

Risk and the outdoor adventure experience: Good risk, bad risk, real risk, apparent risk, objective risk, subjective risk

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Life is an adventure, and whether you approve of it or not, most of us need risk to feel alive. It should therefore be no surprise that a mountaineer, upon reaching the top of a white-knuckle climb, feels a surge of elation, a joy for life. The heightened sense is not just a result of having earned a fine view through exercise, though that surely contributes. It is also because life has suddenly gained intensity from flirting with the stark alternative. While moving on rock, the climber had no thought for anything but the next handhold, the flow of movement, the 'now'. With the climb over, the relief at having succeeded (and survived), floods back. "It's great to be alive!"

I was once driving through Switzerland with some friends. We stopped for lunch at the base of a small crag that sloped like a wedge of gray cheese beside the road. With a couple of days up our sleeves, we were in no rush to reach Genoa, so after eating and lying in the sun, we put on our climbing boots for some bouldering.

I soon found myself traversing solo along a horizontal line that started halfway up the wedge. At an area of increasing difficulty, I made a long step up only to find the handhold smaller than I expected and sloping downwards. Back climbing was out of the question. Ahead, the line vanished. I looked down and cursed my own stupidity. I was forty feet above a jumble of boulders, my boots, hooked onto a half-inch wide ledge, were starting to pump like a sewing machine. My fingers screamed to let go.

Eight feet above me, a piton protruded from a wall of smooth rock. I marveled that anyone could have put it there. It was my only hope. Releasing one hand from the wall, I slipped out of two tape slings and joined them with a cats-paw. I dangled the double sling and touched it against the wall to steady it, then I swung. The top of the sling snuggled neatly over that piton on the first throw. Gently I tested it with my weight, then scrambled up to safety.

I flopped thankfully onto roughly horizontal ground and stared into the heart of a small white alpine flower, acutely aware of its life and my own, and the connection between us. The emotional rearrangement from that experience has lasted thirty years. At the time I barely

mentioned it to my companions from embarrassment. The piton was luck, but hooking it first swing was not. Something inside my brain had cleared the way for one intense, precise calculation and everything worked. Although it was a stupid and embarrassing situation to be in, it was also one of the finest moments of my life. I survived!

The risk in this case was a bad one but it was real and so were the benefits. I would never knowingly put myself into that situation again and I rank it alongside a time when I narrowly missed a head-on collision or another when I just avoided being mugged in a wild Central American city. In each case I found that as well as learning practical lessons in survival, colors seemed brighter, birdsong more noticeable, trees greener, and my companions more important to me. The problem, of course, is that if we go through life pumped up with too many of those situations, it is statistically improbable that we will live beyond our teens. Enter the concept of 'good risk'.

What I call 'good risk' is risk where the odds are in keeping with the expected rewards and where you can maintain reasonable control over the process. It won't necessarily supply the life-altering results of a brush with death, but it does provide a tune-up and, besides, most of us can do without going eyeball to eyeball with the grim reaper. Combine this rush with the natural beauty of the wild, and you have the ingredients for the 'outdoor adventure experience'. Climbing, back-country skiing, mountain-biking, kayaking, canoeing, hang-gliding, diving, caving, and yes, bungee-jumping all provide the opportunity for this tune-up.

But, you say, these can be seriously dangerous things to be doing. That's true at the extremes, and the real art is to find the line between them and gently push and push while still staying on the side of good risk. For most of us, most of the time a little sleight of hand can help. With some careful self-deception, you can get the buzz without the crunch. The trick is to do something that feels dangerous, but is relatively safe. Leave the eyeball to eyeball stuff to the hard core.

Take rock-climbing for example. If I had been top-roped or putting in protection on that wedge of gray Swiss cheese, I would still have

been massively challenged. I would have still been gripped up to the point of exhaustion and I would almost certainly have fallen off. The risk and fear would have been in my face. My attentive partner, however, would have arrested my fall and lowered me to the ground. I may not have been talking about it thirty years later, but I would have taken away something of value from the experience and my life would not have been seriously at risk. The real risk would have been managed and the benefit gained from the apparent risk.

It is the ability to maximize the apparent risk while minimizing the real risk that makes for a good 'wilderness adventure' sport. Not all wilderness adventures offer the same balance of real and apparent risk, however. Rock climbing, unless you're into solo or unprotected climbs, has high apparent risk, but fairly low real risk. High-altitude mountaineering on the other hand is high in both real and apparent risk due mostly to external forces (objective risk). White-water kayaking is high on apparent risk, but relatively low on real risk until you hit the extremes, whereas sea kayaking has low apparent risk but deceptively high real risk since it requires complex knowledge of the sea. Bungee-jumping is a great example of high apparent risk with low real risk. You jump, knowing you're going to stop before you hit the rocks, but you trick part of your mind into thinking this is the real thing.

Society spends a great deal of effort minimizing so-called 'bad risk'. Bad risk is expensive, and wastes productive lives and material. The insurance industry grew rich from buffering us from the impact of bad risk. Unfortunately, it sometimes tries to diminish good risk as well and this needs to be resisted, since despite the art of the actuary, they do not appear to have a firm understanding of the difference between bad and good risk.

Objective risk is risk that we can do nothing much about other than prepare as best we can. I remember trying to explain it to my children by pointing out that a passing aircraft may have just lost a wheel and it is heading right for our house. There's no point in running outside because you don't have accurate information about where it will land. You simply have to get on with living. The inhabitants of Lockerbie could have done absolutely nothing to prepare for, or diminish, the effect of a 747 crashing on their village in the middle of the night.

Then there are the Acts of God which may be considered objective risk we can mitigate by designing homes to withstand earthquakes, building clear of flood planes, preparing a cellar in tornado country and so on. This mitigation of objective risk is the same process we use to stay with an acceptable margin of safety in many

outdoor activities. For example, we reduce the risk of injury from the objective hazard of falling rock by wearing a protective helmet. We wear a drysuit and PFD when we go kayaking so we will improve our protection against cold and reduce the odds of drowning in the event of an unplanned swim.

To be of benefit, you have to be aware of the risk. An arrow that flies unnoticed past the throat of a medieval sentry will bestow no risk benefit. If it buries itself in the wall beside him, the soldier is alerted, Adrenaline pumps, the man ducks, reducing risk from the next arrow. He notices how green is the moss an inch from his nose and how bright the pennants fluttering from the tower. He becomes totally focused upon preparing his own arrow for the return shot.

You can do something about subjective risk. This is basically the risk of human error... your own. As my experience on the Swiss cheese shows, proximity to serious risk focuses the mind. By being fully cognizant of the risk, you are better equipped to manage and respond if things start to come unstuck. Subjective risk is probably the most common source of accidents and it is the one you have most control over. Even when an objective hazard like an avalanche bears down, there is usually a human miscalculation in there somewhere. Someone screwed up and placed the party at risk. Someone did not do a good job of checking the snow layers. Then again, there are times when every precaution has been taken but still, things go wrong. These things happen.

The important thing for the outdoor adventure experience is that we understand the nature of the risk we choose. We need to know the difference between good risk and bad risk by doing risk/benefit analyses as we go and we need to know where the line between them is for our experience level. We also need to know the sort of risk we can do nothing about so we don't waste nervous energy on something upon which we cannot effect change. Dealing with risk is key to our development from the day we are born. It is a mechanism for learning and a stimulant for appreciation of life. Adventuring outdoors is just stylized play that prepares us to deal with risk in the rest of our lives. Play on...!

About the Author

For the past 23 years John Dowd has been writing and been involved with the commercial side of sea kayaking (book: Sea kayaking: A manual for long distance touring; magazine: Sea Kayaker; retail store/school: Ecomarine; and manufacturing: Nimbus). John is currently working on a video series Seamanship for Kayakers (www.seakayakvideos.com). Prior to going into business, John travelled, kayaked and climbed around the world while working at various Outward Bound schools and diving commercially in the North Sea. John can be contacted at jbdowd@hotmail.com