

# Understanding The Meaning Of Risk

by Jed Williamson

What is the meaning of RISK, this well worn and often abused term? Here is the simple definition: **Risk is the potential to LOSE something of value to us.** What we need to remember is that **our MOTIVATION FOR RISK is to GAIN something of value** - good health, self confidence, recognition, spiritual growth, money, friends, relationships, career move, whatever it might be. But in short, it comes out to a life worth living.

Unfortunately, the word is often used when one is really discussing other factors that LEAD to the potential for loss. And what are these? DANGER is the term we should use for exposure to Perils and Hazards. And what are they? A PERIL is the source from which the loss can come. A HAZARD is the physical factors and conditions - human or otherwise - that increase the possibility of loss. Here's how it would look in a matrix:

PERILS	HAZARDS	
Conditions:	Actions:	Human Factors:
• Loose Rocks	• Might Fall	• Being In Fall Line
• Animals	• Might Attack/Kick, etc	• Being in Path Of or Not Being Aware Of
• Swift Water	• Might Have to Cross	• Temp, Speed, Bottom, Skill, etc
• Frayed Rope	• Might Break	• Using Over Sharp Edge
• Rock Cliff	• Might Climb/Rappel	• Inadequate Protection, etc
• Lightning	• Might Strike	• Being on a Ridge or in Water
• Tectonic Plate	• Might Earthquake	• Living in, say Los Angeles
• Student Attitude (M)	• Might Harass	• Put in Tent w/ female
• Bald Tires	• Might go Flat	• Driving Fast on Slippery Road
• Stock Market	• Might go Down	• Not Selling in Time

Let's clear up some other terms here. First, what is an ACCIDENT? Simply stated, **an accident is anything that happens that we hoped would not happen.** Is that any different than an "incident"? Federal, state, and local government agencies, insurance companies, and private rescue groups use the term INCIDENT in the heading for all reports that follow an event which required some kind of intervention. The common use of the term by many adventure educators is to indicate a "near miss." That is, no injury or damage occurred. At the end of the day, the reality is that these terms are basically synonymous in our work.

An incident (accident) may result in fatality, injury to person(s), illness, damage to property, or a combination. Or none of these, in which case, it is an incident that we classify as a "near miss." Many of the "behavior/motivation" problems we encounter fall into this category. Remember reading "The Ox Bow Incident" in high school? Calling it "The Ox Bow Accident" would not have sounded so good, but I'm sure the character who ended up being hung surely hoped that would not happen. And the guys who didn't get caught or injured probably didn't say, "Whew, that was a near miss!" Yes, it was a classic incident that included all the results.

Have some fun and build on to the list above in terms of your own life or the program you work with. Then look at the real versus perceived risks in your situation. Your final assignment, should you chose to take it, is when you have completed reading the articles in this proceedings, think about the scale and intensity of risks you are involved in, reassess, and move on!

And remember what Zorba the Greek said: "Boss, whadda you mean you got trouble? Life is trouble. Enjoy it."