

Surviving a Career in Adventure Activities



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We all love the adventure activities that brought us into this business and most of us put lots of time outside the job into paddling, sailing, climbing, biking, hill walking, skiing and every other adventure sport that can be imagined...and a few that can't.

This degree of passion is one of the reasons why adventure education is such a vibrant field, but there is a downside. Imagine being unable to go up a hill because your knees are worn out, unable to paddle because of chronic ear problems, unable to sail because of permanent back injury. Some can no longer even contemplate such activities as a result of a serious accident at work. Many instructors who have ended up with these problems could have avoided them with better working practices.

Read on!



Judgement and Self Protection

To survive working in the outdoors you need to have a good attitude towards your own safety at work. Instructors do have accidents! Accident rates among adventure activity workers are recognised as being low when compared to other industries, but the evidence is that those that do occur tend to be serious ones, and quite commonly include cases involving permanent disability and death. The vital thing is to understand that it can happen to you. You are not invulnerable!

Most accidents to instructors occur in simple circumstances – not during unusually dramatic and challenging activities. Some of the dangerous situations you face are:

- Over familiarity with a location
- Complacency and overconfidence
- Being distracted from looking after your own safety
- Forgetting your own safety when assisting a participant in difficulty
- Losing concentration during repetitive tasks.



Many instructors are originally attracted to the freedom, excitement and unconventionality of adventure sports. It can be a short step from there to thinking that you can ignore the rules and systems that are designed for your own safety – because the “macho” side of you knows best. Can you honestly say you have never been put in danger at work by your own bad attitude?

Good judgement and high technical expertise in an activity are not the same thing. It is hard to recognise when we are getting ourselves into a threatening situation and one of the vital lessons that experience can give is the ability to recognise the patterns leading stepwise to a dangerous situation.

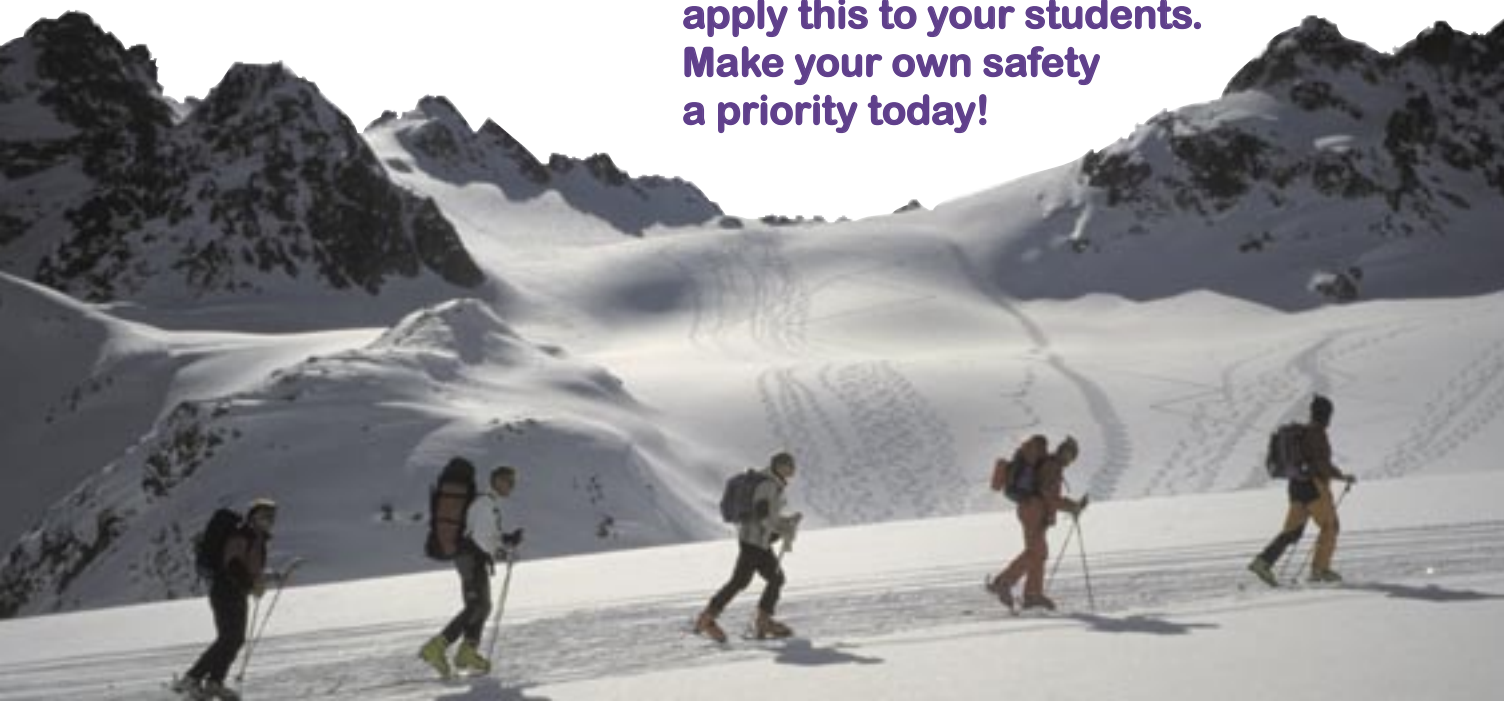
Good judgement can be helped by:

- Making mistakes and learning from them
- Planning in the expectation that not everything will go according to plan
- Recognising that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link
- Studying the experiences of others, especially when things go wrong
- Having a cautious, thoughtful and well informed approach to risk

Good judgement can be jeopardised by:

- Fatigue, hostile weather, lack of food and drink
- Peer pressure, trying to please other people
- A “macho” approach
- Perceived time pressure
- Over-confidence or over-ambition
- Poor planning and preparation
- False assumptions
- Not spotting that a situation of “apparent risk” is becoming one of “actual risk”
- Over reliance on the possibility of help

A good instructor never stops learning about good judgement. Don't just apply this to your students. Make your own safety a priority today!



Awareness of Hazards

People working in adventurous activities outdoors generally recognise that the environments in which they operate - cliff faces, raging rivers, the open sea - are by necessity hazardous but, through the application of skill and good judgment, we aim to reduce the risk to a tolerable level.

You will see two distinct forms of injuries to adventure activity workers - the chronic and the catastrophic. Chronic injuries include Surfer's Ear, dislocated shoulders and tendon damage for paddlers, worn out knees, strained backs and damaged feet for climbers, cavers and walkers.

The cumulative effects of pounding into a winter climbing venue every working day of the season with a heroically heavy rucksack, facing hurricane-force winds and unstable rock, ice and snow can easily add up to serious wear and tear injury. This cumulative effect can be difficult to spot and you may not recognise its occurrence until years later – when it may be too late.

By contrast, a serious mistake while ascending a V Diff that you have climbed every other Tuesday for the last five years, can result in sudden catastrophic injury that can entirely change your life in a few seconds.



Within adventure activities 'catastrophic' accidents appear to be most likely when working at height, working on water, or travelling at speed. This is hardly surprising information but some of us behave as though the law of gravity has been specially suspended on our behalf...

Drownings are truly catastrophic. In the last ten years this has been the cause of several fatalities affecting both workers and participants. As a result, some excellent guidance aimed, in particular, at the difficult water/rock margin has been produced. Are you familiar with this?

It is shocking how many accidents and incidents occur when the worker least expects it. Given the chance to abseil into Gaping Gill every one of us would check and double check our harness, before inching over the edge. When you are entirely focussed on the safety of a group of eight excited young cavers, as you head into the same introductory cave that you have been using for years it is all too easy to cut corners with your own safety.

Here are some of the less spectacular issues that can be overlooked:

Physical hazards

- Back injuries resulting from poor lifting technique (boats on trailers, launching dinghies, loading roof racks)
- Wear and tear injuries resulting from over use (mountaineers and runners have bad knees, canoeists suffer from tendonitis, Surfer's Ear is becoming increasingly common)
- Foot problems from poorly fitting / inappropriate footwear (tight rock shoes or ski boots)

We need to develop working systems and attitudes which encourage an appropriate use of "protective" equipment – walking poles make a big difference to knees, warm headwear can help avoid Surfer's Ear etc. Experienced instructors need to highlight these issues so that less experienced members of staff can start their careers with good working habits.



Environmental hazards

Instructors are often very aware of the primary hazard that they have identified in a situation but we also need to be aware of “secondary” hazards:

- Loose rock on our local crag (do we always wear a helmet?)
- Other climbers or canoeists operating on adjacent routes or above us, (rock fall, dropped equipment, out of control paddlers etc)
- Are we safe on ledges? Do we always concentrate and stay tied in?
- Are we safe in eddies? Do we always concentrate and keep control of our boat?
- On winter ascents have we fully considered the avalanche danger as well as the technical difficulties?
- Do we fully appreciate how serious even a small fall can be?
- Are we overly dependent on equipment – what happens if we break a paddle mid-rapid? Or lose a crampon mid-climb? Or if we lose a map?



Injury Prevention

It is very clear that those working in the outdoor industry develop a variety of chronic injuries. Endless repetitions of poor movement patterns are the root of the problem and leave us with significant soft tissue injuries in later life.

Ask yourself:

- Who helps to put the boats away, who loads the trailer?
- Who launches/recovers the dinghy?
- Who does all the rescues?
- Who carries the heaviest sacks on expedition or even day walks?
- Who holds all the falls?

Talk to a group of outdoor centre staff who have worked in the business for fifteen years or more. Few of them will have avoided some chronic injury to backs, knees, shoulders or ankles and their condition will probably continue to deteriorate.

Our bodies resemble a climbing rope, in that muscles and tendons are made up of huge numbers of slim fibres. Poor movement technique can injure some of these fibres, much as standing on a rope can cut a few individual fibres.

Fortunately, unlike the rope, your body can repair itself, but unfortunately, where soft tissue is concerned, scar tissue means that this repair is never as good as the original and weaknesses accumulate. Eventually, after years of misuse, the bundle of fibres is so weakened that catastrophic failure can occur. It can be very difficult to recover from such injuries.



Avoidance of Injury

The classic approach to avoiding injury from manual handling is

- Remove the risk
- Do everything reasonably practicable to reduce the risk to acceptable levels
- Involve everyone at risk in thorough training and monitor that the training has been incorporated into good practice

We cannot always remove the risk but there are many things that can, and should, be done:

- The coach does not have to be more active than the learner! They may only have a few days' activity – you have to pace yourself over a lifetime!
- Encourage clients to lift boats properly and as a group. You can ensure that yours is also carried by the group, so you don't ever have to lift it. Some commercial rafting guides are required not to involve themselves in moving rafts on land.
- If practicable, use a trolley to move boats on shore.
- Ensure air bags or extra buoyancy is fitted in all boats to reduce weight to be lifted.
- Spread emergency gear around a group so that your rucksack is not overly heavy.

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- Teach a group how to do 'deep water rescues' so that you only have to do them in emergencies.
- Wear shock absorbing inserts in your footwear to reduce loading on knees and ankles.
- Always wear protective gear like helmets, gloves and knee protectors when caving or helmets, gloves and eyewear when cycling.
- Use poles for walking to help relieve strain on knees, though recognise that this may cause problems with your shoulder or elbow joints!
- Ask for some manual handling training and take guidance from more experienced staff.
- Warm up, then mobilization, then light stretching before every activity session, taking the joints of the body through their normal range of movement and stretching connective tissue and tendons around the joints.
- Coaching good practice now points to doing stretching sessions as a specific individual session – probably best done inside, where it is warm and dry.

Rehabilitation

What should you do if you become aware of, or suffer, some soft tissue injury? People rarely seek expert help soon enough, yet this is proven to be the most important way of improving rehabilitation. Even if you don't seek expert help or if you have to wait a couple of days before getting help, at least apply the principles of R.I.C.E.

- Rest
- Ice
- Compression
- Elevate



Most employers take very seriously their legal requirement to protect employees. They are your first source of information on specific local hazards such as radon gas accumulations in caves or water borne infection. Imaginative contracts offering varying work patterns may well be one of the best solutions to repetitive injury - so why not take this up with your employer?

Unfortunately, we are often our own worst enemies. After a day working on the lake with a group, many canoe coaches will be back in their boats that evening for a personally challenging run down one of the local rivers. Climbers, cavers and sailors all have similar recreational patterns which add to their wear and tear.

A minor injury at work is unlikely to recover if we try to maintain personal performance by grabbing every opportunity to get on the hill or on the water.

You need to take proper personal responsibility for your long term health. Freelance staff are at particular risk, as it is often hard to turn work down, and there is no long term employer monitoring your work pattern.



Aggressive or Challenging Behaviours

In some areas of adventure education, workers may regularly be faced with behaviour from clients that is aggressive and challenging. At best this is disconcerting, at worst a terrifying experience as behaviour swings from aggressive posturing to the 'worst case' situation of being faced by someone with a knife. The greatest hazard may be outside formal activity time, particularly in residential situations. Remember also that aggressive behaviour is not confined to certain individuals, but can be manifested by almost anyone under the wrong circumstances.

Fights do occur and staff will usually feel obliged to intervene, possibly at some

threat to their own well-being. Do not underestimate the potential danger of doing this. You need to operate cautiously and conservatively. The most important consideration is your own safety – just like lifesaving in water. Wherever possible, aim to defuse the situation and try to get training to prepare you for this. Don't be a dead hero! Seriously aggressive encounters are beyond the skills of most outdoor generalists.

Organisations working with challenging individuals will normally have:

- Policies and procedures regarding child protection, discipline, reporting of incidents and violent behaviour.
- Methods and means of gaining important information about the young people they are working with, in order to ensure that appropriate staff are given responsibility and are aware of the young peoples needs.



- Access to specialist departments, staff or agencies who can advise and give support.
- Staff training that is proportionate, relevant and timely. Recognition of behaviour patterns, avoidance techniques and training in how to “defuse” may be essential topics.
- Opportunities to review the above with staff from time to time.
- Risk assessments identifying the main hazards.

The support of visiting staff from the school or agency can be invaluable since they will often have a relationship with individuals which has been built up over a longer period of time.

It is reasonable for staff to expect some emotional support to be available in challenging work of this kind and be able to discuss situations with an experienced colleague. In more extreme situations personal and professional counselling may be necessary. Formal systems relating to personal disclosures by a young person (for example, of abuse) are aimed to protect both the young person and the worker.



Psychological and Emotional Health

Most instructors are very good at radiating positivity and enthusiasm to their clients, but behind this façade they can have the same anxieties and feelings of anxiety or depression as workers in any other field. Cumulative fatigue, or a sense of failing powers as the years advance, can all take their toll and once a condition is established it can start to affect your professional judgment and your personal life.

If you are affected in this way, don't hesitate to seek help from a senior colleague or your doctor. Your ability to work effectively is just as compromised as it is for someone with a broken ankle or other obvious injury.

Conclusion

We are all privileged to have challenging and rewarding work. How many other workers regularly get told “that was the best thing I've ever done in my life!”

Just make sure you are still able to enjoy it long into the future.

The authors would be pleased to hear any suggestions you have for working more safely in the field.

■ ■ Good luck!



Background to this Advice

Within the last decade there has been an increase both in the level of participation in adventure activities and also in those who see Adventure Activities as their career.

AAIAC's role includes an aim to maintain and improve on Health and Safety standards in adventure activities in the UK. This advice is targeted at those who are working professionally in providing adventure activities or those who work regularly in the voluntary sector of adventure education.

By raising awareness and providing some basic guidance, it is hoped that both individual workers and employers will be encouraged both to take responsibility and to address, currently, unsatisfactory situations.



AAIAC acknowledges the contribution of the following to this booklet: Bob Barton, Iain Peter, Tom Redfern, John Cousins, Nigel Timmins and Simon Waring.

You can contact AAIAC through its Secretariat: Charlotte Edward [cedward@ccpr.org.uk].





The **Adventure Activities Industry Advisory Committee (AAIAC)** is representative of a wide range of stakeholders from the UK adventure activities sector. AAIAC works with the industry to identify, develop and

disseminate good practice, and to advise Governments and Agencies accordingly.

The AAIAC is supported by **CCPR** and **SkillsActive**.



SkillsActive is the **Sector Skills Council** for active learning and leisure, including the Outdoors and Sport & Recreation. Sector Skills Councils are government

licensed agencies, whose main aim is to help industry sectors become more successful. SkillsActive is a registered charity and membership organisation. It is led and supported by employers to represent and promote the industry sector mainly in the field of skills development and related activities.

The AAIAC is the technical reference group to the SkillsActive Outdoors Employer Group. For further details on SkillsActive see www.skillsactive.com



One voice for Sport and Recreation

The **CCPR (Central Council of Physical Recreation)** is the representative body for 270 national governing bodies of sport and other national sport and recreation

organisations. Its mission is to promote, protect and provide for sport and recreation. The CCPR strategic plan for 2006-2010 states that by 2010 CCPR will be recognised for its part in securing positive policy outcomes for sustainable access to land and water for sport and recreation, underpinned by good practice in outdoor and adventurous activities.

For further details on CCPR see www.ccpr.org.uk

The Institute for Outdoor Learning has designed and published this booklet and AAIAC is grateful for its support.



Institute for Outdoor Learning

The **Institute for Outdoor Learning** encourages participation in outdoor learning by developing

quality, safety and opportunity in outdoor provision and by supporting and enhancing the good practice of those who work in the field.

To find out more about how IOL can benefit your outdoor career see www.outdoor-learning.org