

GUIDELINES

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
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Human Attitudes that Lead to Suffering in the Backcountry (No. 7)

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. 7 that leads to suffering in the backcountry

A casual approach to details; neglect of due diligence owing to familiarity, laziness, path of least resistance thinking, or faulty communication

Suzanne Johnson dropped her climbing partner 75 feet off the end of their climbing rope at the Manure Pile Buttress in Yosemite. Her analysis illustrates the importance of attention to detail:

*“...a really horrible accident happened that could have easily been prevented. Had either of us recognized that the rope wasn’t long enough, Marcus could have walked off the top. Had I tied a knot in the end of the rope, or tied myself to it, it wouldn’t have gone through the Gri Gri...”**

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Johnson's partner survived; sometimes the consequences of inattention are more dire.

*"From the moment Walker and his companion hitchhiked into the park, the two did everything wrong. They unlawfully pitched their tent in a restricted area after disregarding advice from a concession employee; they ignored fresh bear scat near camp; they littered the site with smelly scraps and dirty cooking utensils; they left open food when they went hiking."***

By the end of the night, Harry was dead, the victim of a mauling by a 20 year old female grizzly.

What combination of human attitudes colludes to produce such sloppy attention to detail? Whether it is hurry, laziness, or simply a dismissive attitude that "rules don't apply to me," these stories illustrate what many guides know: *it's the details that will kill you*. Is that knot tied correctly? How much stove fuel did we bring? Are those 20' or 100' contour intervals on the map? How tall is the route, and is my rope long enough to safely lower (or rappel) back down? Did I clearly communicate with my belayer whether I intend to unclip or have him lower me? *Little things become big things in the backcountry*, and so Edward Whymper, famous for his first ascent of the Matterhorn, advised:

*"Climb if you will, but remember that courage and strength are naught without prudence, and that a momentary negligence may destroy the happiness of a lifetime. Do nothing in haste, **look carefully to each step**, and from the beginning, ask, what may be the end."*

**Accidents in North American Mountaineering, 2000, American Alpine Club, p. 37.*

***Death, Daring, and Disaster: Search and Rescue in the National Parks, Charles R. Farabee, Jr., Taylor Trade Publishing., 2005, pp. 303-4.*

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