



Text by Matt Jevon
Photos by Andrey Bizyukin

I read a blog recently that suggested our egos could be responsible for many of the casualties that technical diving regrettably suffers. Sadly my comments on this blog never made it past the moderator. As a scientist and psychologist, I am somewhat protective of terminology used to describe human thought, emotion and behaviour, and the author of this blog fell into a common trap in how one described ego.

Ego simply refers to self and how we feel about ourselves. This results in our thoughts, emotions and behaviour. Where an ego is arrogant, overbearing, misguided or delusional, then bad things can and often do happen. However, having a big ego is not, without a skewed view as above, going to

cause any problems—in fact, quite the opposite. Let me explain.

Psychological research used to place ego and task focus on a continuum, generally to describe motivational style. Educational psychologists as late as the

last decade, which is when most diving education systems were thought up, “proved” that in educational settings a task focus was more beneficial. Learners were more motivated by task satisfaction and clarity than by internal or external

ego boosting rewards (money, status, etc). The flaw in much of this research is that learners were classified as being either task or ego focused, there was no delineation of people who were high in both task and ego focus, or in fact, low

in both and not at all motivated.

Task and ego focus

My own research and practice, backed by some very good recent research, shows that true high performers in any



The Role of Ego

In Technical (& Recreational) Diving





field are highly motivated by both task and ego focus—not just to learn but to achieve, or to avoid failure and to maximise their potential. I am quite sure in work and in diving we can easily describe people we see as being highly motivated, and equally, people who cannot be motivated even by a good old fashioned kick in the ass!

Now, there's a kicker... Both task and ego focus can be internally directed or externally directed. External ego driven people like status, recognition and reward and will enjoy and revel in compliments, etc. Internal ego driven people often do not mind these things, but would not seek them out—their own judgement of self being far more important to the influence on their ego. Evidence used by both

internal and externally driven people would be wins vs losses, feedback or reflection on skills performed, dives achieved, etc.

The bigger the ego, internal or external the better; the higher the level of task focus, the better. Having both, awesome. So why did the original blog's author get it wrong? Because the writer confused ego with arrogance, ego with overconfidence, ego with a lack of honest appraisal on one's own skills and abilities.

Ego vs. arrogance

I work a lot with elite and consistently high performing sports and business people. All have high levels of ego or task focus. About a third have a high need to achieve, to experience success. The rest, including me are

frightened to death of failing.

Why? Because we have big egos and lots of confidence, well placed as it happens in our ability. Failing would not only not provide the reward our egos need, it would damage our ego and confidence. So, we are detailed and meticulous in ensuring we will not fail. We work very hard, past the point where others would have given up, in order not to fail. This is hardly the approach of arrogant and overconfident divers at high risk of an incident.

So to the blog author's point, which was of massive value: what is it about our attitude as divers that makes us a danger unto ourselves? Simply put, it is a matter of perception versus reality. The at-risk divers perceive or believe they have the skills, training and experience



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to do dives that are, in reality, beyond them. This is arrogance, not ego. This is overconfidence, not ego. This is pure self delusion, or worse, peer pressure.

Self appraisal

How do we counter this? We get honest feedback or practice honest self appraisal. We seek out multiple sources of evidence to help with this: instructors, team mates, videos, benchmarks of dives achieved versus dive plans, and so on. We do not get deceived by people telling us we are better than we know we are.

Avoiding being distressed and getting into the panic spiral when failures and negative incidents are experienced on a dive relies on a

cool and confident head. A strong and big ego, coupled with great task focus, will be a huge asset and will be the most likely thing to keep you alive.

It has become a bit anti-social in some circles to be seen as being super confident, to be seen as having a big ego. I think you can be this way without being a jerk. But if not, well, maybe it is better to be a live jerk than being a dead nice guy, with delusions of one's abilities.

Dive safe. Dive confident. Dive honest. ■

A native of the Republic of Ireland, Matt Jevon, MSc., is an experienced and passionate open

and closed circuit 100m trimix diver and full cave diver. Whether using backmount, sidemount or his favourite JJ-CCR rebreather, Jevon believes technical diving is all about being safe, having an awesome dive and enjoying experiences few people share. Jevon holds instructor qualifications from TDI, PADI TECREC and IANTD, and partly owns South West Tech—a TDI dive centre in Ireland. Jevon is also an approved JJ-CCR instructor and dealer. In addition, he is a sports psychologist, senior rugby coach and works in strategy and private equity. For more information, please visit: Swt.ie and Mattjevon.com.

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