

How Dangerous Is Solo Hiking, Really?

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But if you judge safety to be the paramount consideration in life you should never, under any circumstances, go on long hikes alone. Don't take short hikes alone either—or, for that matter, go anywhere alone. And avoid at all costs such foolhardy activities as driving, falling in love, or inhaling air that is almost certainly riddled with deadly germs. . . . Never cross an intersection against a red light, even when you can see that all roads are clear for miles. And never, of course, explore the guts of an idea that seems as if it might threaten one of your more cherished beliefs. In your wisdom you will probably live to a ripe old age. But you may discover, just before you die, that you have been dead for a long, long time.

—Colin Fletcher and Chip Rawlins, *The Complete Walker IV*, p. 756

It all boils down to what you perceive as risky and how much of that risk you can tolerate. We humans are very bad at evaluating risks, and certainly if you stay home rather than hike next week you run the risks of being in a horrible auto accident, being a victim of a violent crime (on the average more likely in the city than in the wilderness), and perhaps additional health risks associated with breathing polluted air, not getting enough exercise, or being depressed because you aren't out in the wilderness where you know you belong.

—David Bonn, “Re: Solo or No Go,” *Backpackinglight.com*, 5/23/2006

Central Questions Addressed in This Article

How dangerous is solo hiking in the wilderness compared with getting to the trailhead? Compared to hiking in a group? Compared to the dangers of frontcountry life? What is most dangerous and bothersome about going solo?

How logical are the arguments commonly used by soloists and anti-soloists? How should an experienced, responsible and *logical* hiker assess this practice?

Introduction

As you might guess from the introductory quotations, the approach of this article will be to take a strong stand on these issues right from the beginning. I will also analyze these issues as objectively and as logically as possible, even though these two goals seem to be at odds with one another.

In brief, here is my position. *First*, the claim that solo hiking is a risky and dangerous behavior is largely a myth, a myth perpetuated by a safety and security oriented culture. By and large, most hiking and backpacking activities involve low levels of risk. (Serious climbing and mountaineering is another matter.) A basic truth in this context is that solo hiking is only as dangerous as a person makes it. *Second*, I recognize that there are risks to both group and solo hiking, but by following carefully chosen risk management strategies, these risks can be largely mitigated. *Third*, if the relatively conservative behaviors detailed in the article on this website "[Strategies To Make Solo Hiking Safer](#)" are followed (e.g., leave a detailed itinerary and emergency contact information with two or more people), this activity is as safe as the average person's normal, everyday activities.

To bring my position into an even sharper focus, consider the following generalizations about the relationship between safety and numbers.

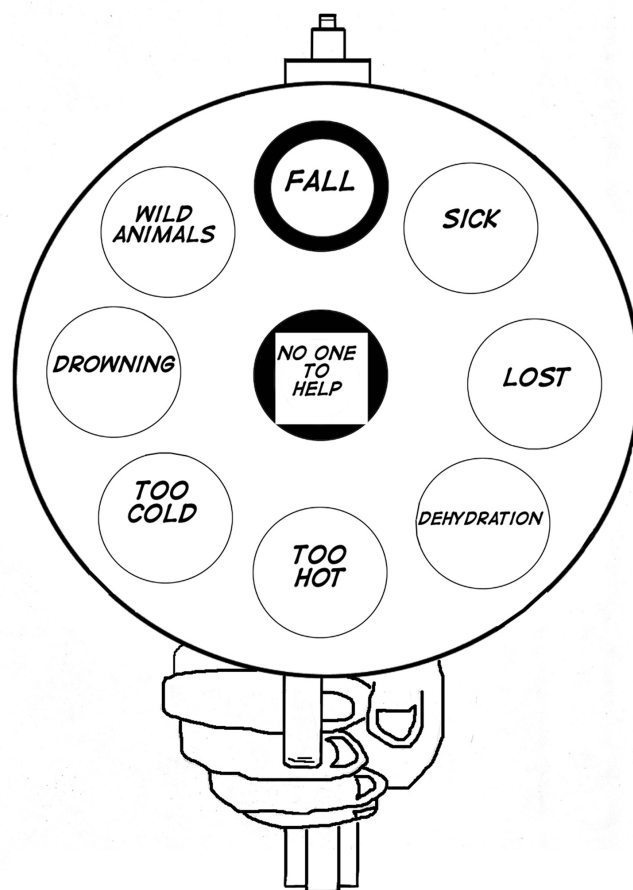
- Safest = group of four or more highly competent hikers.
- Safe = go with at least one other competent person.
- Safe = skilled and experienced soloist following recommended risk management strategies.
- Unsafe = go with one or more incompetents (including yourself) who violate reasonable risk management strategies.
- Most unsafe = go with a group of incompetents who exhibit risky behaviors.

Wilderness travelers can be incompetent in many ways: knowledge (e.g., first aid), skill (e.g., crossing fast moving streams), experience (e.g., traveling off-trail), preparation (e.g., lacking adequate storm gear), decision making (e.g.,

having a strong sense of immortality and therefore likes to take chances). Incompetence is obviously a matter of degree and is of greater concern the more aggressive the trip that is planned. To summarize, there is no substitute for knowledge, skill, experience, preparation and sound decision making, whether going with a group or going by oneself. You will be safest if you hike with competent people with whom you are comfortable being around. Going with even one incompetent person can put you at greater risk than going it alone.

Having stated my position in detail, how best to defend it? In the next section of text I first critically analyze several concerns expressed by those skeptical of solo hiking. I will then analyze the logic of common arguments made by both proponents and opponents of solo hiking. You will have to be the judge of how well I defend my stated position on hiking solo. This graphic, drawn by my close friend Jim Morrison, not very subtly expresses a great deal of skepticism of my defense:

HAZARDS OF SOLO HIKING



*THESE ARE BUT A FEW OF THE HAZARDS
A SOLO HIKER MUST DEAL WITH BY
HIM/HER SELF.*

JIM MORRISON

What is Most Dangerous About Going Solo?

The following scenarios encompass what seem to be the most worrisome concerns of those concerned about the safety of solo hiking. The analyses will be brief but detailed enough to illustrate some interesting patterns in these concerns.

Becoming incapacitated early on during an extended trip

What if I become incapacitated early on during an extended solo trip when no one will start looking for me for many days? This could happen through illness or accident or simply getting lost. Being with a group means that I will likely get

extracted (or found) faster because someone knows exactly where I am and can go for help.

Analysis: If this is a major concern, limit your solo activities to shorter trips of no more than a couple of days. Stay on the more traveled trails and stay true to the itinerary you give to at least two different people. Severely limit off-trail travel. However, probably the easiest way to deal with this concern is by carrying an effective emergency communication device (e.g., a personal locator beacon or satellite phone). PLB devices are now available weighing as little as five ounces and costing as little as \$250.

Becoming severely injured and needing first aid

What if I am severely injured and can't treat myself? If I am in a group that includes people trained in first aid, it might make the difference between my living or dying. Also, what if I came down with a serious illness when by myself?

Analysis: Yes, this is a definite risk, but still a lot of “what ifs”. In my experience and that of friends with years and years of hiking and backpacking experience, suffering a severe illness or injury (whether by oneself or with a group) is very rare. When serious injuries happen, it is usually in a mountaineering context with a group. The subject of this analysis is not mountaineering or other riskier adventures, but hiking and backpacking. When *serious* accidents or illnesses do happen while hiking, having trained first responders present might make a difference, but again it is unlikely. Most serious events of this nature can be dealt with by experienced solo hikers with a basic understanding of first aid. Maybe most important in this context is that most severe injuries in the wilderness come from falling. To minimize this risk, take seriously the numerous suggestions made in the article “[Preventing Serious Injuries From Falling.](#)”

Being pinned by a large, shifting object (boulder, tree, avalanche)

What if I get pinned by a large boulder? If I enter a boulder field, solo, far from a trail, I might die there. Remember the fellow in the Utah canyon country forced to cut off his own arm to survive (portrayed in the movie “127 Hours)? Remember the preacher’s poignant story featured in the June 2002 issue of *Backpacker* magazine (“Trapped, the Mike Turner Story”)? He died in the Wind Rivers after

becoming pinned by a boulder far from a trail. His story is based on a detailed journal that he kept until he died.

Analysis: Even though these occurrences receive a lot of media attention and sell lots of magazines and TV advertising, they are still quite rare especially among hikers and backpackers. If not convinced about their rarity, simply stay on more popular and maintained trails. If I am solo and decide to go off-trail in rugged country, I will acknowledge this as a risk and will be extra cautious, always remaining on alert. If the worst happens, carry a sharp knife and first aid supplies that are up to this gruesome task.

Hypothermia

What about hypothermia, probably the backcountry killer subconsciously feared most by hikers? Because it often takes others in the party to recognize the onset of a pre-hypothermic state, it is much more likely to be deadly when solo than with an experienced partner.

Analysis: Again, it is very rare to hear of *experienced* hikers carrying their “ten essentials” dying of hypothermia. Competent wilderness travelers should understand this danger and take extra steps to avoid it, especially when going solo. For a refresher on this topic, see the website article “[Understanding and Preventing Hypothermia](#).” However, a most interesting challenge is for the experienced *lightweight* packer to be skilled and experienced enough to deal with this problem with a lightweight kit. For an in-depth discussion of this aspect of this issue, see the website article “[Wilderness Safety—A Debate Between Ultralightists And Traditionalists](#).”

Being attacked by wild animals or human predators

These kinds of attacks are much less likely when one is with a group.

Analysis: Again, these rare occurrences receive a lot of media attention and sell lots of magazines and TV advertising when they occur. But the probabilities are still quite low, especially when compared to attacks by human predators in the frontcountry. If legitimately concerned about such attacks, carry a can or two of pepper spray or its equivalent.

What patterns can be derived from the five scenarios analyzed above? *First*, taken individually they are statistically quite rare. But even when the five are lumped together as a group, they are still rare compared to all of the risks we usually face in our lives. *Second*, there are ways to mitigate and minimize (but not totally eliminate) these risks; we have many choices that will make solo hiking much safer than if we ignore the risks. *Third*, and probably most important, is the fact that all of life has risks. With this third pattern comes the quintessential question: When it is acceptable to take unnecessary risks (assuming that hiking solo is not a necessity)? Assuming there is a difference between *taking risks* and *taking chances*, most realistic observers will conclude that taking unnecessary risks comes with living a full life. Eliminating all unnecessary risks would result in a very boring and constricted life. Finally, taking chances is just being irresponsible, whether in the frontcountry or the backcountry.

Six Examples of Illogical Thinking by Soloists and Anti-Soloists

The second method of defending the positions taken at the beginning of this article is to carefully examine the logic of the reasoning commonly used by both soloists and anti-soloists. How logical are the replies of soloists to those who question their behavior? What about those who categorically reject solo hiking? How often do their answers involve rationalized, confused and illogical thinking? Consider the following analyses.

Illogical Thinking Example #1

“Statistically, it is far riskier to drive to the trailhead than to hike solo in the wilderness.”

Analysis: This answer sounds reasonable at first but turns out to be based on a false assumption: that each activity mentioned carries a fixed risk. On one side of the coin, it depends upon how conservative or risky is one’s hiking behavior. On the other, it depends on the driving conditions and one’s driving habits. On the driving side, if one lives fairly close to the trailhead and drives conservatively on rural roads to get there, the risk is extremely low. If one is traveling in countries with regions of high crime and terrorist activities, the risk can be quite high. There are too many varied scenarios of solo hiking and too many different scenarios of getting to trailheads to make any kind of

generalization. In summary, this typical soloist answer is illogical and follows a form of black and white thinking. However, one exception (i.e., that does not involve fallacious thinking) would be the person who habitually does the same type of travel to and from trailheads and who always does the same type of solo hiking. Even then the claim about solo hiking could be positive or negative, depending upon the type of travel and type of hiking.

Illogical Thinking Example #2

Since the next type of thinking is so common, I illustrate it with two different quotes and two separate analyses.

I think we take all sorts of risks every day, accidental and intentional, voluntary and involuntary. We manipulate those as best we can with the information we have on hand at the time. Solo hiking is just one more item of risk to manipulate.

—Bill Forsnel in Houston, Texas, *Backpackinglight.com* forum

Analysis: This answer is illogical by the same analysis related above in Example #1. It would be okay if Mr. Forsnel was speaking for himself and speaking about a specific hike and the current risks in his own life. To speak to everyone's daily life and hiking behavior is illogical. We should not generalize in this way. In addition to the problem of making hasty generalizations about others, it is often difficult to generalize about oneself. The daily lives of individuals can change dramatically along with their specific hiking behaviors. If a specific soloist analyzed the risks currently in his or her personal life and then compared them to the potential risks of a particular solo hike, then Mr. Forsnel's statements might be true and logical. But to generalize like he does is not logical.

Life isn't totally safe and hiking isn't totally safe, no matter how we do it. The sooner we realize that there are risks in everything we do, the more likely it is that we can enjoy life. Then again, many things in life that are worthwhile have some risk associated with them. How much risk does going solo add? I believe only a small amount.

—Mark Verber, *Backpackinglight.com* forum)

Analysis: The first three sentences are true without much question. But the last two (one question and one statement) again raise the problem of hasty generalizations. As in the earlier analyses, the same questions must be asked of Mr. Verber. What kind of life is he currently living and what kind of solo hiking is being contemplated? The truth of his last statement will depend totally upon the answers. Theoretically, a person working in a dangerous occupation (e.g., a law enforcement officer or coal miner or a person fishing stormy Alaskan waters during the winter) could easily claim that solo hiking is considerably safer.

Illogical Thinking Example #3

“I have participated in numerous search and rescue missions over the years involving solo hikers and climbers. Many were never found or found dead. Your hiking solo is irresponsible.” This is a paraphrase of a statement by a highly experienced and long-time member of Olympic Mountain Rescue during an encounter when your author was hiking solo on a relatively popular trail in the Olympic Mountains.

Analysis: The questions that came to mind later (at the time he gave me no opportunity to defend myself or ask any questions) were about the level of experience of those “casualties” he talked about, the types of trails, how much was off-trail, and other relevant factors. Was Mr. Mountain Rescue’s quick-to-judge attitude a hasty generalization from his years of experience? Was he committing a “black and white” fallacy of reasoning? More importantly, did his up close and personal experiences with search and rescue unfairly color his judgment (like those of a bitter law enforcement officer who has spent a lifetime confronting the dregs of society)? The answer is probably “yes” to all three questions. There are real issues regarding solo hiking, but the practice can’t be dismissed so easily.

Illogical Thinking Example #4

It’s all a matter of getting comfortable with something different. Remember when you first started driving? How you were hyper alert and a little unsure in your movements? Now, we all think nothing of hurtling along at 65 mph with 10 other cars within feet of us. We just got comfortable in that environment. An environment we are in daily that is probably more hazardous than a backpacking

trip. My advice—get out there and do it. Stretch your comfort zone gradually or scare the heck out of yourself with a big challenge, whichever is your style. Trust your style, trust yourself. Hike your hike.

—Carol Crooker, *Backpackinglight.com* forum

Analysis: Is the emphasis on getting comfortable and stretching your comfort zone logically relevant to the level of actual risk and danger involved in solo hiking, by either experienced or inexperienced hikers? While it is true that a person who is extremely uncomfortable in the mountains might well be a danger to themselves and to others (like a new driver), the opposite is questionable. It is far too easy for highly experienced solo hikers to become overconfident and to get into trouble especially while traveling off-trail. Comfort levels and the *actual* risks of solo travel are two quite different matters. The same can be said of highly experienced drivers taking a corner too fast or failing to notice black ice on the road or forgetting to drive defensively in a dangerous stretch of road.

Illogical Thinking Example #5

“I’ve been solo backpacking for a lot of years and it hasn’t killed me yet.”

Analysis: This common attitude among experienced solo hikers expresses a lack of understanding of the basic laws of probability. There is just as much probability of getting hurt tomorrow in the wilderness as there is the day after that. Each day is totally new (probability wise); what has happened in the past is irrelevant to the probabilities in the future, all else being equal. More to the point, if one is solo hiking in a dangerous and risky manner, there is a high probability of getting seriously injured or killed today, tomorrow or the next day. If doing it in a very conservative manner, the probability is remote on any specific day no matter how long you have been doing it. The number of years of experience is mostly irrelevant to whether one is behaving in a dangerous or a conservative manner on any particular day. I say mostly irrelevant because what happened in the past is not entirely irrelevant to the laws of probability. We generally assume that most are gradually learning from their experiences and gaining more knowledge and skill with each outing. If one is learning from experience, the probabilities of serious consequences from solo hiking

are being gradually reduced. However, this important qualification doesn't change the illogic of the initial statement.

Illogical Thinking Example #6

But if you judge safety to be the paramount consideration in life you should never, under any circumstances, go on long hikes alone. Don't take short hikes alone either—or, for that matter, go anywhere alone. And avoid at all costs such foolhardy activities as driving, falling in love, or inhaling air that is almost certainly riddled with deadly germs. . . . Never cross an intersection against a red light, even when you can see that all roads are clear for miles. And never, of course, explore the guts of an idea that seems as if it might threaten one of your more cherished beliefs. In your wisdom you will probably live to a ripe old age. But you may discover, just before you die, that you have been dead for a long, long time.

—Colin Fletcher and Chip Rawlins, *The Complete Walker IV*, p. 756

Analysis: The above quote appeared at the beginning of this article, but I repeat it here because it is deserving of a logical analysis. The philosophy communicated in this quote emphasizes a basic truth about the importance of taking risks and being really alive. However, it also carries the idea to the extreme (to make a point?). It is a subtle form of black and white thinking: either you are a real risk taker or you are a member of the group known as the “living dead”). In fact, most are willing to take risks in some areas of their lives, but not in others. This kind of extremist thinking by Fletcher and Rawlins is good to get the reader's attention, but it doesn't cut it in the final analysis. Black and white thinking is illogical in most contexts.

These six examples of illogical thinking might well be countered by examples of logical thinking on the matter at hand (much rarer?). But that would miss the point of this section: the frequency of illogical thinking on this topic. Consider the analyses provided in all sections of this article before forming a judgment about the logic or illogic, the wisdom or irrationality of solo hiking.

Is Solo Hiking More Dangerous Than Going with a Group?

This is a very important question because the most logical answer probably goes counter to the usual thought process. Consider the following perspective from an unknown hiker:

I really don't know if I'm more of a danger to those I'm with than they are to me. I suppose that can depend on my level of luck, or theirs. And I'm not convinced there's a solid inverse correlation between skill level and potential for disaster. Lots of experienced folks get into trouble. I'd like to see some statistics (the real kind) that show whether people are more likely to get hurt while solo or in a group. And to take that one step further, show whether an injured person's chances are really better in a group. I don't know.

It is commonly assumed that hiking with a group is safer than hiking alone, but that is not the whole story. Consider some hypothetical situations or factors. For example, a group could be attempting an off-trail traverse involving dangerous cliffs and rock fall while not equipped with hard hats. Another factor might be party leadership: sometimes party members rely too much on each other and end up with a situation where everyone is responsible, but no one is responsible. Yet another factor is how much testosterone is flowing. Sometimes testosterone-fueled judgments are exacerbated in proportion to group size, which can lead to bad decisions. A last factor depends on individual skill and experience levels and how much the individual relishes the challenges of solo hiking. In the words of Vick Hines (*Backpackinglight.com* forum): “I like feeling self-sufficient and self-contained. You have to think of everything, and that awareness becomes a background for the experience and heightens it.”

Summary of the Principles Developed in This Article

1. Solo hiking must be viewed situationally with a careful eye on risk assessment. The risk depends on the type of terrain to be covered, familiarity with the terrain, the level of experience of the person involved, the likelihood of getting into trouble, the likelihood of other hikers being in the area, the weather and the time of year, the number of days from the trailhead, and so on.
2. Solo hiking is only as dangerous as one makes it; the risks of solo hiking can be mitigated to near zero if one takes a conservative approach.

3. There is no substitute for knowledge, skill, experience and preparation, whether going with a group or going by oneself.
4. You will be safest if you hike with competent people with whom you are comfortable; however, going with an incompetent person can put you at a greater risk than going it alone.
5. The question of whether it is more dangerous to travel alone than with a group is situational and surely open to debate with no obvious answer.
6. Living a full life will always involve some unnecessary risks. Potential soloists must decide for themselves balancing the dangers versus the benefits.

Reader Participation: Priorities Regarding Dangers of Soloing

First, add to the above list any principles you hold dear on this subject.

Second, circle two or three principles that are most important.

Final Thoughts on Solo Hiking

The solo hiking I do is relatively low risk and not particularly dangerous. However, there are some risks and since I have a much lower risk tolerance now than in my early days of hiking and mountaineering, I do make an effort to find a competent hiking partner or two. But there are those days that dawn bright and clear when I feel a strong need to get out into the wilderness. Sometimes I need to do something more challenging, but often not. Few of my hiking friends have set up their lives to go spur-of-the-moment. So, off I go.

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