

# GUIDELINES

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from  
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## Human Attitudes that Lead to Suffering in the Backcountry (No. 9)

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.

So far, we have considered eight of these potentially fatal attitudes:

- *An unwillingness to change plans, even in the face of overwhelming evidence, and its companion behavior -- an unfounded need to keep to a predetermined schedule*
- *A desire to impress; overweening arrogance or ego, and its accompanying competitiveness*
- *A lack of awareness of or failure to acknowledge some critical change in conditions (group strength, weather), and its near cousin, a reliance on wishful thinking, instead of dispassionate acceptance of objective data.*
- *A blind trust in personal invincibility, the benevolence of the universe, and a belief that nature cares about me.*
- *An unexamined urge to press on through obstacles instead of evaluating their objective dangers.*
- *Avoidance or denial of personal weaknesses (lack of knowledge, lack of fitness, inadequate skill level or equipment)*
- *A casual approach to details; neglect of due diligence owing to familiarity, laziness, path of least resistance thinking, or faulty communication*
- *Hurry, for any number of reasons*

Let’s look now at Number Nine; an ironic one to consider at Christmas time. Read on! 

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Human attitude No. 9 that leads to suffering in the backcountry  
*Materialism and greed, leading to ill-advised exploits (either to avoid sacrificing equipment, or to obtain free gear)*

A quick perusal through *Outside Magazine*, *Rock and Ice*, *Backpacker*, or *National Geographic Adventure* will bring the casual observer to two simple conclusions: there is a lot of enthusiasm out there for GEAR – the equipment and clothing that make these outdoor activities possible, safe, and comfortable – and, the stuff is EXPENSIVE. Who can know how many devotees are actually more enraptured by the toys than the activities? Should it alarm us that some among us will sacrifice rationality and common sense to obtain the stuff? No, this isn't the big surprise. We play the lottery after all, demonstrating the power of greed and hope over logic and good math. The big surprise in backcountry incidents involving gear is the amazing lack of calculation that occurs – how does the cost of a carabiner compare to the cost of a life, or the expenses of a debilitating injury?

*“On April 20 [at a sport-climbing area near Franklin, WV], Mark Williamson had finished a day of climbing and already changed from his climbing shoes to his hiking boots. He reportedly spied a carabiner up a climb and decided to retrieve it. It was a 5.9+ route, but he did not change his shoes or rope up. About 20 feet up, he fell to rocky sloping ground and rolled another 20 feet to land head-down the slope, where the Rescue Squad found him.”*

Eventual diagnosis of his injuries revealed a fractured vertebrae, abdominal injuries, extensive abrasions, and a few contusions. Jed Williamson, editor of *Accidents in North American Mountaineering*, offers this wry editorial comment: *“In situations like this, there must be a formula for calculating the ultimate price of a carabiner, etc., by determining the relationship between the climber's degree of desire and level of climbing skill.”\** In practical terms, one also wonders how much more than the value of the \$7 carabiner Mark eventually laid out in paying his insurance deductible, helicopter evacuation fees, lost work time, etc.

A similar motivation was at work in two youths in New Hampshire in October of 1994. Having just started climbing, they aspired to accumulate some gear by cleaning rappel stations on Mount Meader in the Carter Range. *“Using some half-inch hardware store rope, one of the kids hand-over-handed down the line, retrieved a biner and a couple of slings, then went hand-over-hand back up the rope. They then set up to hit the next rappel station. Down he went again, only this time, the wall was slightly overhanging, and he swung out into space. He jumped and landed on a 4 by 8 foot ledge.”\*\** This story didn't end until midnight, when rescue authorities finally descended to him, tied him in to harness and helmet, and rigged an assisted 2:1 hoist to get him safely to the top.\*

So we want free gear, and will ignore obvious risk potential to get it. But we also hesitate to sacrifice our own gear, even if it means compromising safety. Alan C. was lowering off a route at the Heart Creek Slabs in Alberta, with rope running through a sling, when the rope burned through the runner, and Alan fell to the base of the climb. He sustained a fractured pelvis. Climbers will know right away what was happening here. We are fully aware of the potential of nylon running on nylon to generate a high amount of heat. And we are well cognizant of nylon's low melting point. ALAN WAS TOO CHEAP TO LEAVE A CARABINER AT THE TOP!\*\* Similar accidents have happened when leaders have decided to back off a route but refused or neglected to place a second piece backing up their primary anchor because it would be irretrievable. There are stories of long falls after the leader back-cleaned lower pieces and then fell on a single top anchor that failed. (see *ANAM 2000*, p. 49). Backpackers attempt dangerous stream crossings untended because they don't want to leave their handlines. A real-life story with a very unhappy ending occurred at the Yoyo pit in the Jemez Mountains of New Mexico, all for the retrieval of a dropped cell phone (see *ANAM 2003*, p. 75). What a price to pay for being stingy!

What to do? How about these ideas? Many practicality-minded climbers carry one or two old hardware pieces on their harnesses to use as “bail-binners” – gear they don’t mind leaving if necessary. Also, designating a set portion of each year’s activity and travel budget as “consumable” might appeal to the reality-minded accountant types among us. Maybe we would be more motivated to do the right thing if we had a tacit agreement with our partners that, if we must leave any gear to ensure anyone’s safety, we will all share the cost to replace it when we get home (in the same way that we would all have shared the grief and pain if we had an accident because we were too cheap to protect ourselves or each other). I have even considered proposing that each year, Black Diamond and Metolius offer to replace for free any equipment left behind by a climber to keep his party safe. This arrangement, however, while guaranteed to generate great and convincing testimonial stories, would also undercut one of the fundamental theses of these articles – that is, that change must come from within ourselves, rather than from external and extrinsic rewards. And it might unwittingly cultivate the very materialism that is the culprit here. So one final approach that I would offer is a tad more symbolic. I propose that, each time we finish reading some outdoor mag or catalog that romances us with the newfangled toys, we conduct a small ritual, simply to reify our perspective. I suggest picking up a carabiner, staring at it, and repeating three times with conviction: “*My life is worth more than you.*”

\* *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* – 1998, American Alpine Club, p. 71.

\*\* *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* – 1995, American Alpine Club, pp. 59, 5.

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