

## **“Help, my car is sinking!”**

This plea for help is a terror-filled call that no dispatcher wants to hear. But the dispatcher’s response will determine if the caller lives—or dies in a watery tomb.

Action, not location, is crucial to survival. Dispatchers need to change their regimental thinking when this particular call comes in. If the driver of the vehicle does not escape immediately—while the vehicle is still on the surface of the water—s/he will most likely drown. The dispatcher can ask questions **after** getting the driver (and occupants) out of and to the top of the vehicle.

I have served on the Indiana State Police Underwater Search and Recovery Team for 17 years. And I have been an Accident Reconstructionist longer than that. I am certified to dispatch and have been doing part time dispatching for more than 30 years. I am putting on all three hats to tell you how to save lives in a vehicle immersion.

**“Help, my car is in the water.”** When that call comes in, the first thing a dispatcher should do is encourage calm and follow **this** script:

“You are okay, your car will float. Release your seat belt, open your window. If children are present, release their restraints and help them into the front seat with you. You will all go out the window like a NASCAR driver, and climb to the top of the vehicle, children first.” If dispatchers follow these steps the vehicle’s occupants may not even get wet. Don’t let their vehicle become a coffin; get everyone out and on top before you ask them anything else. Now that everyone is out of the vehicle is the time to ask questions: “Is everyone out of the car? How many occupants are with you? Is your car still floating? Where are you? Are you in fast water?” Emphasize that they should stay on top of the vehicle while you assess the situation together.

There are numerous scenarios, but I am going to describe the most likely:

The vehicle has just entered the water and is not completely submerged. The car will float from two to 10 minutes **if doors have not been opened**. Automatic windows will usually open until the battery goes dead or shorts out.

If the window doesn’t open, the most effective way to break the glass is with a punch or glass-breaking tool. Most people will not have either tool at hand. Until vehicles are equipped with a glass-breaking device built into seat belt buckles, the occupants need to find a strong pointed object such as a key, seat belt buckle, tire tool, the posts on a headrest, rearview mirror handle, etc. (hands alone will not break the glass). Holding the tool in a fist, punch the tool into the

corner, not the middle, of the window. Pushing on the glass with a shoulder or hand while punching will be most effective. The occupants need both hands. Tell them to put their phone in their mouth, or in a pocket where it won't get wet or lost.

Once occupants are out and on top of the vehicle, assess the situation with them. If the car has stopped sinking, indicating that the water is shallow, they should be able to wade out to the closest bank, usually the path the vehicle followed into the water. If they are afraid of the water, tell them to stand or sit on top of the car until help arrives. If conditions require, and the driver and occupants can swim have them swim to shore. Continue to reassure them that help is on the way.

As I mentioned, there are numerous scenarios. For example:

- In fast water they should stay on top of the vehicle and ride it like a boat until it snags. If the vehicle snags (i.e., on a fence, stump, or the bottom), they should stay on the car until help comes. If they are in fast water and forced to swim they should strip off their clothes. **Note:** Wet blue jeans create tremendous drag, but wet jeans can also become an instant flotation device by knotting the legs, trapping air in the legs and grasping the waist. (This method is taught in water safety courses.) I recommend floating or swimming with the current, angling towards shore. Never swim **against** fast water.
- If the vehicle crashed through ice the occupants should follow the same procedure; however, if circumstances force them to jump they should land flat and roll to the bank so they don't break through ice.
- There may be people who are not ambulatory or who are too overweight to get out the window and to the top of the vehicle. If others are in the vehicle, the most agile person should go out first, assisting the others to crawl through a window directly into the water where they can float.

As a last resort, and only as a last resort, open the car door, if possible; but understand this would flood the car very quickly, cause the car to tip, and trap everyone else inside.

Education is key to understanding this process. The Indiana State Police (ISP) Underwater Search and Recovery Team 5 has developed a survival program to educate the public in vehicle immersion escape. This technique is simple to understand and remember. The video is available on the Internet at:

[http://www.igot2know.com/action/viewvideo/234/Two\\_Minutes\\_to\\_Survival/](http://www.igot2know.com/action/viewvideo/234/Two_Minutes_to_Survival/), or on the ISP

web site. The ISP has also produced a flyer that can be printed and distributed. It is on their web site at: [www.in.gov/isp/files/TwoMinutesToSurvival\\_Brochure.pdf](http://www.in.gov/isp/files/TwoMinutesToSurvival_Brochure.pdf).

Vehicle occupants have to save themselves, and dispatchers must help them save themselves **before** help arrives. Calm their fears. Tell them they can do it. "Just open the window, unbuckle your seatbelt, and get to the top of the car." **Do not tell them to stay in the car**, and do not waste valuable time asking them location questions as water fills the vehicle, drowning the occupants. Playbacks of victim/dispatcher conversations are numerous and prove that the time wasted trying to gather location information, rather than leading them to safety, has caused many occupants to drown. Dispatchers must first give them the course of action to survive. I demonstrate this technique with kids at our career camps. The average length of time it takes four ten-year-olds to roll down a window, unbuckle their seatbelts, and get to the top of the car is 20 seconds.

### **Call from a Witness**

When the 911 caller is a **witness** to a vehicle sinking into water:

1. Make one attempt to get location while you assess the situation. Is there immediate peril, and is the car sinking?
2. Dispatch rescue units to the general area.
3. Conduct a caller interrogation. Ask if they can shout to the occupants to roll down their windows, climb out the windows and get to the top of the car. If they succeed in talking the occupants to the top of the car, tell them to wait for rescue.
4. If the witness says the car is partially submerged and the driver did not get out and the caller asks whether or not s/he should attempt a rescue:
  - a) Warn that s/he must be an excellent swimmer and be trained in water rescue to successfully help a crash victim escape from a sinking car.
  - b) Explain that they will need a tool to break a window (submerged windows are more difficult to break; you cannot break it from the outside by pounding with your fist). Underwater Rescue Divers twist a knife into the edge of the window between the rubber seal and glass until the window is in a bind and the glass breaks. A tire tool would also work. Chances are the back window will be out of the water and will break easily with the tire tool.
  - c) If the car is only partially submerged, ask the witnesses if they can wade out to help the occupants or form a human chain. If the occupants are on top of the car and safe from drowning, there is no need to rush. If the witness helped the occupant get out, they both

can wait on top of the car. However in icy water or frigid temperatures, it may be best to make their way to shore. Reassure them that help is on the way.

Keep in mind that people may have been given incorrect survival information in the past. There are numerous inaccurate videos on the Internet and via other sources. Some of these are produced by people who are totally unqualified; others are sensationalized by reporters. For example, many people still believe, and many reporters still promote, letting the vehicle fill up with water before trying to escape. This method has caused more deaths than lives saved. Escape as quickly as possible, out the window, possibly before even touching the water. Unless the car hits a guard rail, the impact with the water is like landing on a pillow. Occupants survive the impact with the water, so it is up to the dispatcher to save them.

Other myths include:

*Myth: Your power windows won't roll down when your car is in the water.*

TRUTH: As long as your battery is connected, your electronics may still work. I have recovered cars that were in the water for 45 minutes; the radio was still playing, the wipers were going, and the headlights were visible. Remember, if a caller says that the windows will not roll down, some vehicles are equipped with window locks that are controlled by a switch near the driver's seat.

*Myth: You must stay in your seatbelt to prevent being thrown around the vehicle by the motion of the water.*

TRUTH: After the chaos of the initial accident and/or entry into the water, the vehicle will settle quickly and float for thirty seconds or more. This is the optimal time to get everyone out of their seatbelts and ready to exit the vehicle, open or break the window, and scramble to the top of the vehicle like a NASCAR driver. Every second that passes once the car is floating, and every inch that a vehicle sinks before all occupants escape, lessens the chance of survival.

Note: Advocates of staying belted while clearing the glass are putting lives in danger unnecessarily. These advocates are concerned that deepening water will toss the occupants around the cabin resulting in injury, panic, and confusion. The reality is that if the vehicle is still floating high in the water, the water will not flow over the window opening as the occupants exit. If the opening is below the water line, the water coming in will not be all that forceful. It is not like a tidal wave.

An added problem is that the water may be quite cold. Occupants strapped in will be forced to remain relatively stationary in the rising water and lose body heat quickly as the interior fills. Chances are good that panic is setting in. It is better to release the seatbelt immediately and let the survival instinct work to allow a self-rescue through the window.

Remember, the best solution involves getting everyone unbelted, out the window, and on top of the car before the water has a chance to fill the cabin and sink the car.

*Myth: Ride your car to the bottom to equalize the pressure so you can open your door.*

TRUTH: The weight/pressure of the water is very strong, keeping your door closed. **Don't try to open the door.** Go out the window while you are on the surface. Opening the door increases the water flow into your car causing your car to sink faster.

*Myth: There is an air pocket in the back of your car where you can breath.*

TRUTH: That air goes through the back seat cushion and out the trunk or blows out the back hatch. Don't waste time looking for an air pocket when you should be escaping out of the car's windows.

*Myth: You will be pulled down by the suction if you are near your car when it sinks.*

TRUTH: There is no suction. Water does not compress; it just fills in.

In conclusion, I would like dispatchers to think of this common sense approach to vehicle immersions and practice taking this call. Remember the victims' location is not important until they get to the top of the car. If the dispatcher keeps asking the victims where they are, I can predict every caller's location: they are in their tomb. Stop asking people for an address or location until after you get them out of the car following these steps.

#### Car in the water

- 1) Unbuckle your seat belt
- 2) Roll your window down or BREAK GLASS
- 3) Go out of the window and get to the top of your car (like a NASCAR driver). Get children out first. Don't bring anything with you. Don't go back in the car. Wait on top of the car for help.
- 4) Where are you?

#### CARRO EN EL AGUA

1. Desabrocha tu cinturón.
2. Abre la ventana o rompe el vidrio.

3. Sal por la ventana y subete encima del carro (como un conductor de carros en el NASCAR). Saca a los niños primero y deja tus cosas. No entres al carro otra vez. Espera encima del carro hasta que llegue ayuda.

4. Donde estas?

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