

# Swim Time!

## Coping with Capsizes

Canoeing is full of contradictions. It can be almost anything you want it to be. Contemplative or thrilling. Easy-going or exhausting. Bathtub-safe or downright risky. But there's no getting around one thing — all canoes are more or less tippy. Just ask anyone who doesn't paddle. To be sure, the cautionary tales spun by armchair voyageurs *are* often wildly exaggerated. Still, it can't be denied that [even skilled canoeists go for unplanned swims](#) every so often: the beamiest boats will turn turtle under the right (wrong?) conditions. In short, if you paddle a canoe frequently, you'll capsize sooner or later. My first dunking came at the bottom of a modest drop high in the Canadian north. Despite the remote location, it was as gentle an introduction as I could have hoped for. My second swim took place much closer to home, yet it could easily have been my last. In the end, though, luck and [the kindness of strangers](#) cheated Nemesis of her intended victim.

Luck and the kindness of strangers. Both are good things to have on your side. But it's best not to depend on either one. Luck is fickle, and you can't count on finding a helping hand when you need one most. That's why the first rule in coping with capsizes is...

### Dress for Success

And in this case "success" means "survival." It's the classic my-eyes-glaze-over topic. Canoeists who'll cheerfully spend hours debating the merits of different paddles will snort with impatience the moment the conversation turns to [life vests](#) (PFDs in official-speak) and [helmets](#). This makes sense, I suppose. Nobody likes to be reminded that she's mortal. I can understand that. And it's difficult to make a PFD into a must-have outdoor fashion accessory, no matter how radical the color or the cut. It's still just a foam-filled fabric envelope. But the fact remains that a good-quality, properly fitted life vest is probably your most important purchase, and — at least on steep, rocky rivers and in surf — a helmet comes in a mighty close second. No swimmer can fight the power of moving water for very long, and rocks are harder than heads. Your life vest and helmet are your final line of defense.

[Cold kills](#), too, of course. And that makes dressing for the water temperature critically important. This isn't hard to do on [blustery fall days](#), when the warmth of a wetsuit is very welcome, but it's not so easy in late summer, when there's often a fifty-degree difference between the sultry air and the freezing water. There's no simple way out of this dilemma, I'm afraid, though it's probably better to bake in the sun than congeal in the water. Just be sure to [drink enough](#) to [replace what you lose in sweat](#). Don't stop there, however. When you're on the water, your boat is an extension of your body — or at least it should be. [Outfit it](#) with the same care you use in outfitting yourself, [load it properly](#), and be sure to have [plenty of reserve flotation](#). Oh, yes. Don't forget to bring along a [bailer for every paddler](#).

This sounds like a lot of trouble to go to for a day on the water, and to tell the truth, it is. But you'll be glad you took the time to prepare when you're...

### In Over Your Head

First, though, a word about fear. The British parliamentarian Edmund Burke — he was also a good friend to the upstart American colonies — wrote that "Early and provident fear is the mother of safety." And so it is. There's an important caveat, though. *Improvident* fear paralyzes. *Improvident* fear kills. If nothing else, it kills joy. And joy is why we paddle, right? So don't let the

fear of getting in over your head get in the way of finding joy. If you paddle, you'll get wet. Get used to it.

How? There are lots of ways. As a teenager working at an Adirondack boys' camp in the years before the Depression, [my grandfather](#) had the use of a fleet of wood-canvas canoes. First, though, he had to prove to the camp lifeguard that he could both swim *and* recover a capsized boat. To do this, he and a buddy paddled out from the beach until they were in deep water. Then they deliberately capsized their canoe. Next, without towing the swamped boat back to the beach, they righted it, bailed most of the water out, climbed in, and paddled away. My grandfather and his buddy passed their test on the first try, and they had such a good time that they repeated the exercise on hot days throughout the summer.

That's one way. I'll leave the others to your imagination. But please bear two things in mind: While no one can really swim in a rapids, and wearing a PFD always makes sense ([even on a farm pond](#)), anyone who can't swim at least a little bit will never be entirely at home in the water. So if you can't swim a stroke, take the time to learn. Now. You'll be glad you did. And what's the second thing? Practice makes perfect, but [it's a lot easier to practice when it's fun](#). Make a game of it.

An unintended capsized [in a rapids](#) isn't a game, though. The force of moving water has to be felt to be believed. Having fun takes second place to staying alive. Don't plan on swimming away from trouble. Don't plan on swimming, period. Instead, concentrate on these four Important Things:

- Hang on to your paddle
- Don't get between your canoe and a hard place
- Let your feet go first (and hold them up)
- Keep an eye out for your partner

Capsizes on [open water](#) present different problems. You're not likely to be pinned against a rock or tumbled about in a hole, but unless you dump where a lifeguard can see you — not very likely in the middle of a three-mile crossing — you may be in the water for a while. And the water will almost certainly be cold enough to sap your strength. So the list of Important Things to remember is slightly different:

- Hang on to your paddle
- Hang on to your boat
- Keep an eye out for your partner

Now let's take a closer look at some of these, beginning with...

### **Hanging On to Your Paddle**

You've heard the one about being upstream without a paddle, I'm sure. And I'm sure you always have a spare paddle lashed in your boat, too. So what's the big deal about hanging on to your paddle? Easy. Spare paddles sometimes get washed out of swamped boats, and it's damned hard to paddle a canoe with your bare hands. Finding a lost paddle among the cobbles and snags on a riverbank isn't exactly easy, either. 'Nuff said?

This is one place where good form pays off, by the way. If you were [fighting to keep your boat right side up](#) when you went over (and you should have been), you already had a good grip on your paddle. And you probably hung on to the shaft as you went in. On the other hand, if you were grabbing the gunwales in a spasm of "*improvident fear*," your paddle probably went off on a solo swim at the same time you did, leaving you you-know-where. Robert Louis Stevenson,

whose 1878 [Inland Voyage](#) remains one of the best trip journals in the English language, was so proud of his performance in a capsize that he swore he'd have the words "He clung to his paddle" inscribed on his tomb. (He'd didn't, though.) Of course, if you need both hands to stay alive — when you're struggling to claw your way out of [the lethal embrace of a sweeper](#), for example — drop your paddle without a second thought. No rule is absolute.

And that brings us to another question. As useful as your paddle is, your boat is more important by far. But whether or not you should hang on to it depends on where you are when you capsize. It's a...

### **Weighty Matter**

A swamped, 17-foot tandem canoe can weigh as much as a small car. Float bags displace water, and since air weighs a lot less than water, this is a Very Good Reason to have float bags in your boat. Just be sure they're lashed in place. Otherwise, they'll simply float away. But few canoes have enough float bags to displace all the water. (You wouldn't have a place to sit if they did.) The upshot? If you get between your swamped canoe and a rock in a fast river, you're likely to feel the pinch. And even if you don't, it's no fun being hit on the head by something that weighs a ton, nor will you be happy if you surface after receiving a thrashing in a hole only to discover that you've come up under your canoe.

What's the bottom line? If you dump in a fast-moving river, keep some distance between yourself and your boat. Better yet, let your boat go through the drops first. In any case, don't hang on to your boat. Your swamped canoe may dive like a sub. Or spin on its axis for longer than you can hold your breath. Neither of these rides would be much fun. Worried about salvaging your boat? Don't be. You can't save your trip if you drown. You have to save yourself first. You can recover your boat and gear later. Often, you'll catch up to your runaway canoe in the pool at the bottom of the drop, or find it going round and round in a gentle eddy some distance downstream. Even a broached boat can be winched off the rock it's clinging to — if you know how. That's a subject for another time, though.

Capsizes on open water — [lakes](#), the margins of the sea [beyond the surf zone](#), and [big, even-tempered rivers](#) — require a different approach. Unless waves are breaking all around you (if they are, give your canoe plenty of space!), your boat is your best friend. Keep it close. Time and cold water are your principal enemies now. So here's what to do: Take a few seconds to get your bearings. Check to see if your partner's OK. Then roll your canoe upright. If you're lucky, and if you've added some flotation, your boat will float with its gunwales out of the water. Now lash your paddle to keep it from going off on its own and then bail for all you're worth. When you've gotten most of the water out, steady the boat while your partner climbs aboard. Once he's in, he can return the favor. You'll want to practice this beforehand, of course. And it won't work in a heavy sea. That's when you'll wish you had another boat or two keeping you company. Still, even if you can't empty your boat and reboard it, so long as it's floating you'll want to stay close. Somebody may be looking for you, and they're a lot more likely to spot a 17-foot yellow canoe than your head.

The scene shifts — again. We're back on a whitewater river. You're drifting downstream faster than seems possible, and the waves look huge, but your canoe is a long way ahead of you and your life vest is doing its job. So far, so good. Is there anything else you don't want to forget? Yes. You'll need to keep your courage up, right? And the best way to do that is to...

### **Put Your Best Foot Forward**

Even better, put *both* feet forward — and hold them high. Float on your back. Keep your feet pointing downriver. And take advantage of any eddies or backwaters to work your way toward

shore. Why? Think about it. Floating on your back makes it easier to see what lies ahead. (It helps you snatch a breath of air now and again, too.) Your feet are right where they need to be to fend off too-close encounters with midstream boulders, and keeping them high makes it less likely that they'll be trapped. You won't be able to swim very far in this position, but a simple sculling backstroke is all you need [to do a ferry](#). Don't fight the current. Make it work for you, instead. In time, this will get you out of trouble.

In theory, at any rate. In practice, you're more likely to feel like a sock in a washing machine than an in-control aquanaut. But keep fighting anyway. If your river was canoeable in the first place, the odds are on your side. You'll know you've won when your butt hits the bottom and stays put. Then it's time to get on your feet and take stock. *Don't rush things*. If you try to stand while you're still struggling in fast, deep water, you leave yourself open to a terrible one-two punch: (1) Your foot slips between two cobbles and gets stuck. (2) The current knocks you over. The result? Your mouth and nose are underwater, but you can't get back on your feet. I don't have to say more, do I? It's a short story, and it doesn't have a happy ending. And the moral of the story? Patience is a virtue.

What's next? Once you're out of danger...

### **Look Around for Your Partner**

He'll be looking for you, too, and he's probably quite close. No luck? Give three long blasts [on your whistle](#). Wait for the answer. Then get together to plan salvage operations. A few helpful hints: If somebody's hurt, you'll be glad you and your partner both [know what to do](#). You'll also find good use for the [basic first-aid supplies](#) in your life-vest pocket. And later, when you recover your canoe and find it a little the worse for wear, you'll wish you'd prepared a [first-aid kit for your boat](#), as well.

Can't find your boat? At least you left [a float plan](#) with family or friends at home, besides giving a copy to the local authorities. You did, didn't you? Good. Then somebody will be looking for you. And there's always next year.



Has all this talk about disasters narrowly averted got you down? Are you having second thoughts about taking a paddling holiday? Don't. Very few canoeing outings end in [a Deliverance scenario](#). Even capsizes are rare. Still, it's a good idea to be ready for an unplanned swim anytime you're in your canoe. Somebody once said that fortune favors the prepared mind. It does, too. So make your own luck. Be prepared for whatever the water and wind can throw at you. Then relax. And get ready to be surprised by joy. I'm betting you won't be disappointed.