

Inland Open Water Safety and Rescue Course Support Resource

This resource is designed to introduce you to some key concepts that you will cover on your British Canoeing Awarding Body Inland Open Water Safety and Rescue Course. During the training your highly experienced course provider will guide you through a range of technical skills appropriate to your craft in open water, as well as helping you develop decision making in this environment. This resource introduces you to these decision making concepts and familiarising yourself with these will help you to get the most from your training.

The Influences on Our Decisions

You

Your skills, your experience, your knowledge and your fitness all have a massive influence on the decisions you make on open water. Deciding whether your skills and your experience are suitably matched to the environment is very important and can impact on the likelihood of an issue occurring. Considering the suitability of your equipment and also your preparation should also influence the decisions that you make on the water. Recognising that your skills and experience also need to be current is very important, as often a paddler's ability, experience and knowledge can change over time.

The Group

If we choose to paddle with others, then the needs/goals/skills/aspirations and physical capabilities of the group all need to be considered too. Whilst a more adventurous trip may be good for you personally, it may not suit the needs of the group, so deciding to use a venue that suits the needs of all present will most likely lead to a more successful and enjoyable journey. Planning a trip together as a group is typically a more reliable approach as it will consider the needs of all the paddlers and give more ownership to the individuals.







The Environment

This is a critical influence on our decisions and can often be affected by a range of factors that change throughout the day. Environmental influences such as wind, tide, flow and the size/exposure of the water should be having an impact on the decisions that are made by the group. Wind direction and fetch (the distance travelled by wind/waves on open water) can dramatically affect how easy it is to paddle on open water and choosing the right location to launch and land is an important decision to make. Whether you paddle up/down/across the wind changes how different craft handle and some craft are more or less wind affected than others. If we choose to paddle into the wind during our journey, making a tactical choice when to do this is important. We can take into account the fatigue that may be often faced later in the day and may wish to aim to make our paddle easier, rather than harder, by paddling downwind to our final destination rather than upwind.

The Situation

Often when we paddle we have other contributing factors to consider, such as the expected duration, time constraints of the day, group size, mix of craft, motivations, goals and fitness. If we do not consider these when we are planning and deciding what to do, we might not be making the most appropriate decision which could, of course, lead to an issue at some point during the day.



Responding to a situation



Open water can be a challenging and dynamic environment to perform a rescue or self-rescue. It can be beneficial to understand how we make decisions in these situations and, as our experience grows, we develop a greater understanding of what is effective and how to manage situations to avoid them becoming bigger. When responding to situations, we have two modes: "fast thinking" and "slow thinking".

Fast thinking

Responding using our fast thinking system is automatic and requires very little effort, it is lightning fast and based on intuition and instinct. Emotions, gut feelings and our past experiences all work together to create what appears to be an unconscious response to a situation. Whilst this fast thinking approach can be very beneficial for some situations, it is less reliable in more complex situations as many factors may need to be considered to make an effective decision:

- An example of a successful outcome using "fast thinking" decision making Quickly dropping to your knees on your SUP when experiencing a big gust of wind on open water;
- An example of a possible problem when using "fast thinking decision making" Whilst paddling on a large stretch of open water in F4 wind conditions, a paddler capsizes nearby to the group leader. In attempting to respond to a capsized paddler quickly, the group leader forgets to attract the attention of the other group members and the team become separated very quickly.

Slow thinking

Responding using our slow thinking system requires more effort as we consciously process the information we have and make a rational decision based on the possible outcomes. This approach is slower, but is more reliable in complex situations and is driven by facts and evidence rather than feelings and emotion:

- An example of a successful outcome using "slow thinking" decision making Taking time to observe the weather conditions, check the forecast, looking at the venue and the group and then deciding to paddle in a more sheltered area rather than more exposed open water;
- An example of a possible problem using "slow thinking decision making" A paddler needs assistance after capsizing their boat and another paddler attempts to offer help. They spend too much time trying to work out which would be the best way to empty the water out of their craft and get the paddler back into the boat, deliberating over advice from other paddlers on what they should do. This means that the person being rescued spends much longer in the water than was necessary.

It is when we combine these systems that we typically make the most reliable decisions, as we use our instinct and experience, as well as the evidence and information we have available to us.



Travelling with the Wind

Using the wind on open inland water can be exciting, as well as being a great tactical choice to make progress. There are some additional considerations for each craft which are helpful to be aware of.

Sailing with canoes

Canoe paddlers often choose to sail when given the right conditions. Sometimes this can be using purpose-made equipment and other times using more improvised methods. It is very possible for a canoe that is being sailed to be overpowered by the wind and, in this instance, equipment failure can happen which could cause injury or capsize. A sail should always be able to be dropped or depowered quickly and easily when using it in windy conditions.

Person overboard

It is possible that, when sailing rafted canoes, someone can fall overboard. If the canoe is moving quickly under the power of the sail at this point, then it is critical that the sail can be dropped quickly and that the people in the boat can revert back to using paddles to be able to paddle back and quickly recover the person in the water. This helps to avoid the person in the water being left stranded a long way from the group.

Swamped Rafted Canoes

If you are sailing or paddling rafted canoes, consider your plan for bailing water. Being ready with a small bucket, drybag or purpose-made bailer is really handy if water starts to enter the boat. Being able to take the raft apart quickly and having experience dealing with a swamped boat is also an important consideration.

Kayaks

A rudder/skeg can be very helpful with controlling the effect of the wind on your craft's direction. Using your skeg/rudder allows you to avoid your boat turning sideways or into the wind and, with some subtle adjustments, you can make your paddling much more efficient and avoid having to make regular direction corrections. Care must be taken to avoid damage of the rudder/skeg in shallow water and, in particular, during landing when it needs to be retracted. Being aware of the skeg/rudder during rescues and ensuring that it is not damaged is also essential.

SUPs

As a SUP paddler there are a variety of options available to you when managing the challenge that is presented in the wind. It may be a good tactical choice to paddle kneeling if the environment feels too challenging and, in some instances, paddling prone to stay out of the wind could be a good decision. When remounting the board after falling off in windy conditions, climbing onto the board from the upwind side avoids lifting and presenting the board to the wind, which could make self-rescue challenging and reduces the chance of the board flipping over you during the rescue.





"Unexpected" issues and "predictable" issues

Some issues on open water can be quite unexpected and not very easy to spot before they happen. For example, a SUP paddler falling off their board with a large gust of wind, a canoe paddler slipping when getting into their boat and ending up in the water, or even the failure of a piece of equipment such as a broken paddle. When we respond to these incidents we will often be able to deal with them quickly and, depending on the issue, it may be unlikely that the situation may happen again.

However, some issues on open water can actually be quite predictable. Many situations on the water often start from a much smaller issue, but if not dealt with effectively can then lead on to become something much more serious later on in a journey.

For example:

A paddler capsizes when getting into their canoe right at the very start of the journey. Even though they end up completely submerged in the water, they do not feel that cold and just get on with going for a paddle. Due to their early immersion, they get progressively colder over the next few hours and end up shivering whilst trying to paddle. The group then has to land early and use their emergency shelter and some warm drinks to try and improve the temperature of this paddler. If this paddler does not improve, then they will most likely need to end the trip early.

The above situation could be avoided by dealing with the capsized paddler more completely when it happened. They could have put on additional layers and taken on food and a hot drink before continuing with the trip. Even though the paddler might have felt this was unnecessary at the time, it would have helped to prevent the issue of being cold a few hours into the journey.

Gaining experience and reflecting

Learning how to predict that an issue is building during a journey does need experience. Often, reflection after a paddling journey will help you to consider the changes you could have made and the steps you could take to avoid it happening again in the future. It can be very helpful to reflect with a group as well as individually, sharing your thoughts and reflections can often be very powerful and can lead to positive changes in your actions out on the water.

Other helpful resources

When developing your skills and experience on open water, it may be helpful to look at the following additional resources:

Leadership & Raft Guide Resources - British Canoeing Awarding Body

