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waves of emotion



by Anna Levesque

ADMIT IT. YOU GET GRIPPED ONCE IN A WHILE. THESE POINTERS SHOW HOW TO USE YOUR EMOTIONS TO YOUR ADVANTAGE.

All paddlers experience emotion on the river. Sometimes it's excitement at the completion of a difficult river or a new freestyle move. Other times it's frustration that comes from failing to attain a goal, fear in the face of a difficult rapid, or intimidation when paddling into an eddy full of skilled paddlers. There are many articles and resources in the kayaking world to help paddlers improve their technique, but very few have addressed how to manage the emotional aspects of kayaking. During the creation of *Girls at Play*, my instructional video for women, I conducted interviews with more than 20 female paddlers on their approach to the emotional side of kayaking. Combining my personal experience with the information collected from the interviews, I have come up with some helpful tips on how to approach and deal with the emotions we face on the river.

Fear

- Face your fear. Admit that you are afraid or nervous.
- Identify the source of your fear. It's important to separate "rational fear" from "irrational fear." Rational fear comes from a real consequence on the river: an undercut rock or a big recirculating hole. "Irrational fear" is fear from pre-conceived notions that we have about the dangers of water, a rapid, or a river. An example would be someone who won't practice her roll in a pool with an instructor because she is afraid of drowning. The chance of that person drowning in that situation is very slight. Yet she might have been told that practicing the roll is dangerous. Or she might have previously had a bad experience in water.
- Recognize the source of your fear to determine how best to approach the situation. If the fear you are dealing with is rational, then you might want to walk the rapid. If the fear is based on something someone else has said, you want to evaluate the situation objectively. Then you can determine what is best for your particular skill and confidence level.
- If a rapid makes you nervous, break it down. Focus on the Class II, III, and IV moves you'll have to make throughout the rapid and not on the "big, scary rapid."
- Breathe! Remember to breathe deeply, take the time to relax, and assess the situation with a clear mind.

- Paddle for yourself. Don't do something because someone else wants or expects you to do it. If you don't feel comfortable doing something, then don't do it.

Intimidation

- Remember that feelings of intimidation are often created in our own minds. Most paddlers are friendly people who like to see new faces on the river.
- Remember that every paddler has felt intimidated by someone at some point in his or her life. It is something that everyone experiences.
- Be kind to yourself. Focus your attention on what you are doing, not on who is around you and what they are doing.
- Get to know the person who intimidates you. You will probably discover that you have a lot in common.
- Smile and be friendly to other paddlers. Chances are that someone else is intimidated by you.

Crying

- It's OK to cry on the river. Crying is a common emotional outlet for people, especially women. It's important that male paddlers allow women to cry without trying to "make it better." In most cases, the paddler will feel much better after crying. Her head will be clearer and her emotions calmer. Healthy crying usually happens in short bursts. If you give a person the space and time to cry, she will feel much better, and your day will go much more smoothly. If, however, a paddler is crying uncontrollably and often, it's probably a good idea to get the person off the river.

In some paddling circles, showing emotion on the river is frowned upon. Paddlers who are thought of as "hard-core" are paddlers who are able "to keep it together." Kayaking doesn't have to be hard-core. There is something for everyone in kayaking, from Class II to Class V. Acknowledging and dealing with the emotional aspects of kayaking will help create a more comfortable and supportive environment for all paddlers.

Anna Levesque is a world-class kayaker who also has a fiery passion for salsa dancing. □