

ncidents such as the tragic events in Padstow just over a year ago highlight the need to take an assertive approach to safety. Keeping people safe is not about having the most kit or the latest electronic gizmo. It all starts with you – the skipper – having an approach where safety sits at the centre of what you do. So what makes a good skipper?

Firstly, a good skipper fully understands that they have complete responsibility for everything that occurs on the craft. That's not to say that they need to actually do everything, but they know the 'buck stops with them'. They appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of the crew they have on board and ensure that the boating they do is within everyone's capabilities and will be fun. They will always be trying to develop the skills of others by delegating responsibility for new tasks – such as the daily checks, checking the safety kit etc. – and will

ensure that even the most inexperienced get plenty of time at the helm. They will make sure that anyone who comes onto their boat that they haven't boated with before gets a full safety brief and understands where the lifesaving appliances are on board and how to deploy them. A good skipper will always be aware of the possible risks in what they do and take a proactive approach.

Accidents don't happen!

While from time to time things do go wrong that could never have been predicted, many of the inquiries into incidents afloat seem to show that the vast majority of 'accidents' occur after the skipper has failed to address various seemingly minor issues that in isolation are perhaps not a great problem, but together may cause a big issue. Here's an example:

It's the start of the season; you haven't had the boat in the water for six months. At the end

of last season there were a few issues with the engine but you think it's probably fine. Your regular crew mate isn't around but another mate, who hasn't boated much before, is keen to get afloat. Your mate is keen to do a trip of about 20 miles along the coast; you're not so sure but go along with the idea. The winds are light but they're blowing from the north, keeping the temperature right down. You go out, and about halfway through your passage you start to lose power intermittently. The wind is still light but the tide is running strongly and you are now in trouble. It's very cold. You try to contact the coastguard but your VHF calls are struggling to be heard; you have no mobile signal. Your inexperienced friend starts to be seasick.

It's easy to look at this example as an unfortunate and unavoidable incident, but at any stage the skipper could have prevented it





Skipper giving safety briefing

from ever reaching this degree of seriousness by dealing with each of the contributory factors – check the boat is working fine before a longer passage; with a new crewmember limit the distance and duration of the first passage, and so on. It's a skipper's role to be able to see these risks and the cumulative effect of seemingly minor issues and take a proactive approach to safety.

In summary, whatever your level of experience, as skipper the buck stops with you. Be proactive about safety – look after your boat and crew and they will look after you.

In terms of the safety kit you should carry, it will really depend on where you are going boating, how many other craft frequent the area you are in, how far offshore you are going etc.

As a relatively new boater, you'd be sensible to stay closer to your home base/launch site until you have developed your skills and experience.

In a busy location such as the Solent or Poole Harbour/Poole Bay, you will rarely be that far away from other craft or the shore, which influences what equipment you should carry.

As a rough guide, the minimum to consider

carrying is: life jackets of a suitable size for all on board, warm clothes for all on board, a spare kill cord and battery key, flares (two orange handheld and two red handheld), a handheld VHF radio, a mobile phone (as a backup to the VHF), a rescue throw line, a tool kit to include a variety of tools and a roll of gaffer tape and cable ties, a serrated knife to cut lines, some fresh water and high-energy snack bars, an anchor and chain/line, various mooring lines, a first-aid kit and fire extinguisher, a bailer/manual bilge pump, paddles, local charts and tide tables. A handheld GPS unit is always handy too. If you are going to boat either in less populated areas or further away from base, then you need to be more self-sufficient and better able to contact the rescue services should the need arrive.

You might consider adding to your kit: more flares – perhaps four rocket flares and four

Good planning, training, practice and familiarisation are key...





Skipper issuing distress call

handheld orange and red flares, a larger tool kit and selection of spares, a fixed VHF set in addition to the handheld; a chartplotter becomes the norm too when boating further afield. If possible, carry a suitably sized small outboard as an alternative means of propulsion.

The reduction in price of electronic methods of issuing distress such as EPIRBs means that this becomes a realistic proposition too in more remote areas.

If it does all go wrong, you will need to be able to effectively contact the rescue services. Make sure, though, that it is not just you that knows how to do this. As part of your safety

briefing when you start your day afloat, explain the various ways of issuing distress and show where the safety items are stowed and how they are deployed. Extend this briefing even to the youngsters on board - they can certainly use a VHF for distress from a very young age.

If in trouble, there are two types of call that you can make:

Pan-Pan - when you need assistance but life is not in immediate danger.

Mayday - when you need assistance and life is in immediate danger.

(See MayDay & Pan Pan article in this issue).

With the VHF, if your handheld or fixed set is fitted with a red distress flap, the first step should always be to lift the flap and press and hold the button for at least five seconds to send out a digital distress message containing your vessel identity number (the 'MMSI' number) and position. (Note: some radios need you to press the button, release it, then hold it for at least five seconds.) [Editor's note: Do not hesitate to make your distress call even if you don't have your MMSI to hand!]

Then lift the handset, press the 'Push to talk' button and send the voice message:

'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, this is RIB Hunter, Hunter, Hunter. MMSI 235999999, call sign MTNY9. Mayday RIB Hunter. MMSI 235999999, call sign MTNY9.

Position 50° 47'.53N, 001° 16'.97W, close to Bramble Bank, aground, taking on water. Four persons on board, immediate assistance required. Over.'

Flares should be launched if it is likely that someone can see them. Wear gloves (a set of gardening gloves in the flare container is sensible) and follow the instructions. Always familiarise yourself and your crew with the method of deploying the flares well before you ever need to use them.

Use your mobile to call 999 and ask for the coastguard. Use a mobile as a backup, as the VHF can be heard by all afloat in contrast to the private nature of a phone.

If you have an EPIRB or other distress beacon, then as with flares, ensure you regularly look at how to deploy it quickly. Reading the instructions for the first time when you are sinking or on fire is not great!

In summary, as we have seen, safety is very much a state of mind. Good planning, training, practice and familiarisation are key too. Have fun afloat! PBR

MUST HAVE

The RYA Powerboat Handbook contains many more useful insights into how to make handling your boat a whole lot easier. It is available for £15.50 from the RYA website or on Amazon It will also soon be available as an e-book using the RYA app.





