

Canoe Rescues

Always wear your PFD while canoeing. It is extremely difficult to put on a PFD while you are in water (assuming you have one within reach!) If the canoe capsizes, always think of safety first by making sure that you and your passenger are OK before trying to save the canoe and your belongings. Stay with your canoe (it floats!) and capture any floating items. You can crawl into the swamped canoe and paddle it to shore or swim alongside the craft and push it in. When you are able to touch bottom turn the canoe over and lift it out of the water.

Single Canoe Rescue

If you are canoeing in fast water and you capsize, with the water only being knee to waist deep. You are going to have to grab onto your canoe, try to retrieve your paddles and swim your canoe to shore, empty it and start out again. (Grab the paddles first because they float away the fastest and then swim to grab the canoe.)

This is why it is always good to have an extra paddle tied into one of the canoes in your group just in case you cannot catch the paddles while they are floating down the river. (It is possible to canoe with one person paddling.)

If you are in really fast water and you capsize, you are going to be moving quickly down river. Keep your feet out in front of you. Do not let your body get switched around so that your head is going down river first. If you do get switched around backwards and your head is going down the river first, get back to the position of your feet in front of your body as fast as you can and try to watch where you are headed.

Really fast rivers are full of rocks everywhere protruding out of the water. You do not want to hit your head going down river so swiftly. If it is possible keep a hold of the canoe until you reach calmer water, if you can't keep a hold on the canoe let it go, get yourself to shore first and your canoe will pop up somewhere close by. Once you have your canoe ashore empty it, take a breather and away you go again.

What do you do if you are canoeing in a lake, the water is really deep and you are too far from shore to swim the canoe back to land to empty the water out of your canoe? First of all do not panic, hopefully you have your life jackets on. If you don't and they are floating around in the water get them on quickly. You are going to need your strength to do this.

Get your paddles before they float away, stick them up under your canoe thwarts, they should stay in there, they may slip out, but just put them back in again (paddles float).

If you are in the water and the canoe is not upside down, turn it upside down. Both paddlers should get into the air pocket under the canoe. You'll need both hands to right the canoe so cradle your paddles under the thwarts to get them out of the way. You'd be surprised how secure they are in this position—they'll be ready to use when you're back inside the upright canoe.

Then try to lift the canoe a bit to get some air under it. Both people need to get under the canoe. There will be lots of air under there and lots of room to breathe. You can always use this as a resting spot if you get tired.

This next part is where the work comes in. Make sure that you have good communication with each other. Untie anything that is tied into your canoe. The canoe is heavy enough without things tied into it; you can retrieve these later if they float.

Stay under the canoe, you are going to have to push the canoe up off the water and give it a flip to turn it back over which is really hard to do.

Both paddlers position themselves at their respective seats on the same side of the canoe. Work together and lift one gunwale slightly out of the water to break the airlock. Kick your feet really hard and push up with your arms as hard as you can at the same time and fling the free gunwale up into the air. Quickly flip it back over. If your timing is right, the canoe will land upright and relatively free of water. More than likely in the first couple of tries your canoe will still be full of water, but don't get discouraged. Just turn it upside down again, get back under the canoe and try again. Your canoe does not have to be completely empty of water, just as long and most of it is out.



Now that your canoe is flipped back over and it is empty, you are still in the water. All you have to do is get back in—which is the hardest part. The canoe sides are really high up and as soon as you grab onto one side and pull down it will tip back over again.



Position yourself next to your seat, and on the opposite side of the canoe from your partner to act as a counterbalance. Both paddlers do a big scissors kick and heft themselves onto the gunwale. The trick is that both paddlers must be doing this at the same time. Their bodies should be half way across the top of canoe with their legs hanging over their side. Next, each will roll their body at the same time so that their rear ends land into the bottom of the canoe.

Now that you are both back into the canoe, keep low. With one person moving at a time, work your way back to your seat. Once one person is in their seat then the next person will move slowly, keeping their center of gravity low, in order to get into their seat. Move slowly and be careful, you don't want to have to do this again.

Bail out your canoe—you do have a bailer, right? Or paddle to shore to remove any remaining water.

Canoe-to-Canoe Lift

If other upright canoes are available or the occupants are too tired to self rescue, then transfer the packs and paddles into a rescue canoe(s) and perform a canoe-to-canoe lift.

You can easily empty a canoe full of water while still far out on a lake. You should use this skill only in fairly calm, flat water. If done in slowly moving water, there should be no obstructions.

If you witness a canoe capsizing, you should first see to the safety and consciousness of the paddlers. In the process, if possible, rescue their paddles as well, since even a small current can quickly carry their gear away. You should always travel with a spare paddle lashed into at least one of the canoes in your group.

If you are close enough to communicate with them, tell them to hold onto their craft. Everyone should have lifejackets on, but if someone does not, get it on them.

As you approach the swamped canoe, be certain the wind, your speed or the current does not push you into the people in trouble. Keep back a slight distance until you have talked to them and are certain they will not try anything that will cause your canoe to swamp as well.

As you do the emptying, stay low in your canoe to stay balanced. Describe what you need from your partner and the swamped paddlers clearly.

Once the paddles and any gear from the swamped canoe have been stashed in the rescuers' canoe, set up the two canoes with the swamped one perpendicular to the center of the rescuers' canoe. The swamped canoe, even with a moderate amount of water in it, is now very heavy.



The two rescuers need to be facing each other near the center of the canoe. The person at the bow (front) slowly turns around to face the person at the stern (rear). As you change your position, it is not a good time to stand up and swamp your canoe. Roll the swamped boat upside down.

If the swamped canoeists are still both a little panicky, both can hold on to opposite ends of the rescuers' canoe to stabilize it. If at least one feels he/she can help with this process, they should go to the far end of the swamped canoe. They can push down on it to break the suction as the rescuers pull the end of the swamped canoe up onto the craft. Be sure to at least get a little of the swamped canoe up first, so as you drag it onto the upright craft it empties mostly into the water, not into the rescuers' craft. Aren't you glad you use dry bags for your gear?

The overturned boat is carefully slid up onto the rescuers' boat. The canoeist in the water can stay at the end of the overturned boat or go to the other end of the rescuers' canoe to help stabilize it. The two rescuers can't see each other as they slowly flip the previously swamped canoe over so they need to move slowly and communicate. At least one of the swamped canoeists should be paying attention to stabilizing the rescuers' canoe.



The now empty canoe can be slid back into the water and the waiting canoeists.



Put the two boats alongside each other to assist the canoeists in the water as they reenter their boat.

It is wise to practice these skills in advance of ever needing it during an emergency. During practice you can make mistakes that could be life threatening in a real situation. Practice is best in a pool, pond, or a lake cove with few waves.