

The Ten Commandments of Effective Lifeguarding

The Ten Commandments of Effective Lifeguarding is a lifeguard training resource for swim clubs, summer camps, YMCAs and water parks... really any place with a lifeguard. Understanding, embracing, and following these simple lifeguarding tips will make any pool much safer.



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LIFEGUARDS

Leave cell phones, iPods, magazines and all other external distractions at home.

NO TEXTING

A responsible lifeguard will avoid all distractions. Most people agree that distractions of any kind are detrimental to effective lifeguarding, so why do we continue to find so many reports of lifeguards texting and reading while on duty?

Lifeguard Texting In The News

We know that lifeguards do amazing and often selfless work, but these stories are a major black eye for guards all around the world.

- **Texts From the Lifeguard Chair** – NYTimes.com
- **Injured Diver Neglected by Texting Lifeguard** – CultureOfSafety.com



Preventing Lifeguard Distractions

Institute a Zero Tolerance Policy

No *Aquatics Director* or *Lifeguard Supervisor* would tolerate a lifeguard chatting face-to-face with his or her friends for an entire shift. That same level of intolerance is necessary when it comes to guards text messaging or reading while on duty. We highly recommend instituting a strict, one-and-done policy. Any lifeguard caught text messaging while on duty should be terminated immediately. No excuses.

Remove All Temptations

While text messaging is the hot topic with lifeguarding right now, there are countless distractions in pools across the country. More and more pools have decided to play music in or around the pool. Music is great, but lifeguards should NEVER have the ability to change or adjust the music selections. We all know that changing a single song can often lead to creating a new playlist, which can often lead to becoming the pool DJ. Don't even give lifeguards the chance to be distracted... lock these things behind closed doors.

Suspect a Lifeguard is Texting? Drill Them.

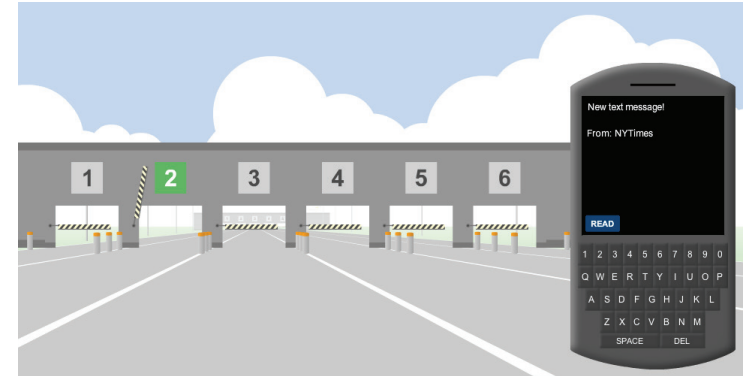
If you suspect a lifeguard is texting, but you're having a hard time proving it, drill them. Toss a dive brick into the pool or have them demonstrate proper water entry technique. If a lifeguard is texting, one of two things will happen... they'll either ruin a perfectly good phone or they'll take the phone out before entering the water. Either way... lesson learned.

Provide Pocketless Lifeguard Attire

All lifeguards should be wearing pool-approved clothing. Next time your facility purchases swimsuits or sweats, make sure the clothing has no pockets. Don't forget about the pouch on sweatshirts! With nowhere to conceal a phone, lifeguards will be less inclined to bring a phone, book, or other distraction with them onto the pool deck.

Empower Patrons and Other Lifeguards

Because a Lifeguard Supervisor can't be everywhere, this is the best, most effective method for curbing distracted lifeguarding. Empower the entire lifeguard crew, and the pool's patrons, to speak up when they suspect a lifeguard is distracted while on duty. After all... lifeguarding and water safety are a community effort.



LIFEGUARDS

Inform other lifeguards and supervisors of weak or problematic swimmers.

IDENTIFY BAD SWIMMERS

As a lifeguard, you should take pride in everything you've been trained to see and hear. When you fail to communicate your observations, you're not only putting your fellow guards at a dramatic disadvantage, you're also putting swimmers at risk.

Recognizing Problematic Swimmers

Recognizing weak or problematic swimmers should be second nature to every lifeguard. As a lifesaving professional, spotting vulnerable or mischievous patrons is your first priority. **If you don't know what to be looking for, or have concerns with what is being asked of you, speak with your supervisor immediately.**

As far as this Lifeguard Commandment is concerned, we're more focused on the importance of communicating your observations effectively as a team.

Opportunities For Communication

Lifeguards must take steps to share their observations with other guards. Fortunately, several opportunities for sharing your observations are built into a typical lifeguard shift.



Lifeguard Rotations

One of the five most important steps of a safe lifeguard rotation is sharing useful information with the other guard. Useful information includes identifying any weak swimmers, swimmers that have been reprimanded for rules violations, or swimmers who appear to be tiring.

In-Service Trainings

Lifeguard rotations and shift changes are a great opportunity to share information where time is of the essence, but are not the proper time to discuss bigger and more long-term ideas. Luckily, lifeguards have in-service trainings... the perfect chance to talk about larger concerns or observations.

Topics of discussion for lifeguard in-services should include lifeguard-to-swimmer ratios, lifeguard stand positions, swim testing procedures, and more.



YONI GOTTESMAN

Yoni drowned because the lifeguard that swim tested him didn't tell other lifeguards that he was a weak swimmer. **Read his story.**

LIFEGUARDS

Fine-tune lifesaving and water rescue skills regularly; take training seriously.

IN-SERVICE TRAINING

When athletes come off of the bench, they are expected to step in and do their best to salvage a difficult situation. When lifeguards come off of the bench though, they are expected to perform at the highest level possible right away. There is no time to learn on the fly, a life may depend on it.

The Lifeguard Training Conundrum

A lifeguard's number one job is preventing water-related emergencies. When a lifeguard does their job effectively, however, they spend very little time putting their water entry and lifesaving skills to use. The lifeguard conundrum is... if practice makes perfect, and a good lifeguard prevents every opportunity to practice, what happens when an accident that can't be prevented occurs?

Because you don't have the luxury of honing your lifesaving and rescue skills while on-duty, **lifeguards absolutely must take in-service trainings seriously**; it is the only way to ensure you're prepared to answer the call of duty when a swimmer is in distress.

Lifeguard In-Service Training

In-service trainings are the ideal time for lifeguards to:

Make Mistakes

Lifeguards should be encouraged to make mistakes during in-service trainings. Allow guards to demonstrate each skill completely before offering constructive feedback. If a lifeguard makes any mistakes while demonstrating a lifesaving technique or a water entry skill, offer suggestions or critiques, and require that they demonstrate the skill again.

Ask Questions

Every in-service training should start with an opportunity for lifeguards to ask questions or raise concerns. They are the ones “in the field”, and as such, have the greatest sense of the opportunities for improvement with an aquatics program.

Communication is a very, very important part of lifeguarding, but it is understandable if some lifeguards are reluctant to ask questions in front of their peers. Consider implementing an anonymous question box for your lifeguard crew to use.

Practice Working as a Team

Regardless of whether you have a single-guard pool, or a crew of twenty or more lifeguards, working as a team is of the utmost importance. Guards must communicate effectively during lifeguard rotations, during rescues, and during in-services. In-service trainings are a great time to identify which guards should contact EMS, which guards should clear the pool, and which guards should take the lead during a rescue.

Work on Conditioning

Lifeguards should spend time in the water during every in-service training. In addition to performing water rescues, lifeguards should also spend time conditioning. Lap swimming, brick drills, and treading water are all good conditioning exercises.

If a guard struggles through any portion of the conditioning exercises, it may be necessary to pull them from the schedule until they are better suited to handle the physical rigors of water rescue.

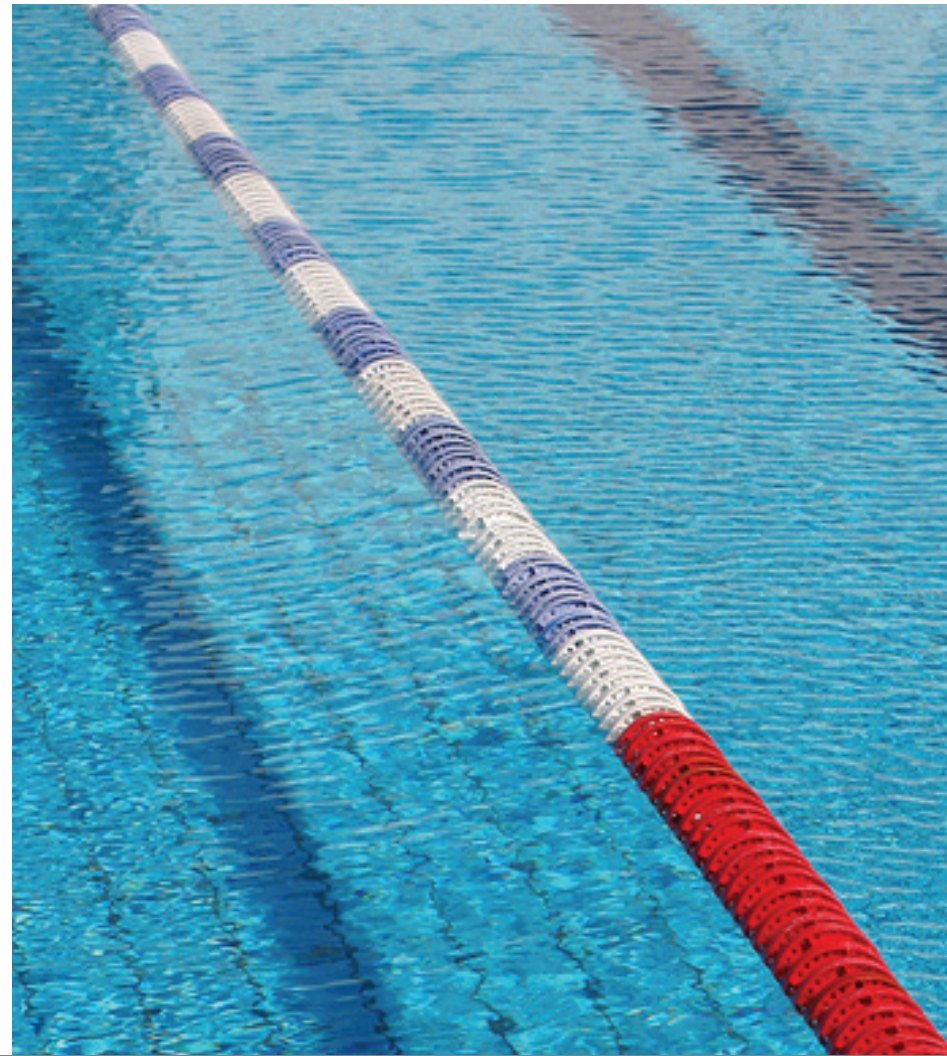
LIFE GUARDS

Educate swimmers of the dangers of extreme breath holding and shallow water blackout.

SHALLOW WATER BLACKOUT

Shallow water blackout is a loss of consciousness caused by a reduced supply of oxygen to the brain. It is often related to hyperventilation, which is a series of long, deep breaths designed to decrease the amount of carbon dioxide in the blood.

Hyperventilation is a dangerous technique often used by competitive swimmers and divers in order to hold their breath longer. Without the appropriate levels of carbon dioxide, the body fails to recognize the need for oxygen as it traditionally does. Swimmers that hyperventilate develop something called hypocapnia and reach the blackout zone before experiencing the normal urge to breathe.



Who Is Affected By Shallow Water Blackout?

Shallow water blackouts can affect anyone at anytime. Victims typically have no prior medical problems, are physically fit, and give no warning. It is usually associated with individuals who are either participating in breath holding contests or are performing underwater distance swimming. Recently a series of deaths of young, healthy, athletic males aged 15 to 26 demonstrated the dangers of shallow water blackouts; each were engaging in underwater breath-holding contests and were all found dead at the bottom of the shallow end of the pool.

For these reasons, lifeguards should be trained to stop **ALL** activities in which a swimmer is trying to hold their breath for an extended period of time, regardless of the swimmers physical fitness or expertise.

Prevention Strategies

Shallow water blackout can be difficult to spot, but is easy to prevent. All you need to do is:

1. Institute and enforce a ban on any prolonged, repeated, and competitive breath holding activities.
2. Train lifeguards on the dangers of hyperventilation and shallow water blackout.
3. Inform parents and swimmers why breath-holding activities are not allowed.
4. Understand that any strenuous exercise performed underwater drastically decreases the amount of time a swimmer can stay submerged.
5. Never hesitate; if a swimmer is sitting motionless on the bottom of the pool pull them out immediately. Better safe than sorry.

LIFE GUARDS

Guard while on duty; secondary responsibilities are for later.

SECONDARY RESPONSIBILITIES

Prioritizing the wide array of lifeguarding responsibilities can be made much easier by distinguishing between primary responsibilities and secondary responsibilities. And distinguishing between the two isn't difficult because all lifeguards have one primary responsibility.

A Lifeguard's Primary Responsibility

The primary responsibility of a lifeguard is to ensure patron safety. Any other task a lifeguard may be asked to complete should be considered a secondary or tertiary responsibility, and, therefore, should never take precedence over water surveillance.

Secondary Responsibilities

While every lifeguard has the same primary responsibility, secondary responsibilities will vary widely from one pool to the next. Here are some tasks that you may be asked to complete at your pool:

- Check rescue equipment
- Perform swim testing
- Test water chemistry
- Empty trash bins
- Maintain locker rooms
- Complete incident reports
- Answer patron questions
- Reprimand trouble makers
- Provide basic first-aid
- Clean the pool deck

You'll recognize that many of these tasks on the previous page can have an immediate impact on swimmer safety. Most can be delayed until the end of your surveillance shift, but some may require immediate attention.

Take, for example, your responsibility for testing water chemistry. What if you notice that the pool water is so cloudy that you can no longer see to the bottom of the pool? You should clear the pool any time you need to complete a secondary responsibility in order to better protect swimmers. In this instance, the cloudy water is making it impossible for you to achieve your primary responsibility of keeping swimmers safe. Immediately clear the pool, do a thorough scan of the pool bottom, then you can shift focus from swimmer safety to water chemistry.

Stand Strong

There may come a time when someone tries to get you to take your eye off of the water; maybe it'll be a child that lost a toy, or a swimmer complaining about the water temperature, or maybe even a fellow lifeguard just trying to catch up on the latest gossip.

In all of these situations you should feel empowered to explain that unless their question or concern immediately impacts swimmer safety, they'll need to wait until your surveillance shift is complete, or they'll need to find another staff member.

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From The American Red Cross
“The primary responsibility of a lifeguard is to ensure patron safety and protect lives.”

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LIFEGUARDS

Uphold pool rules consistently and fairly.

ENFORCE POOL RULES

Pool rules are important. They help protect swimmers from the most common water- and pool-related injuries, and they also make a lifeguard's job easier. Pool rules lose their effectiveness, however, when a lifeguard fails to uphold the rules consistently with all swimmers.

Know All of the Rules

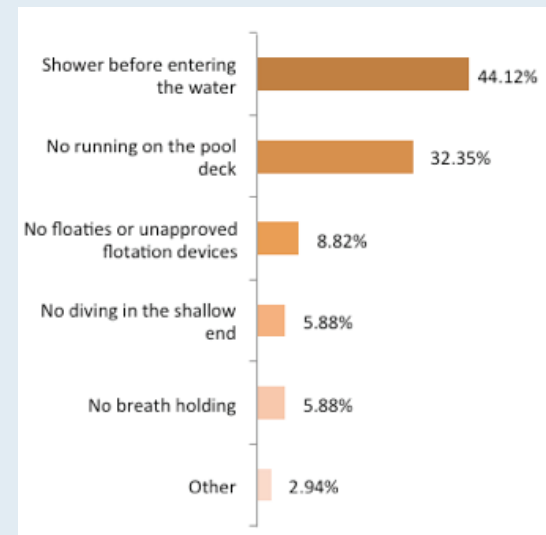
Every lifeguard needs to know every pool rule. If a single lifeguard forgets a particular rule, swimmers may view that as leniency, which may make it difficult for other lifeguards to successfully enforce the same rule at a later time.

The timeless “but that lifeguard didn't stop us from {insert dangerous activity here}” can be a frustrating interaction for even the most patient and experienced guard. In-service trainings are a great time to remind lifeguards of each of the pool's rules.



WHAT IS THE MOST DIFFICULT RULE TO ENFORCE?

We asked visitors to our website which pool rule they feel is the hardest to enforce. Here's what they said:



Treat Everyone Equally

It isn't always easy to treat every swimmer the same. If you've worked at the pool for a long time you'll develop a rapport with some swimmers, and perhaps even learn which swimmers can handle themselves and which cannot.

Over time, you may become tempted to allow a member of the swim team to dive in the shallow end. Or you may be tempted to allow a fellow lifeguard to practice breath-holding techniques. These actions compromise your ability to effectively enforce the rules. Always treat swimmers equally.

Know Why The Rules Exist

Before any lifeguard can be expected to enforce a pool's rules, they need to know why the rule exists in the first place. A canned response like, "Because I said so" isn't going to fly with today's younger generation. To be truly persuasive and effective, a lifeguard may need to sit down with a swimmer and explain exactly why they need to shower before entering the water, or why a pair of floaties are insufficient for non-swimmers.

You need to remember that swimmers don't spend nearly as much time at the pool as you do; some rules that you think are extremely clear may be confusing or contradictory to pool patrons. If you feel that you are unable to persuasively convince a swimmer of the importance of a rule, speak with your supervisor and discuss your concerns.



LIFEGUARDS

Always be rescue ready; have proper attire, rescue tube and PPE.

BE RESCUE READY

When a lifeguard doesn't have the right tools they can't be rescue ready. And when a lifeguard isn't rescue ready, the safety of everyone around them can be jeopardized. Being rescue ready, however, requires more than just a swimsuit and the right tools.

Key Elements To Being Rescue Ready

Have the Right Mindset

Lifeguarding requires incredible amounts of mental strength, which makes it so important for a guard to start each shift with the right mindset. When a lifeguard is confident in their rescue skills and the lessons learned in in-service trainings, they can approach water surveillance with the right frame of mind.

A lifeguard must also be confident that they are prepared to activate the Emergency Action Plan (EAP), as well as knowing their role during an emergency situation. Scanning the water is tedious. Making a rescue is stressful. Lifeguarding is physically demanding. For all of these reasons, you must always be in the right mindset.



Be Rested and Hydrated

No matter how good of a lifeguard you might be, you can't be rescue ready if you can't keep your eyes open. Because lifeguarding is so physically and mentally demanding, it is extremely important that all lifeguards are hydrated, rested, and energized. Lifeguards should be given every opportunity to hydrate during shifts, and making healthy snacks available during break times is recommended.

Be Dressed to Rescue

Uniforms are extremely important in many careers that operate around life-or-death situations. Firefighters wear clothes that can withstand high temperatures. Soldiers wear clothes that provide camouflage or protection from projectiles. Lifeguards, too, are expected to wear clothes that perform a very specific purpose. On-duty lifeguards should always wear a swimsuit or some other type of clothing that they've successfully demonstrated rescue techniques in.

Have the Right Tools Ready to Use

Once a lifeguard is mentally prepared, hydrated, and dressed to rescue, they need to be sure they have all of the right tools. Simply having the right tools for lifeguarding isn't enough though; guards need to know how to use all of the tools at their disposal, and all of the tools must be in good working condition and easily accessible.



LIFEGUARDS

Recognize, respond and rescue a distressed swimmer in less than 20 seconds.

TWENTY SECOND RESCUE

A swimmer can lose consciousness in as little as 30 seconds, and as long as a swimmer is unconscious, there are no guarantees regarding their safety. The best way to keep all swimmers safe is to recognize a distressed swimmer immediately, then quickly and safely respond, and then, finally, perform the necessary water rescue technique without hesitation.

Recognizing A Distressed Swimmer

An experienced lifeguard knows that distressed swimmers often look and sound nothing like the images we see on TV. Splashing and yelling are extremely helpful indicators for a lifeguard; unfortunately, many swimmers in need of help often slip quickly and quietly underwater.

Lifeguards can easily miss a potential drowning victim anytime they are not actively surveying the water from bottom to top. And even when a lifeguard is providing quality aquatic surveillance, it may be difficult to see all areas of a pool because of strong glare, cloudy pool water, overcrowding, or even a slight breeze rippling over the surface of the water.



WHAT A REAL DROWNING LOOKS LIKE

This video shows you **what a real drowning** will look like. No splashing, no yelling, just quick and silent.

Responding To A Distressed Swimmer

Responding to a distressed swimmer should take up the majority of a lifeguard's 20 seconds. Once a guard has identified that a swimmer is in need of assistance it can be easy to forget some very importance steps along the way.

For example, a lifeguard's first instinct is often to immediately enter the water and rush to the distressed swimmer. Before doing any of this a lifeguard must activate the Emergency Action Plan (EAP) to notify other pool staff that there is a problem. A successful rescue is rarely a one-person job.

It is also important to approach a distressed swimmer, especially an active drowning victim, with extreme caution. An active drowning victim will do anything they can to keep their head above water, so it is important that you approach carefully. If you rush to provide assistance they may attempt to push you under water in an effort to stay alive.

Always approach a distressed swimmer – active or passive – with extreme caution.

Rescuing A Distressed Swimmer

Once a lifeguard has recognized and responded to a distressed swimmer, it is extremely important that they perform the appropriate rescue technique. If there is any reason to believe that a swimmer may have sustained a head, neck, or back injury the responding lifeguard should perform the applicable spinal rescue.

As was mentioned above, it is important that a responding lifeguard use extreme caution when responding to a victim. A lifeguard should always put his or her own safety above anyone else's. After all, if a distressed swimmer unintentionally puts a lifeguard in harm's way, both may need to be rescued.

LIFEGUARDS

Drink plenty of fluids. Eat right and get plenty of sleep before a shift.

HEALTH AND HYDRATION

What Happens When A Lifeguard Starts Their Shift Dehydrated And Exhausted?

We asked this question online and received a shocking response from a Lifeguard Supervisor working in Florida. As he explains it, a lifeguard in his early twenties showed up for his shift at a large waterpark severely dehydrated and operating on only a few hours of sleep. The guard, who, by all accounts, was usually very good at his job, got dizzy and ended up falling from his stand into a busy wave pool more than eight feet below. He was so disoriented that three other on-duty lifeguards were forced to enter the water and rescue him.

Luckily, everyone made it out of this situation unhurt, but things easily could have ended much worse for the lifeguard that fell, the lifeguards that had to perform the rescue, and the patrons swimming in the wave pool.

As a lifeguard, your health and wellness impacts more than just your own well being. When you're tired you can't survey the water effectively, and when you're not doing your job, other people are put at unnecessary risk.



Preventing Lifeguard Dehydration

To ensure proper hydration and effective aquatic surveillance, all lifeguards should have fluids constantly available. Either purchase water bottles or require the guards to bring their own for every shift they work. Not only does this aid in keeping guards at peak performance, but it also alleviates the need to leave the stand to get a drink.

Standard recommendations for athletes consist of drinking up to 20 ounces of water or sports drink two to three hours before competition, and another 8 to 10 ounces 20 minutes before. While lifeguards may not burn as many calories as a traditional athlete, the need to perform at a high level over a long period of time requires similar caution.

Persuade your guards to hydrate during each of their breaks. In order to maintain optimum performance, the crew needs to replace all of the fluids they lose while on duty. On particularly hot or humid days, it becomes even more important to monitor hydration.

In addition to providing lifeguards with fluids, it's also important to encourage them to maintain a balanced diet and healthy lifestyle. Breakfast is extremely important, yet 35-40% of all Americans skip the most important meal of the day. Providing fruit to supplement a missed meal is a great way to improve performance and boost morale.

Get plenty of sleep, eat right, and hydrate constantly.



LIFEGUARD S

Scan your area of responsibility from bottom to top every 10 seconds.

SCANNING BOTTOM TO TOP

Lifeguards know that distressed swimmers don't often resemble what we see on TV or in the movies. Most of these portrayals show a swimmer flailing, splashing, and yelling loudly... if only it was that easy! Swimmers can slip beneath the surface of the water almost instantly, and they often don't make a sound. The only way to ensure that all swimmers are safe is to actively scan the bottom of the pool every 10 seconds.

Counting Swimmers Does Not Work

Trying to count swimmers is extremely difficult and can also be exhausting. Counting swimmers is dangerous because a lifeguard never knows when a new swimmer will enter or exit their zone of coverage.



Scanning The Bottom Of The Pool Can Be Difficult

We feel strongly that the best way to quickly spot a distressed swimmer is to scan the bottom of the pool first, and then work up to the surface of the water. Unfortunately, scanning the bottom of the pool can be difficult, so lifeguards need to be prepared to make quick adjustments while on duty.

Here are a few reasons scanning the bottom of the pool may prove to be difficult.

- **Cloudy Water:** Cloudy water is quite possibly the single greatest hurdle for a lifeguard. If you can't see the bottom of the pool, how can you be expected to spot a swimmer in distress? If you're not comfortable the visibility of the water you must clear the pool immediately.
- **Glare:** Most lifeguards, especially those that spend the majority of their time outdoors, have experienced surveillance problems due to glare. Whenever possible, a lifeguard should have their back facing the sun in an effort to minimize the effects of glare.
- **Wind:** Even a slight breeze can cause ripples on the surface of the water. This rippling action may not seem like a problem, but as the [photos of the disappearing dummy](#) demonstrate, even a little water disturbance can be a big problem.

From everyone at West Bend, thank you for your part in making the world a safer and healthier place. We hope that you have found the information in this free eBook to be helpful in your risk management efforts.

Please note that the chapters of this eBook only represent a fraction of the safety resources available to you. We encourage you to visit TheSilverLining.com to view West Bend's entire catalog of free safety articles, videos, and links.

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