

Plan before you enter the water



A brief Theory of Planned Behaviour session for university open-water sports clubs

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The problem

26% of UK accidental drownings in 2020–24 were young people aged 10–29¹

Edinburgh’s student water-sport clubs have no mandatory risk assessment.

The session

Club committees, then members, learned risk assessment and basic drowning first aid, in a session built on the Theory of Planned Behaviour² as used in road safety.³

The evaluation

Anonymous surveys before (n = 22) and after (n = 25) the session scored each part of the model from 1 to 5.

What changed

73% → 100%

intend to risk assess and discuss the safety plan before entering the water

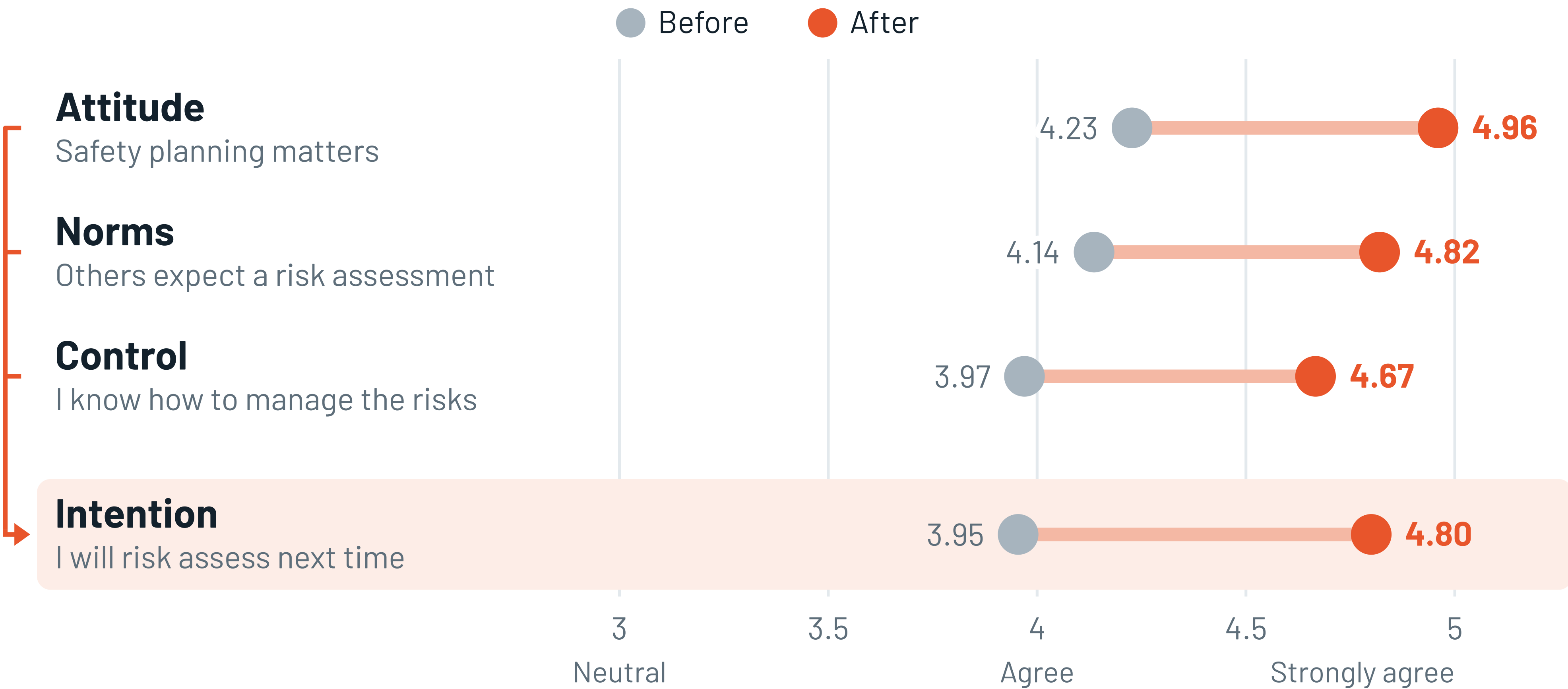
45% → 96%

know where to find their sport’s open-water safety guidance

43% → 12%

would enter the water themselves to help someone struggling
Safer for bystanders: reach or throw, don’t go.⁴

All three drivers of intention rose, and intention followed



One short, low-cost session made students **more willing and better able** to plan for open-water safety. It fits easily into club committee induction.

Limitations: single group, unpaired anonymous samples, intention rather than behaviour,⁵ scores near ceiling.

Next: check that risk assessments are completed, then test against a control group.

1. National Water Safety Forum. Young people aged 10–29 account for over a quarter of accidental drowning deaths in the UK (WAID data 2020–2024). RoSPA; 25 July 2025.
2. Ajzen I. The theory of planned behavior. Organ Behav Hum Decis Process. 1991;50(2):179–211.
3. Elliott MA, Armitage CJ. Promoting drivers’ compliance with speed limits: testing an intervention based on the theory of planned behaviour. Br J Psychol. 2009;100(1):111–132.
4. Schmidt AC, Sempsrott JR, Hawkins SC, et al. Wilderness Medical Society practice guidelines for the prevention and treatment of drowning. Wilderness Environ Med. 2016;27(2):236–251.
5. Webb TL, Sheeran P. Does changing behavioral intentions engender behavior change? A meta-analysis of the experimental evidence. Psychol Bull. 2006;132(2):249–268.