

What is an Accident?

by Julian Celms

What is an accident? Is it just an unpredictable coincidence resulting in an unfortunate occurrence? Or is it the result of a series of decisions and actions that continue to spark until something tragic occurs? These actions, decisions and factors can be a recipe for disaster. We need to ask ourselves what we have done to contribute to this.

James Raffin, an outdoor educator, uses a slot machine as an analogy for discussing an unwanted outcome. For example, let's say that every time you take a trip outside of your meeting place, you are standing in front of



Make sure your group has the level of skills to match the activity.

Photos courtesy of the "On Rappel" - Scouting photo archive.

a slot machine; your hand on the handle. You pull down, fascinated by the spinning of the wheel, and the random circling of lemons or cherries that tell you if you've won or lost.

If you pull the handle, and one or more lemons come up, you are closer to hitting the "accident jackpot". What pulls up a lemon on your machine during an outdoor activity? Let's consider some possibilities:

- It's cold, damp and windy outside
- It's the end of a long day's hike
- Lunch on the trail was skimpy as someone left the bread in the car
- The younger members of your group are really tired, and struggling with their packs
- Group morale is low.

For example...it's late afternoon. Your group comes upon a river crossing. You observe the river is running deeper and faster than you expected. You know of a great campsite on the other side of this valley, and after a quick search, there are few other places to cross. Your choice is to continue to the campsite as originally planned, or camp here for the night, and look for options in crossing the river tomorrow.

If you pulled the slot machine's handle — and crossed the river that late afternoon, how many lemons would come up? Quite possibly they all would — jackpot!

Each of the above factors, individually, has limited ability to cause

harm. However, as they stack up, the odds of having an accident or "hitting the accident jackpot" increase.

Let's consider a scenario at a Cub camp in late September:

- Your leadership team barely slept the night before
- It's raining outside, and half of the Cubs left their gear outside the tents
- You planned a cold breakfast, and you stick to the plan
- The weather report indicates a cold front moving in during the day
- Canoeing is this morning's activity.

Although you are confident you have the skills, attitude and knowledge to run the canoeing program, you had also planned on having another canoeing resource person to help out. Sadly, they were called away to a family emergency the day before camp.

How many lemons do you think you would pull on this slot machine? More than one?

The purpose of this discussion is to illustrate how often a number of actions, most often decisions, can contribute to an accident. Yes, we want to be prepared, to minimize the number of lemons showing on our machine. Recognizing that one lemon on its own may not cause the accident — but left unchecked and added to a number of additional lemons significantly increases the odds of risk and injury. In

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the field of accident analysis, it's often true that a number of small decisions lead to the error in the end.

Factors That Affect Us

When we are outdoors, there are two primary factors that affect the condition of your party. The environment is one of them. Where are you and what is happening? Is the water cold? Is it a hot day? Is there a storm moving in? What is the geographic nature of the place you are in? Are you near a stream that can quickly flood after a rainfall? Do tides move in quickly? Is it common knowledge that strong winds in this area can damage tents and tarps? These factors are out of your control — but with experience, planning and common sense, you will be aware of these potential risks and be able to take appropriate action to minimize them.

The second factor is the human factor. It comes into play in any outdoor activity. What is the level of experience and skills of those who are on the trip? What level of skills does the group have to match the activity? Are you a flatwater canoeist running rapids for the first time to “see what this is about”? Is this your first time winter camping? Have you ever been in avalanche-prone areas before? In the river-crossing scenario above, has the group practiced crossing a river? When you break camp, do you review how to cross a river once you have found a safe point?

Decisions you make can have a serious bearing on the outcome. For example, you may decide to continue a hike when many members are cold and need to change into warmer clothes. Do you choose to drive home

after a long three-day trip, while tired at the wheel? After a long day of mountain biking, do you go ahead and make that last downhill run just before dinner? Choosing to satisfy our egos, bowing to group peer pressure, or needing to satisfy a sense of accomplishment while ignoring the physical condition and environment can push the safety envelope.

Was the success of your trip due to good management or good luck?

What do we do to avoid this?

Consistently making flawless decisions is not a human trait. Planning and preparation prior to your trip is your first defense from the slot machine lemons. Asking yourself, “do we have the right people, at the right place, at the right time, with the right equipment” is the beginning. The checklist in *B.P.&P., Section 10000, Camping and Outdoor Activities*, available on Scouts Canada's web site, is provided to help you work through the trip in your mind.

Be flexible once you are out there. A timeline and trip plan has a purpose, but not at the expense of common sense. Change your menu around if you need a warm lunch. If reaching the intended campsite puts the group at risk, it's not worth it.

Watch for peer pressure — and the dangers of allowing the end goal to be

more important than the journey itself. This is the most tempting lemon to spin — as it is emotional and personal.

Finally, evaluate how the group is doing. What is happening around us? From the examples above, you can see how both environmental factors and decisions can increase the risks. Debriefing following trips is an excellent way for the group to discuss what potential risks and hazards were encountered and how they were dealt with. How many lemons were showing on your machine? Was the success of your trip due to good management or good luck?

If you start removing those lemons (through intelligent decisions as you progress through the day or trip) when you pull that slot machine handle, you will be rewarded with smiles and good memories. X

— Julian Celms is Director of Beavers, Cubs and Outdoors.

PLANNING A HIGH ADVENTURE TRIP?

What hazards are there that you need to be prepared for? Are those clearly communicated to your leadership team, the group committee, the parents, and your participants? Have a meeting before the trip to go over the trip plan. Discussing with the parents the adventure their child is about to embark on can help ensure appropriate personal equipment selection and less anxiety from parents.



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