done that better,” before the solution could kick in. This turned out to be the rela-

LEFT Talking through high stress scenarios beforehand can help solve problems before they start.

tively simple task of moving over two boat lengths. But even after sailing together for 25 years we still need to work at being a team.

Part of our challenge is what Cawrse Esarey calls a “misalignment of expectation.” Simply put, people enjoy boating for different reasons. Some are in it for the travel, the natural beauty, or the quality time. While others are looking to maximize speed, try out new gadgets, or test their skills. And the goal can change from day to day.

“I remember the time my husband convinced me to do a Jack-and-Jill race by saying we could check the kids with the grandparents,” Cawrse Esarey says. “I had a vision of kid-free tranquility, cheese and crackers in the cockpit, conversation. I forgot this was a race.” The day ended in a spat until Cawrse Esarey discovered they’d won the first leg. “The second day, I was as obsessed with tweaking the sails as he was,” she said.

Most couples take up boating as a way to enhance their relationship and spend time together—but when the boat becomes a battlefield we miss out on all the benefits. “But when we boat well together, we enact our best selves,”

Cawrse Esarey says. And we do this not by avoiding the trials and pitfalls (bad weather, breakdowns and anchorages are going to happen), “but by moving through these challenges and learning from them, together.” ☛

FOR MORE INFO

Janna Cawrse Esarey is the author of *The Motion of the Ocean: 1 Small Boat, 2 Average Lovers, and a Woman’s Search for the Meaning of Wife* (Simon & Schuster). A humorous, true story of a couple that sails across the Pacific on their honeymoon, only to find their relationship heading for the rocks. Watch the book trailer at www.byjanna.com.

Marla Hedman Canadian Yachting Association Sailing Instructor PCOC, ICC, CPSS, CYA power and sail. Coaches and instructs for the yacht charter and sailing school company Cooper Boating www.cooperboating.com.

Jan Harrell, PhD, co-author *Love Again—Creating Relationships Without Blame*, www.InnerPeacePress.com. The book is available on Kindle.



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