

How to Save an Active Drowning Victim

User
Reviewed

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If you see someone bobbing vertically in the water and unable to call for help, act quickly to determine whether the person is drowning and rescue him or her immediately. Drowning happens in a matter of minutes; if there's no life saving guard around you'll have to perform the rescue yourself. If you're prepared, you'll be able to make a real difference in someone else's life, and potentially save them if you know the right things.

Method
1

Assessing the Situation

1 Determine whether the person is drowning. Active drowning victims are conscious but are struggling and unable to call for help. They also may be thrashing their arms. It is very important for you to recognize these signs early as people will become submerged in 20 to 60 seconds.^[1]

- An active drowning victim will bob in and out of the water with his or her mouth being just above the surface of the water. The person is not making forward progress either.^[2]
- Someone who looks as though they're having trouble, but isn't yelling for help, may not have enough oxygen to call out.

2 Shout for help. No matter your experience or training, having others assist you is a good idea. Yell to others that someone is drowning. [Call emergency services](#) immediately, especially if the person is floating face-down.^[3]

3 Decide which rescue method to use. [Remain calm](#) and figure out how you can best rescue the person based on the location and type of body of water the person is in. Find a flotation device if you can. If the person is close, use a reach method. If the person is further away, use an ocean rescue method.^[4]

- It may take a few seconds to get the person's attention. Stay calm and continue to talk to them.
- If you have one available, a shepherd's crook can reach someone beyond the range of a reaching assist in a pool or lake.
- Use a ring buoy or other easy to throw rescue device to reach a victim further away from the shore; this is also used in an ocean rescue.
- [Dive](#) into the water and swim to the victim as a last resort, when the victim is out of reach.

4 Proceed with the rescue. [Stay calm](#) and [focused](#). People who panic are more likely to make mistakes and may also stress out the victim. [Call](#) to the victim that you're coming to his or her aid.

Method
2

Performing a Reaching Assist

1 Lie face down on the edge of the pool or dock. Spread your legs to make sure that you are in a stable position. Never extend yourself to the point where you lose your balance. Reach out to the person and yell, "Grab my hand/arm/paddle!" You may have to yell multiple times before the person hears or sees you. Speak in a voice that is loud, clear and confident.^[5]

- This type of rescue is only helpful if the drowning victim is within reach of the side of the pool, pier, or close to the shore.^[6]
- Do not attempt to perform a reaching assist while standing. This puts you in a precarious position, and you are more likely to fall into the water.
- Reach out your dominant hand, since you'll be using your strength to pull the victim to safety.
- Grab an object you can use to extend your reach if the person is a little too far for your arm to reach. Almost

anything that can add a few feet to your reach can help; a boat paddle or a rope are also effective if the person is able to grab them.

- Pull the person safely out of the water and gently help him or her get onto dry ground.^[7]

2 Locate the shepherd's crook. This is a long metal pole with a hook on the end that can be used either as a handle for the victim to grab, or as a device to wrap around the victim in the event that the victim is unable to hold onto it himself. Many pools and outdoor swimming areas are stocked with this tool. ^[8]

- Warn other people on the deck to stand away from the end of the stick in case it hits them. You don't want them to interfere with the rescue.

3 Stand slightly away from the edge of the deck. Brace your feet in case the victim pulls on the pole. Be sure you're far enough back that you don't risk getting pulled into the water. Hold the hook where the drowning person can reach it, and call to the victim to grab the hook. If the person is unable to grab it, dip the hooked part further into the water and wrap it around the person's torso, just below his or her armpits.^[9]

- Make sure the hook is not near the person's neck, since this could lead to injury.
- Aim carefully, as it is often difficult to see.
- You will feel a sharp tug when the person finds the crook.

4 Pull the person to safety. Verify that the person has grasped the object before you begin to pull him or her in.^[10] Slowly and carefully pull the victim to the side until he or she is close enough for you to use a reaching assist to pull him to the wall. Lie down and make sure you are stable before performing the reaching assist.^[11]

Method
3

Performing A Throwing Assist

1 Find a floating aid. A floating aid with a line attached is ideal because the line can help you pull the victim in. A ring buoy, life jacket, and floating cushions are often found at lifeguard stations at pools and outdoor swimming areas. Boats are also equipped with ring buoys, so use this rescue if the incident occurs while you're out in the middle of a body of water.^[12]

2 Throw the floating aid. Toss the float so that it lands within reach of the victim, but do not strike the victim directly. Take the wind and the current of the water into consideration before you throw. Let the victim know that you are about to throw the aid, and that he or she needs to grab the aid.^[13]

- A good goal is to throw the ring just past the victim, then pull it to him or her with the rope.
- If you miss the victim or he or she is unable to grab the aid, pull the line back or try throwing another device.
- If repeated attempts are unsuccessful, you may need to try another method or swim to push the device closer to the victim.^[14]

3 Try throwing a line. An unweighted rope can also be used to rescue a victim. Loosely coil the rope or line in your non-throwing hand by tying a small loop on one end and placing your wrist in the loop. Use an underhand motion to throw the ring, and allow the rope to uncoil freely from your non-throwing hand. Step on the end of the rope so that you do not accidentally throw the ring away.^[15]

- Aim for the victim's shoulder when throwing a line.
- Once the victim grabs the line, drop the coil, and begin to slowly pull the line until the victim has reached the side or is able to stand in shallow water.

Method
4

Performing a Swimming Rescue

1 Be sure of your swimming abilities. Swim rescues should be used as a last resort. They require training and very good swimming skills. Victims are often thrashing and panicking which can make it hazardous to perform a swimming rescue.^[16]

2 Dive in with an aid. Do not attempt a swimming rescue without a buoy on hand; a drowning victim's first reaction will be to climb on top of you, so you'll need a flotation device to keep both of you safe and perform the rescue effectively. If you don't have a buoy, go in with a t-shirt or towel that the victim can grab onto.^[17]

3 Swim to the victim. Use the **freestyle stroke** to quickly get to the drowning person. If you are in a large body of water, use **ocean swimming techniques** to avoid getting tossed back in a wave. Toss the buoy or rope for the person to grab.^[18]

- Instruct the victim to grab the object. Remember not to swim right up to the victim, since he or she is likely to push you under the water.

4 Swim back to shore. Move in a straight line back to shore, towing the person behind you. Check back every few paces to make sure he or she is still holding the buoy or rope. Continue swimming until you make it safely back to shore, then exit the water.

- Keep a safe distance between you and the victim.

Method 5

Caring for the Victim after the Rescue

1 Assess the person's ABCs - airway, breathing and circulation. Make sure someone has called 911 and check the ABCs. Determine if the person is breathing in and out, and if anything is obstructing his or her airway. If the person is not breathing, feel for a pulse on the wrist or the side of the neck. The pulse should be checked for 10 seconds.^[19]

2 Start CPR. If the person has no pulse, begin performing CPR. For adults and children, place the heel of one hand on the center of the chest or place one hand on top of the other. Perform 30 chest compressions at the rate of 100 per minute. Press down about 2 inches. Allow the chest to rise completely between pushes. Check to see if the person has started breathing.^[20]

- Do not press on the victim's ribs.
- If the victim is an infant, 2 fingers should be placed on the breastbone. Press down about 1.5 inches.

3 Give breaths if the person is still not breathing. Only give breaths if you are trained in CPR. Begin by tilting the head back and lifting the person's chin. Pinch the nose, cover the victim's mouth with yours, and give 2, one second breaths. Watch to make sure the chest is rising. Follow the 2 breaths with 30 chest compressions.^[21]

- Continue this cycle until the person begins breathing or professional emergency help arrives.

Community Q&A

How can I save someone who is drowning in cold water?

wikiHow
Contributor

You should not to panic, because you could lose valuable energy you will need more in the cold water. Be ready to dive through the waves to get to them faster, because in cold water, every second counts. Get both of you out of the water as quickly as possible, and remove all wet clothing, covering up with dry blankets or clothes.

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Suppose there are two people: one is not breathing and the other is thrashing about and going under and coming up. Which should I rescue first?

wikiHow
Contributor

Rescue the one with the better chance of survival first. It may seem cruel, but that's how it is.

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Do I use the backboard to take someone out of the pool if they are active drowning?

wikiHow
Contributor

Not typically. Backboards are mostly only used for when the victim has a suspected spinal injury or is unconscious.

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How do I save a drowning person when I don't have any flotation devices?

wikiHow
Contributor

If you can swim, be prepared to get wet. Get in the water, grab the person, and pull them out of the water as quickly as possible.

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How can I save someone if an electric wire is in a pool and I can't swim?

wikiHow
Contributor

If there is an electric wire in the pool, they are probably already dead, unfortunately. Whether you can swim or not, stay out of the pool for your own safety and call 911.

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How do I rescue a person who is in the water and had a heart attack?

wikiHow
Contributor

(I am a qualified RLSS UK Lifeguard) You would rescue them as normal using any of the tow supports, buoyancy devices, or rescue aids available. If you had no help to get them out of the pool, you would support them as you hold onto the side of the pool, check their breathing, and if they aren't breathing (they have most likely inhaled water from having a heart attack), perform 5 rescue breaths through the nose. Call an ambulance and conduct CPR until they arrive.

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What do I do if I try a reaching assist, and the victim doesn't grab it?

wikiHow
Contributor

Keep calmly repeating that he or she must grab the object. If this does not work, try a swimming assist or a throwing assist.

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What do I do if the person is injured?

wikiHow
Contributor

Carefully remove the person from the water, and very carefully assess where he/she is injured. Call 911 or 000, and get help.

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Why is a drowning man kept in a recovery position to the left?

wikiHow
Contributor

So he can breathe, and the water doesn't stop him from breathing as he should.

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Tips

- You are the first priority. If you feel your life is in danger, remove yourself from the situation and reevaluate and then try the rescue again.
- When you get someone to the pool wall put their hands on top of each other and put your hands on top of theirs so they don't let go. Gently tip their head backwards so their head doesn't go into the water.
- Only enter the water if there is nothing around that could be used to reach the victim. Being in the water with someone in a panicked state, like a drowning victim, can be fatal to both the rescuer and the drowning victim.
- If the victim is panicking, it may be safest to take a hold of him/her from behind. If you try to take hold from the front, he/she may, in panic, grab onto you too tightly, thus pulling both of you under. The best way to get a hold of his/her hair or back of the shoulder-from behind. Do not touch his/her hands.
- Do not attempt a reaching assist from a standing position or you may be pulled into the water.
- Take a buoy with you when using the swim rescue as his/her's first reaction is to climb on top of you, use this so you and him/her are above water level. If not, you will both drown together.

Sources and Citations

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