



Honorary Rowing Safety Adviser Monthly Report

August 2025

Stephen Worley

TEAMWORK | OPEN TO ALL | COMMITMENT

Rowers to the Rescue

Several Coastal rowing boats were taking part in the annual race and were rowing fairly close to the coast. The rowers saw an adult and two children in difficulty in the water. A fourth unrelated adult had swum out from the beach to help and then gotten into trouble. Some swimmers were helped into the larger coastal gig. Other rowers, wearing flotation devices, jumped in to help other swimmers to shore. The incident was also attended by the RNLI Lifeboat, the Ambulance service and local Beach Lifeguards among others.

All the swimmers survived and four people were taken by ambulance to hospital. The rowers have had a debrief and a 'trauma' talk with other senior members and aftercare is ongoing.

Incidents reported in August

Take care in mud

The crew of a 2+ were wading ashore through deep mud. One rower's leg submerged to below the knee and she felt her leg scrape an object (probably a rock). The rower was helped back to the club where the injury was assessed. A photo of the injury was provided but this is too graphic to show here. It this shows a deep central longitudinal gash in the left shin about 50 mm long, There is also evidence of bleeding from this wound.

First aid was provided, and the rower was taken to the hospital injury clinic for further treatment.

The club has compiled and circulated an internal safety brief with a map illustrating the safe areas and the no go areas.

If this could happen at your club then please take care to make sure that it does not. Consider recommending the use of boots in mud.

Keep Well Clear of Swans

There was an incident in which a rower in a 2x hit a swan with their backstay; the swan continued under the riggers and emerged apparently unharmed. The rower stated that the "*swan did not move as I expected*". Perhaps it was wrong to expect the swan to move out of the way, why should it.

There is advice on Swans and Rowing on the British Rowing website here [Swans and Rowing - British Rowing](#), this explains that Swans are protected in law and includes sections on "*Understanding Swan Behaviour*" and "*Safety measures for rowers*". It also advises rowers to adjust their course to avoid obstructing the path of swans or forcing them to take evasive action. This guidance is referenced in section 9.2 of [RowSafe - British Rowing](#).

If there are swans in the area where you row, then please read the guidance and take care to Keep Well Clear of Swans.

Keep your safety plans simple

There was a risk of confusion at a club because they had five safety documents, in the members area of the club website, with inconsistent information and different circulation plans. Please take care to ensure that your club's safety information is clear and unambiguous.

Coordination helps

There was an incident in which an 8+ approaching an area where scouts were spread across the waterway in a variety of watercraft. The 8+ stopped and the watercraft made their way to either side leaving the 8+ space to pass. The rowing club will meet with the Scouts to coordinate their plans.

If you do not already do so, then please consider meeting with other water user groups to discuss how you can keep each other safe

More anti-social behaviour

As we approach the end of the summer season it is hoped that the level of antisocial behaviour will reduce. The following events have been reported this month: -

- During a water session a fisherman shouted and swore at the junior squad. The launch approached the fisherman and was subjected to more of the same. They did try to advise that the nature of the language and suggestion boats should not be sharing the river was unacceptable and again was met with abuse. The coaches moved the squad away.
- A woman and her friend were blocking up our landing stage in an inflatable kayak, next to the sign saying "no inflatables". They appeared to be very inebriated. She was politely asked to move as the club was trying to bring in a juniors in small boats. She was not receptive to this and became very argumentative. She and her friend eventually moved themselves and their inflatable away. She came back later and punched the club captain in the face.
- A 4+ rowed past some children and they shouted at the rowers. A rower then felt something hit the side of their leg. Later the rower looked down and found small rock. This was reported to the Police.
- A Regatta Safety Launch driver drove at speed past a moored cruiser and the wash annoyed the owner who was heard to scream abuse at the finish launch and exhibit threatening behaviour.
- A large motor cruiser came through the wrong arch of the bridge, at speed, and rowers in 1xs and a 4x had to take evasive action. The crew of the cruiser were shouting and swearing, and appeared to be drunk and was aggressive and belligerent. The cruiser created a large wash. A passenger on the cruiser said his driver was having an "episode" and it seemed very much as though he was aiming at the boats. This incident was reported to the Police and to the Navigation Authority

Please take care not to engage with people who threaten or endanger rowers and take extra care to protect juniors: -

Don't REACT
REMOVE yourself from the situation
REPORT to the Navigation Authority, Police etc.

Take extra care around motor vessels

Many people who drive motorboats do so with great skill and care, but some do not. Here are some examples from this month: -

- A large barge started to turn towards a rower in a 1x and their coach in a launch. The coach shouted to warn the captain, but the captain was unable to reverse quickly enough and collided with the launch. Several people spoke to the captain and his helper, and it transpired that the captain has dementia and the person next to him was helping him to navigate. This was reported to the Harbourmaster.
- A rower in a 1x passed under a bridge when a motor launch that had been moored under the bridge took off upstream and sent them into the river. People from a nearby sea scouts group had been calling out to the driver to stop but they made no effort to slow down or change direction. The driver was drinking and left the scene of the incident without stopping. This was reported to the Police.
- A 2x was doing a low-rate piece when a weekly hire cruiser was travelling in the opposite direction. Both were on the correct side of the river. The cruiser then collided with the starboard blades of the 2x. The couple on the cruiser said they had decided to cross the river to moor and had not seen the 2x coming downstream. They did not know they needed to look before crossing the river!

Please take extra care around motorboats.

Please behave responsibly when driving a launch

An Outdoor Activities Organisation for children submitted a report stating that two coaching launches were doing high speed doughnuts and speeding through a sailing course on the wrong side of the river. There were two older men who appeared to be coaches on the launch, but it was a teenager who was driving the launch at high speed whilst not wearing a kill cord.

The club responded saying *“Thank you for reporting this, this is completely unacceptable from our launch drivers. We have identified the driver and will be calling them in for a meeting about this. We have also spoken to all other launch drivers that were present that day and will review our policies and guidance/instructions for launch driving during Learn to Row courses.”*

If something like this could happen at your club then please take action to ensure that it does not.

Take care when loading trailers

A coach used a four-step plastic horse mounting steps alongside a trailer to help getting boats into place and tied down. Whilst on the top step the steps flipped over to one side and the coach fell causing painful injuries.

If you have steps like this then please encourage users to take care.

Lessons learned from simple incidents

An unaccompanied rower in a 1x capsized as a result of a loose rigger. The rower had asked to join an outing with a coach and a 4+. After some time, the rower noticed that one of the four bolts holding a reverse wing rigger had come loose so planned to return to the club. The coach offered a spanner but was advised that as the remaining three bolts were secure and the rower would return to the club.

The coach continued the session with the 4+ and returned to the club assuming that the 1x was following. The coach and 4+ arrived at the club at approximately 20:15 but the 1x could not be seen so after some time the coach returned to look for them and two crew members stayed at the clubhouse with a radio. It was getting dark. The boats did not have lights because club rules prohibit rowing in the dark.

The coach went to the point where they had last seen the 1x and a passing motorboat advised that he had not seen anyone. As the coach was dialling the Coastguard for assistance, they spotted a Hi-Vis pink shape and motored toward it. It was the 1x, they had capsized shortly after the coach left him and had swum his boat to a beach to relaunch it. The coach took the 1x and the rower back to the clubhouse.

Lessons learned:

1. Carry basic tools if alone and unaccompanied - even a 10mm spanner would probably have prevented the incident.
2. Carry a communication device such as a mobile phone in a waterproof.
3. Learn the harbour geography, even at high tide, most of the harbour is chest deep or shallower outside of the channel.
4. The harbour on a cloudy night has zero visibility but plenty of hazards. Think before going out in the evening.
5. The coach should have been more assertive when offering help with tools. On reflection, if the loose bolt was affecting the rowers ability to scull effectively, then the other three were unlikely to have been secure enough to hold the rigger properly.
6. This again shows the value of Hi-Vis on the water.

In another incident elsewhere a 2x was doing a 500m race practice piece around a wide bend and was adjusting having realised that they had taken the bend too wide. The sun was low and very bright, and the steers failed to see the other 2x, which was stationary or moving very slowly, until they hit it at speed.

Learning points:

1. look around more often when doing a race piece even if you think no other boats are there;
2. slow down or stop if you realise, you're taking the bend too wide;
3. if the sun is low in the sky or flashing between trees, then conduct fast racing pieces in areas/directions where that is less of a problem.

Take care with your nails

A rower in a 4+ was wearing false nails which caught on the handle pulling her real nail with it causing bleeding. Please ask your rowers not to row with false nails.

Always be prepared for the unexpected

The 4x was approaching a right-hand turn, there were no other river users were visible, and the steers thus took a wide line into the corner. The boat strayed over to the left-hand bank and ran adjacent to an overhanging tree. There was a canoeist stationary, partly within the foliage taking photos. The crew of the 4x performed an emergency stop and avoided contact. -

Club members have been briefed to always be prepared for the unexpected.

Do not underestimate the strength of the stream

A rower in a 1x was swept onto a big black metal buoy and the only way they could get the boat off it, was to capsize deliberately and then swim the boat to the shore. A coach from another club stood by to assist the rower. The rower identified the following lessons learned: -

1. Do not underestimated the speed of the stream. It looked as if they had plenty of time to cross the river, but they were pushed along faster than anticipated.
2. Do not underestimated the extent to which a boat would be pushed out on the outside of the bend.
3. Take extra care to look around and be more aware of the location of hazards.
4. Take care of yourself and do not be too concerned about other people who you are rowing with.

Take care not to go deep

A 2x capsized due to one of the rowers allowing their blade to go deep. One of the causes of blades going deep is under squaring. Late squaring can lead to going in under square. The remedy is obvious, if the handles are held loosely (i.e. not gripped hard so that there are no "knuckles" visible) then the blade will be free to rotate such that the flat surface on the collar will press against the flat surface of the gate and the blades will square automatically, providing that it is not too far undersquare.

Consequences of at-risk behaviour

A 2x and a 1x were rowing side-by-side doing a high-rate piece down the wrong side of the river. Crews and a launch from another club were rowing up towards them on the same side of the river. Luckily the 2x and 1x changed course to just avoid a collision. The rowers in the 2x and 1x were removed from club steers list, sent safety and navigation documents for review, and informed they are not to go on the water without a coaching launch until they have had their steering reassessed. A reminder about steering was sent to whole club.

Take extra care at the turn of the tide

The navigation rules on the Tideway change with the turning of the tide. A collision was caused due to some confusion about the state of the tide and failure of all crews to keep a good lookout. It is well known that the tide turns at different times along the length of the Tideway, this is explained on page 73 of the [Tideway Code](#), this includes the following: -

Avoiding collisions: the turn of the tide

Navigating on the turn of the tide is notoriously confusing and may lead to collisions or near misses so requires extra consideration.

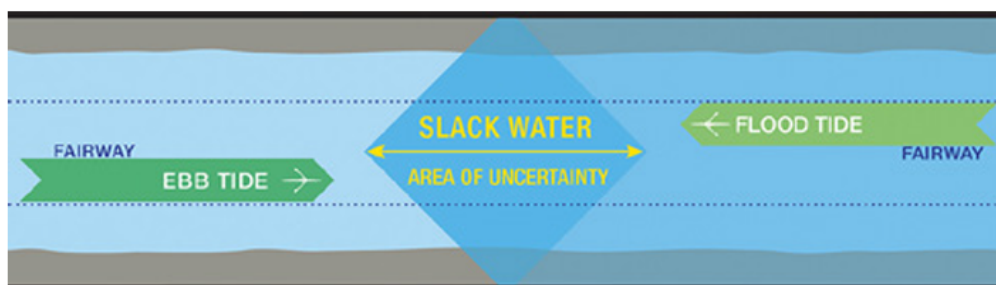
It is possible for a rowing boat to travel faster than the tidal stream is moving, so when travelling with the tidal stream rowing boats can easily overtake the changing tide.

When travelling against it, boats could easily meet the changing tidal stream as it approaches.

At the point where the tide is turning there is an obvious zone of still water, known as **slack water**. This slack water zone continually moves at the head of the turning tide and is a good indicator that steers will need to change their navigation pattern from one tidal stream to the other.

See [page 12](#) for how to check the tidal stream direction. However if in doubt:

- Navigate on the **starboard** side of the Fairway until you can be sure of the tide direction
- Observe how other crews are navigating and communicate with them about the state of the tide – it may be different where you are now to where they have just come from
- Only make changes to your navigation pattern once you are completely sure the tide has turned
- Avoid racing or doing pieces when you are unsure of the tide direction
- **KEEP A GOOD LOOKOUT**



The turn of the tide can also happen at different times across the width of a river. I searched and found this: -

"The tidal flow in a river does not always turn at the same time in the middle as it does at the edges, as the shape of the river, its width, depth, and interaction with river water cause local variations and delays in the timing of slack water and the reversal of the current. The complex local factors mean that the moment the current reverses, known as slack water, can occur at a different time than the local high or low water level, especially further inland from the coast. "

On the coast, the "inshore tide turns first" so at high tide, as the tide turns, the flow in the centre of the river is still flooding in whilst that at the edges are ebbing out. The reverse occurs at low tide.

Please take extra care at the turn of the tide and please always keep a good lookout.

Check your wing riggers

A rower in a 1x was paddling as normal, when they experienced a catastrophic failure of the weld on its heavy-duty wing ringer. The rower capsized and was recovered to the club using buddy rescue. (see photo opposite)

In another incident at a different club a rower in a 1x was practising race pieces when they heard a loud bang. The wing rigger sheared off and the rower capsized. The rigger appeared normal when launching, there were no obvious signs that the rigger would come apart.

It can be difficult to detect cracks in riggers, but they normally start in the heat affected zone around welds and are likely to start near the leading edge as this is in tension through the drive phase of the rowing stroke.



Look to both sides

It is important when looking ahead, to look to both sides. There are several incidents where this did not happen.

- A 2x was proceeding on the correct side of the river prior to spinning. The steerer was concentrating on the two 4xs preparing to turn ahead. The 2x was passing a line of moored boats but didn't see a dinghy double-parked alongside until their blades hit it. They now understand the need to look around on all sides, particularly when manoeuvring.
- A 4- was rounding a bend and the steers had been looking over their right shoulder and simply did not see the pontoon until they were about 10 metres away. They hit the pontoon and bent a rigger.

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Control Commission Checks

The checks at one Regatta identified a 4x with heel restraints not correctly adjusted.

At another Regatta there was a complete check of heel restraints, and this found that of the 49 boats inspected, five had heel restraint faults.

Please take care to ensure that your boats are checked before every outing.

Take care in thunderstorms

A 4+ and two 1xs were afloat, at the start of the outing it was overcast, and the river was calm, as they proceeded it became clear that the conditions were deteriorating and that a storm was imminent.

As the heavens opened the crews on the water made their way to a nearby rowing club for shelter. Thunder and lightning started shortly after they went ashore and found shelter in the club where they were made very welcome. The storm lasted about half an hour. The rowers were collected and taken back to their own club by road.

This was the perfect response. Remember the [30:30 Rule](#) which states that if the flash to bang is 30 seconds or less you should seek shelter. Stay inside this shelter until 30 minutes after the last clap of thunder.

Take care to ensure that rowers are correctly briefed

Two 2xs lined up to complete a practice race piece downstream. A 1x was visible upstream, travelling in the opposite direction but still at some distance. The two 2xs raced; during the piece, one 2x moved to the wrong side of the river. Two coaches in a launch observed this and stopped the crew before any harm occurred. One of the rowers in this 2x said that they believed it was acceptable to race on the wrong side of the river if no crew was approaching from the opposite direction. They were informed that this is incorrect and that navigation rules must always be followed. A rower joining from another club on the river did not appear to have had a full induction when joining our club, not recognising the importance of correct navigation. The CRSA will review the induction process.

Take care at the end of a race

At the end of the race a 2x veered towards the bank and hit it sustaining scratches and light damage to the hull. The crew was reminded that reducing pressure and correcting course results in better results than ramming the bank!

Unserviceable Lifejackets

A colleague informed me that they needed to borrow a life jacket to take out a launch at a coastal competition and was supplied with one by an attending club. On checking it prior to use they found that the gas inflation cylinder was missing. Two other life jackets from the same club had been provided to other umpires afloat and when they came ashore these jackets were checked. One had a loose gas cylinder (it would not have inflated the jacket), the other was serviceable. The club concerned has been informed and asked to provide assurance that they will review their management of life jackets.

A local RNLI volunteer mentioned that at a separate regatta the previous day the RNLI had provided their usual service of free checks, and they found approximately 30% of lifejackets they checked were unserviceable so it's not just rowers that are getting it wrong.

My response was that I wish I could say that I am surprised. If everyone would simply do what they know that they are supposed to do, then the world would be a safer place.

In my Region we have a set of Lifejackets for the use of Umpires. Each Umpire afloat is issued with one at the start of each competition and they are collected at the end of the competition. I hold myself responsible for checking and maintaining these and delivering them to the next competition, alongside the other umpiring equipment.

Please ensure that the Lifejackets that you use are checked before each use and thoroughly at least once each year. There is further information in the [Safety-Alert-check-your-lifejacket.pdf](#).

Serious Injury at Sea

There has recently been a Marine Accident Investigation Report ([MAIBInvReport 11/2025 - Lundy Explorer - Serious Marine Casualty](#)) into an incident in a boat like this: -



This boat is certified to carry up to 12 passengers.

The incident resulted in a passenger suffering a fracture of the T12 vertebra, damage to the spinal cord and permanent paralysis. The boat was operating fairly close inshore in rough water off Ilfracombe. Injuries of this type, but perhaps not so severe, are far from unknown in this type of large, powerful boat.

If this causes you any concern, then please let me know.

Rowers who cannot Swim

There was an enquiry from a CRSA about the need for rowers to be able to swim. The response was that British Rowing does not require that rowers must be able to swim, or that those who cannot swim must wear lifejackets or buoyancy aids when afloat. This is specified in Section 3.6 of [RowSafe](#) which states: -

3.6. Competence in the Water

It is important that rowers who find themselves in the water do not panic and are able to respond so that they can keep themselves safe. In effect, this means that they should be able to swim or float. [Floating](#), rather than swimming, is recommended by the RNLI, RLSS and NWSF because it tends to conserve heat and energy when in cold water.

All participants in rowing should be competent and confident in the water. Each club is expected to use its Risk Assessment to determine the capability that it requires its members to have. In particular, the club risk assessment may determine that the ability to swim is essential if there is a risk of a member entering the water upstream of a weir and being swept over that weir.

It should be recognised that the ability to swim in a pool does not guarantee the ability to swim in cold, exposed waters. This is explained further in the online learning module on [Cold Water and Hypothermia](#) and the [Safety Alert - Cold Water Kills](#).

Everyone taking part in rowing should be able to:

- Float unaided for at least five minutes

And ideally

- Swim at least 50 metres in light clothing (rowing kit).
- Tread water for at least two minutes.
- Swim under water for at least five metres.

Those rowers who can only float or swim when wearing a buoyancy aid should also wear such an aid, or a lifejacket if coxing, whenever they are afloat.

The sentence highlighted in yellow was added this year.

There is clear evidence to show that if someone falls in then it is safer to float than it is to try to swim. This is presented here [RNLI: Float to Live](#) and here [The Science Behind Float To Live](#).

Take care of your Trailer this winter

At some point soon some clubs will take their trailers out of use and park them for the winter. Please take care not to apply the handbrake when doing so, this is particularly important if the trailer is parked outside. If the handbrake is left on, then the brake shoes can become seized to the cylinders in such a way that they will not release when the brake lever is lowered. When the trailer is moved then the seized brakes may overheat and damage the running gear. It would be better to leave the handbrake off and, if necessary, chock the wheels so that the trailer will not roll away.

Capsize Training

I was asked for advice on capsize training and specifically on conducting capsize training in open water rather than in a swimming pool.

The response was Capsize training is safe in a swimming pool, but I would not recommend doing it in open water. Even if the water is free from chemical, biochemical, and biological contamination and is not cold then there are additional risks. Pools contain clear water, and the sides and bottom are usually white or a light colour. If there is a person in the water, then they are easy to find and as there is no flow and no risk of being carried into a hazard. This is not the case in open water.

I once conducted a fatal accident enquiry for World Rowing when a rower drowned during a capsize drill in a lake in Zimbabwe. There was also an incident in this county this year when the first person to enter the water to search for a person who had jumped from a bridge over a river could not find them. The second person to enter the water did find them and bring them to the surface (and thereby saved their life).

Try to ensure that the skills needed to survive a capsize in the places where your rowers are likely to row are included in the training. Some people row on large, deep lakes and others row on shallow canals. If your advice to rowers is “if you capsize then stand up and walk ashore” then this should be reflected in your training.

The basic protocol in response to a capsize is: -

1. Get free from the boat
2. Get out of the water and
3. Get off the water

It is also important to Stay with the Boat – It is your Liferaft.

The protocol is described in more detail in the British Rowing Capsize Drill training on RowHow here [Course: Capsize Drill | Home](#).

We developed the following method when we were Coach Educators (we still are).

The basic idea is that each person: -

1. rescues someone else,
2. rescues themselves and is
3. rescued by someone else

We start with a couple of people in the water, one at each end of the boat. We do not use ropes, etc. The first person gets into the sculling boat from the side of the pool and is pushed out clear of the side. The person in the water at the stern of the boat then climbs onto the stern and the rower sitting in the boat takes a couple of little strokes. That rower has then experienced rescuing someone else using buddy rescue.

The next stage is for the person on the stern canvas to slide back into the pool and the rower in the boat to practise the core element of the capsize drill as shown in the video. They capsize, climb onto their inverted boat, sit astride and take a few strokes paddling with their hands. In this way they experience rescuing themselves. They re-enter the water and the boat is taken to the side of the pool for the next person. Once the boat has returned to the centre of the pool then the person who has just capsized, climbs onto the stern and experiences what it is like to be the subject of buddy rescue.

The people in the water at each end of the boat are there to provide support if needed. They each get their turn at rescuing someone else and being rescued by someone else. It is important, but not difficult to control the rotation of people, just to get the logistics right.

This process is efficient and can be completed quickly. People who are less confident watch their colleagues and by the time it is their turn, they know what to do.

Guidance for Rowers and Paddlers

In 2017 we worked with colleagues at British Canoeing to produce Guidance for Rowers and Canoeists on Shared Water. This was intended to build a better understanding between help rowers and canoeists, and their clubs, to improve their relationship.

Recently we have been working with colleagues at Paddle UK to update the terminology so that it includes paddlesport generally. This has resulted in the production of Guidance for Rowers and Paddlers on shared water; it is available on the British Rowing website here [Guidance-for-Rowers-and-Paddlers.pdf](#).

Other work with Paddle UK

Several Incident Reports contained information about interactions between rowers and canoeists or Stand Up Paddleboarders. These have been shared with my colleague at Paddle UK.

Rescuing an unknown person in the water

Advice on how a rower in a 1x can assist a person in distress in the water was provided to me. This consisted of: -,

- *Try, if possible, to not get involved, though no one wishes to stand by and watch someone drown. Talk to them and try to assess if they wish to be saved.*
- *If you have the ability, you can offer the stern of your boat to the person in the water (manoeuvre your stern towards them). Keep talking to them gently, do not let them try to climb onto your stern, if they do, row away. Then offer your stern again but tell them you will only help them if they do as they are told and just hold the stern of the boat and only if they hold it gently.*
- *If the person in the water complies, tow them, or push them, gently into the bank. Any violence, row away, they will soon calm down. Do not risk your own life. Keep a watchful eye for launches arriving throwing up a large wash.*

My comment was that I am afraid that real life is not as nice as we would like it to be. I remember learning to qualify as a lifeguard when working at the local Swimming Baths, in the summer of 1969 before going to college. We learned that people being rescued could be panicked by the thought of drowning and would tend to grab hold of, and support themselves on, anything that could keep them afloat. This includes the body of the rescuer. We were taught to approach the casualty from behind, underwater and had to learn disengagement techniques. Some of these were violent. We also had to learn how to restrain people we were towing if they panic and try to break free.

Current day pool staff carry floats so that they can offer one end to the casualty and hold the other end to tow the casualty to safety. That maintains a safe distance between the rescuer and the casualty.

The use of what is effectively buddy rescue to save the life of a person in trouble in the water needs a bit of thought. It is right to be cautious. If the casualty is a rower who has experienced buddy rescue (preferably including as the casualty) and they are reasonably calm, then proceeding in the way described makes sense. If they are passive or semi-conscious, then it may be safe to proceed providing the casualty is sufficiently aware to do what they are told.

The last thing we want is for the casualty to grab the boat and cause it to capsize. We would then have two, or more, casualties in the water. If the rescuer becomes a casualty, then they would be no further help to the casualty.

If the casualty is panicking then it would be best not to approach too closely but speak to them to try to calm them down and call for help from a launch (or other boat) driver or a person on the bank, possibly using Public Rescue Equipment (Life ring & Line) or a coach with a throwline. If you can get them to lie back and float (on their backs with their ears in the water) then that may tend to diffuse the situation. The "ears in the water" concept is important, see [The Science Behind Float To Live](#).

There is more information on the Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS) website here [How to rescue someone from drowning](#)