

...SAFE—RISK FREE? (II)

RISK

Ours is one of the very few professions that deliberately place our clients in risky situations. Some risk is desirable. Without risks, challenge would be absent from programs and benefits of participation would never result. Perceived risk is essential to human growth, while real risks ought to be diminished to acceptable levels. The difficulties arise when public citizens cannot tell the difference between real and perceived risk. They begin to think that EE is dangerous.

SAFETY

Nothing is 100% safe. However, top quality EE programs employ a series of **risk management procedures** to ensure the highest levels of safety. Risk management procedures range from **primary** (proactive to prevent accidents), through **secondary** (active response to accident within available resources), to **tertiary** (reactive assistance from outside agencies). Risk management refers to carefully controlling real dangers at low levels, while allowing clients to perceive and overcome risks for therapeutic benefit in adventures. Despite the appearance that some activities may be dangerous, actuarial data suggest that these activities are quite safe. Decades of data collection indicate that risky adventure activities are actually on par with daily living and have lower injury rates than traditional sports. Clients in legitimate programs were three times less likely to go to an emergency room for an injury in the field than at home. The average client participating in recreational sports was four times more likely to visit a hospital emergency room for an injury than from participating in the outdoors.

ACCIDENT RATES

Several studies have established the safety record of EE. What we do is on par with daily living and less injurious than many publicly acceptable activities as the following data show.

The Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Council found 0.51 injuries/1,000 participant days for their EE programs and compared this rate (per the same 1,000 participant days) to high school football games (72.24) or practices (15.36) and to snowboarding (16.77), downhill skiing (5.15), mountain biking (2.92), and backpacking (0.77).

The Wilderness Risk Management Committee found 0.52 injuries/1,000 program days for backcountry travel and compared this rate (per the same 1,000 program days) to recreational games or sports (1.27) and bicycling (1.12).

Project Adventure found 4.33 accidents/million hours and compared this rate (per the same million hours) to physical education classes (9.6), educational services (8), amusement or recreation (19), and real estate/finance (4.5).

Outward Bound found 37.5 accidents/million hours in its programs and compared this rate (per the same million hours) to automobile driving and college football (both 60+).

SAFE & RISK FREE?

In conclusion, well-executed and professionally run programs are less risky than traditional life activities like sports, driving, or simply staying home. Nevertheless, convincing the public of this fact often proves difficult, especially since risk must be a necessary part of our programs.

Steve Javorski & Simon Priest

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