



ASK DR. DEBBIE...

By Debra A. Hill, MD

HOLIDAY STRESS AND DIVING...

STRESS is a regular part of our everyday lives, but around the holidays it is certainly magnified by the additional demands put on our schedules with parties, shopping and gatherings with family and friends. We may find ourselves drinking more coffee to stay awake to wrap gifts, consuming more alcohol at parties, eating more and trying to meet the needs of many close to us.

Those of us who love diving and entering the calm of the sea may be daydreaming about the chance to dive and looking for any opportunity between work and grabbing an appetizer at Trader Joe's to bring to the party that you have only 30 minutes to get to after work in stop-and-go traffic. And you might be "lucky" to squeeze in a Saturday morning beach dive after the "Friday night work party till midnight, the Thursday night up till 2:00 a.m. finishing a report due at work that you started writing after you got home at 10:00pm from your kid's school holiday program, and all you've eaten all week is fast food, protein bars and diet coke."

My big wake-up call was when I didn't wake up in time-and I missed my connecting flight in Honolulu to Kwajalein

But let me caution you: there is a stress on the body as well as the mind that is easy to overlook that could turn a sought-after dive into a potentially dangerous situation.

I am reminded of my recent experience of a last minute opportunity to join my husband in Kwajalein over Thanksgiving Week for some awesome warm water diving. My big wake-up call was when I didn't wake up in time—and I missed my connecting flight in Honolulu to Kwajalein because I'd been so overtired from several late nights working, and getting gear, video

equipment and all of the rest packed for the trip. I should have been up at 4:00 a.m. on my way to the airport to catch the 6:55 a.m. flight to Kwajalein—that leaves only every other day. But, I opened my eyes to look at the clock at 7:00 a.m.! I was crushed!

I was forced to wake up to reality and accept that I'd pushed myself beyond my limits and had to slow down and embrace the fact that I wasn't going to make it to be with my husband to go diving on Thanksgiving Day in Kwajalein

as I'd thought I could miraculously do. I called Continental Airlines in a panic—somehow still expecting that maybe I could get on an Aloha Airlines flight and still get there in time. But no, Aloha no longer flies there. Continental is it. So, they kindly offered the best they could to get me there as soon as possible which was: a 9.5 hour flight to Nagoya, Japan, then 3.5 hours to Guam, an 8-hour layover in Guam from midnight to 8:00 a.m., then 5.5 hours flight to Kwajalein via stops in Truk, Pohnpei, and Kosrae, before arriving in Kwajalein. I had a price to pay in terms of flying time and more exhaustion and just feeling like a total twit.

I realized once I was on the flight to Japan that I had to refocus and try to enjoy the adventure of the journey rather than put myself down and feel impatient. There was nothing more I could do. The flights and journey were going to unfold as they would—and I might as well enjoy the journey. It was time to stop being so focused on getting to Kwaj to dive on Thanksgiving Day with my husband. So, I sat back and began to appreciate everything around me. I enjoyed listening to another language being spoken – Japanese – and found that even though I didn't know the language I could get a sense of the tone of the exchange between the people and could imagine what they might be thinking about. The airport in Japan was the cleanest airport I've ever been in and the people were very helpful and polite.

Guam felt like home; especially when I got off the plane and saw the big welcome sign in the airport saying, "Welcome to the United States." And well, the airports in Truk, Pohnpei, and Kosrae were familiar as we'd gone through them – but the other direction from Kwaj – a couple of years ago when we went to Truk for Christmas. It was actually fun to spend about 30 minutes in the Kosrae airport as there were a few locals selling their famous green tangerines—a coveted item on Kwaj. So I bought a few bags of them to give to our friends on Kwaj—and

they were much appreciated.

All the while during this odyssey, I kept humming in my mind the song that goes, "Ain't no mountain high enough [...] to keep me from getting to you..." When I arrived in Kwaj, I sang this to my husband and he laughed, saying that he'd been humming the same tune the past 24 hours while waiting for me to arrive. I guess our internal ipods were in synchronicity. How romantic! I arrived in Kwaj on Friday, November 26th (after having left LAX on Tuesday –remember we cross the date line and so lose a day—so you can see why I didn't want to wait two days to take the next 6:55 a.m. flight from Hono to Kwaj) instead of 11:35 a.m. on Thursday, Thanksgiving Day. I missed a day of diving, but I realized that I needed to "amp down" rather than "amp up."

It was a good thing that my mistake was "above water" and not underwater. So, I encourage you all to slow down, enjoy the journey through the holidays and spend time with family and your dive friends, too – above water. There's plenty of time to dive and it's smarter to do so when well rested and not over stressed. We did eventually get to dive – clear warm water and even a school of eight parrot fish. Awesome! But this was all after a good long rest, and some great turkey!

Happy and Safe Diving Everyone!

Happy Holidays!

Yours Truly,

Debbie Hill Titus, MD