

# GUIDELINES

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from  
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## Human Attitudes that Lead to Suffering in the Backcountry (No. 6)

Not many of the so-called *accidents* in the outdoors are actually “acts of God” – totally unpredictable and capricious acts of harsh Mother Nature. Most of them have *human causes* – namely, particular attitudes of bravado or ignorance that place one in a position to have a disaster. In this series of short essays, we are exploring 10 different “**human attitudes that lead to suffering in the backcountry.**” Think deeply about each one – reflect on your own experiences, and prepare yourself and your group mentally before departing, so you don’t get added to the stories that follow.

### Human attitude No. 6 that leads to suffering in the backcountry

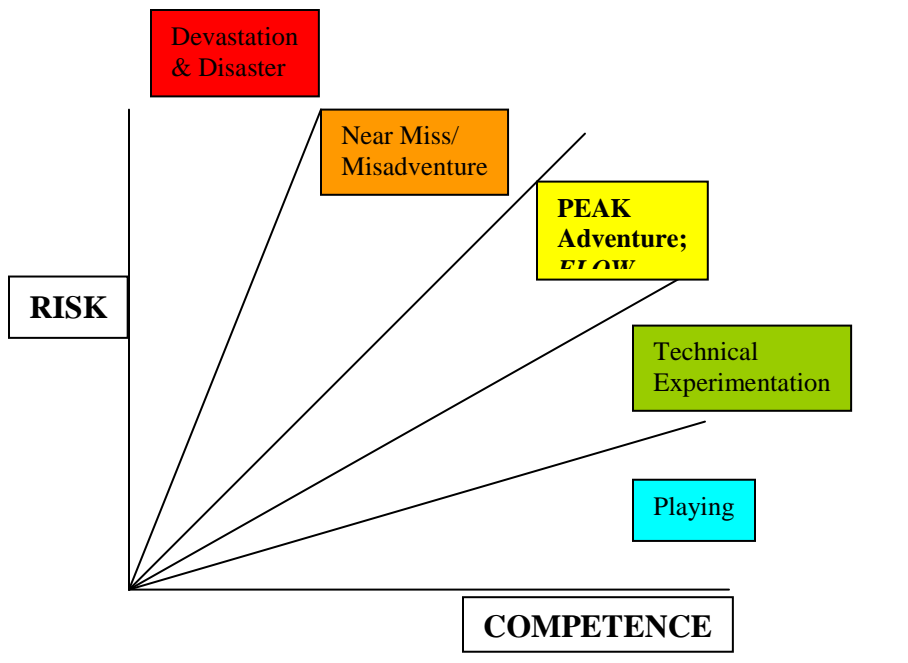
*Avoidance or denial of personal weaknesses (lack of knowledge, lack of fitness, inadequate skill level or equipment)*

Jed Williamson, managing editor of the American Alpine Club’s annual publication, *Accidents in North American Mountaineering*, includes in each edition’s appendix a table tallying the “immediate causes” of the various incidents reported therein, and then his committee’s judgment of “contributory causes” listed in order of prevalence. According to the 2006 edition, over the last 55 years that this effort has been compiled, “*exceeding abilities*” is the second most prevalent contributory cause, surpassed only by “*climbing unroped.*”\* What might “*exceeding abilities*” mean? How does it look, and how might we begin to recognize it in ourselves before it is too late?

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Priest and Baillie offer one dimension of the answer, in their intriguing Adventure Experience Paradigm – a model graphing the interaction of risk and competence.\* \*



Imagine both horizontal and vertical axes starting at 0 and extending to 5. Let's plot several positions on the graph. Imagine a risk factor of 2, and a competence factor the same. There is risk, but also corresponding competence to manage it. Plotting (2,2) places one in the Peak Adventure Zone (also known as "flow" according to Csikszentmihalyi). Incidentally, this is why beginners (1,1) can have as much adventure as those more experienced (5,5), simply because *adventure* is a function of the interaction of risk and competence. Now imagine a risk factor of 1 and a competence factor of 5. The resulting point would end up in the Playing or Technical Experimentation zones – trying out our skills in a highly controlled setting, with little fear or danger. Maybe we are trying out our new Tricams on a 5.3, or kayak surfing in a hole to refine our exit moves. Now take it the opposite way. The more imposing example arises when we are at a competence factor of 1 but a risk factor of 5. This places us solidly in Devastation and Disaster zone, or at least the Misadventure (near-miss) area. How do we get there? Maybe we misjudge our skills, or the impact of the environment – maybe our enthusiasm and ambition propel us into a situation that our abilities are insufficient to extricate us from. It can happen any number of ways, but fundamentally we have created an incongruence between the hazards of the situation and our relative skills to manage them. When we place ourselves in this circumstance and then the predictable happens, Jed will say we were **EXCEEDING OUR ABILITIES!**

There is also something that we could call the "risk multiplication phenomena." On a recent canoe expedition, after two days and some challenging but fairly straightforward high wave runs, the group was facing a third day. This stretch, however, had higher mileage, more technical rapids, and a forecast bringing rain and 45° temperatures. Moreover, it was clear that the skill level of one of the paddling teams was not progressing, and that this pair might be destined to do some swimming (they had already turned over once or twice in the moderate rapids). In a way that had never quite happened before, this risk multiplication phenomena began to crystallize in my mind. When we are facing one area that stretches us, we can create backup systems or strategies to compensate. But it became remarkably clear to me that, when we are being challenged on multiple fronts, (skills, weather, equipment), the risk increases exponentially, and it's wise to abort. We can trust in luck – I would define trusting in luck as "*hoping that the uncontrollables will miraculously go your way.*" But when we are trusting luck more than competence in *multiple* dimensions, we are unwittingly arranging luck against

ourselves. When the dangers begin to gang up on us and we don't make any changes, Jed will say that we were **EXCEEDING OUR ABILITIES!**

Also, we must acknowledge that skills and preparedness are relative or situation-specific. She thinks she can trad-lead 5.8 out at the crag because she has led numerous 5.10 sport routes at the gym – *she doesn't yet know what she doesn't know*. He runs 8 miles each morning, so covering 10 miles on the backcountry trail with a full pack doesn't sound so hard. It is remarkable how many accidents happen at these crossovers – making assumptions or drawing inaccurate conclusions rather than considering the specifics of each new situation and our readiness for them. Parenthetically, the proliferation of guidebooks has probably created a fiction of uniformity that is not true to the real outdoors. A 5.9 on moderate angle granite with plentiful protection opportunities is vastly different than a steep Seneca 5.9 with loose rock and run-outs. Not many of us are expert enough to be that versatile; not being skilled enough to make necessary adaptations to new terrain or less than ideal conditions is known as **EXCEEDING OUR ABILITIES!**

So it comes back to knowing where we are on the learning curve, and then lingering there long enough that we progress naturally when it is time, rather than forcing our way into situations that we are not ready for. Burton Moomaw, formerly of Appalachian Mountain Guides, offers this taxonomy of learning:

- *The Novice*: Consciously incompetent – very aware of his limitations in knowledge and skill.
- *The Apprentice*: Unconsciously incompetent – begins to think that he knows, but doesn't yet know what he's lacking.
- *The Journeyman*: Consciously competent – beginning to master skills, but still needs to be very attentive throughout.
- *The Master*: Unconsciously competent – skilled and versatile enough that even instincts and gut feelings can be trusted, being based upon many and varied experiences. Skills are automatic and reflexive.

The most dangerous person on the mountain is not merely the person who doesn't know, but the person who ***doesn't know that he doesn't know*** – that one walking around in an illusion of competence that hasn't been truly tested with progressive challenges. In the trades, the Apprentice always works under a Master, but in our modern outdoor recreation world, Apprentices can take off and go paddling or climbing or hiking without any coaching or oversight. Lord Schuster observed about these folks: *“He may, with the good luck which sometimes attends children, drunkards, and persons of weak intellect, escape the dangers without even knowing that they were there. But if he affronts too often forces whose powers he had not attempted to understand, he will in the long run succumb.”* And Galen Rowell wrote: *“Courage divorced from logic becomes hubris, in which arrogance etches away the old honesty. The good vibes of karma change into the false understandings of hubris.”* When we act out of hubris instead of logic, and when we attempt exploits at the Journeyman or Master level when in truth we are only Apprentices, Jed will say we are **EXCEEDING OUR ABILITIES!**

\**Accidents in North American Mountaineering – 2006*, American Alpine Club, 2006, p. 100.

\*\*Priest, S. and Baillie, R., “Justifying the Risk to Others: The Real Razor's Edge.” *Journal of Experiential Education*, 10(1), pp.16-22.

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