

Feature Article

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Randy Morgart's article "Cold and Alone on an Icy River" in our August issue drew a response from Moulton Avery, an expert in environmental physiology and the author of the frequently cited article "Cold Shock" from our Spring 1991 issue. Here he looks at a psychology of decision-making that helps explain how an experienced paddler can make a mistake that we would expect of a novice paddler.

- Christopher Cunningham

Anatomy of a Bad Decision

By Moulton Avery

It takes a lot of courage to publicly write about making a really big mistake, and Randy Morgart has my respect and gratitude for his willingness to share his terrifying near-death experience following an unexpected February capsizing on the freezing Mississippi River. There are a lot of lessons to be learned from his experience, and he did a great job discussing them. I want to add one more to his list.

Reason vs. Emotion

Recent studies of human emotion, cognition, and behavioral psychology have shed considerable light on the age-old tug of war between reason and emotion that underlies decision making and so much of human behavior. If you participate in a sport like sea kayaking and value your life, this process is worth a closer look, because in our sport, realistically and accurately assessing a situation and making a sound decision about how to proceed is fundamental to staying out of trouble.

When it comes to making important decisions, most people will tell you they decide what to do by carefully and rationally weighing the pros and cons of the situation. More often than not, however, rationality is just a bit player in the game; the real decision-maker is emotion. It's a subtle but absolutely critical point, particularly if you want to understand how an experienced paddler like Randy could suddenly find himself in such a terrible predicament. After all, rationally speaking, he knew better than to leave his wetsuit at home.

In the aftermath of many accidents and disasters, people often see a landscape littered with obvious warning signs and wonder about the mental capacity of the victims; saying, in effect, “What the hell were they thinking?” This really stands out in cases in which the victims were experienced rather than clueless newbies. In far too many cases, the short but stunning answer is: Whether they knew better, or whether the danger was right in front of their eyes isn’t the point, because they never saw it. And they missed it precisely because they weren’t thinking at all; their actions were based solely on a gut reaction – on a feeling.

Setting the Trap

For many accident victims who “should have known better,” the landscape is littered with examples of this non-rational process in action. It’s a regular feature of accident reports about tragedies that occur in the great outdoors in everything from mountaineering to cave diving.

A sea kayaker can end up leaving the wetsuit or drysuit at home, or not own one to begin with, not because of some rational process, but because—when he or she took a quick mental peek at the situation—it just felt like a perfectly reasonable thing to do. In other words, it felt right.

This danger of overlooking the obvious has been greatly enhanced in sea kayaking, because unfortunately, for over thirty years, thousands upon thousands of sea kayakers have been told that if you don’t plan on capsizing, if your level of skill is sufficient to safely handle the conditions in which you *expect* to be paddling, you don’t need to worry about dressing for the water temperature.

I’ve paraphrased that message below. Pay close attention when you read it because it’s complete hogwash, and it provides paddlers who take it seriously with a safety net that whales could swim through:

You don’t really have to dress for the water temperature every single time you go paddling on cold water. Unless you “plan on encountering challenging conditions”, it’s perfectly fine to forget about wetsuits and drysuits, and dress instead as if you were going for a hike in the woods.

Which is precisely what Randy did. He set the trap that almost cost him his life by dressing for the air temperature. It’s an easy trap to fall in to, particularly if you don’t have a personal “no exceptions” policy when it comes to cold-water safety.

The “challenging conditions” argument is really insidious, and it undermines cold-water safety precisely because it encourages paddlers to equivocate, make excuses, or rationalize a decision not to dress for the water temperature. Capsizing on cold water without a wetsuit or drysuit is the direct cause of at least 90% of sea-kayaking fatalities, and it’s safe to say that none of the paddlers who died this way ever, in their wildest dreams, anticipated encountering conditions “challenging” enough to kill them when they went paddling on that final occasion.

Emotional decision-making is often a spur-of-the-moment kind of thing—subtle, but very powerful at initiating or inhibiting action. It can be particularly dangerous in situations where a wrong decision + a small mistake = an excellent chance of winding up badly injured or dead. It also presents a great argument for being conservative and cautious, and for leaving yourself as big a margin for error as possible any time you venture into the great outdoors. No paddler is immune to making mistakes, or has the magical power to see into the future.

The unsettling truth about decision making is that rational, clear, impartial, error-free, Mr. Spock-type-thinking is the exception rather than the rule in life. We’re just not very good at it. On the other hand, what we’re really skilled at is rationalization, justification, and wishful thinking. What’s more, we make mistakes and unwise decisions all the time. We seldom take notice, because more often than not, the stakes are so low that being wrong makes no appreciable difference to our daily lives.

We misplace car keys, TV remotes, and cell phones, don’t remember to back up files and return calls, forget to buy things at the grocery store, have one beer too many, underestimate how long something is going to take, overestimate our physical abilities, make resolutions we don’t keep, eat junk food, purchase stuff we don’t need, commit errors while driving to the put-in, and do all sorts of things that have the potential to come back, in one way or another, to bite us in the backside. The list goes on and on.

Going with your feelings isn’t always bad, of course. The mental process we customarily think of as intuition has kept many a paddler out of harm’s way. A common response for not leaping into the Great White’s jaws being: “I don’t know, I just had a really bad feeling about it.” In those cases, listening for, paying attention to, and acting on the “wee, small voice” of intuition can be a really good thing to do.

This subtle, often complicated emotional terrain is something best negotiated cautiously and with eyes wide open. When you find yourself on the threshold of a potentially important decision, like whether or not to paddle solo in fog on an exposed and rocky coast towards which huge ocean swells from a distant hurricane are heading – it’s really helpful to pause for a moment and ask yourself: “Why do I feel the way I do about taking this particular course of action? What is my motivation for wanting to do this? Does it make sense?” And, of course: “Is it safe?”

After all, a candid examination of your own feelings and motivations is central to one of the most important pieces of advice in life: Know thyself. To that every wise sea kayaker will add: “Know thy environment” and “Watch thy step.” Viewed in this light, two articles in the October edition of *Sea Kayaker*—“Lost at Sea” by Michael Powers and “Aftermath of an Accident” by Saul Kinderis—take on even greater meaning.”

Skills vs. Challenging Conditions

Randy Morgart was no wet-behind-the-ears newbie. He started canoeing in 1972, he’d spent a lot of time on flat water in his sea kayak, and had a lot of confidence in his flatwater roll. And unless the river was really shallow and he was bouncing off the bottom, he had a pretty reliable whitewater roll as well. It had been a long time since he unintentionally capsized his sea kayak, and even longer since he’d had to wet exit. He knew about self-rescues, and had even conducted paddle-float demonstrations for his local paddling club.

In the event that he did need help, he carried both a cell phone and a VHF radio. When it came to the mighty Mississippi, he had both solo and group experience on the section of river he planned to paddle. And from his perspective, the paddling conditions were tame. In his words: “...calm, slow-moving water, sheltered from the main channel by a string of islands.” It wasn’t windy or raining, just a little cold, and he’d had plenty of experience dealing with cold weather. You’d be really hard pressed to find anyone who would describe the paddling conditions Randy encountered as “challenging” for someone with his level of experience.

Zero Margin for Error

It was Randy’s fleeting mental comparison of his paddling skills versus the seemingly benign river conditions that allowed him to be comfortable with his near-lethal decision to dress for the air rather than the water temperature. And although

he might never have heard someone make the often repeated “challenging conditions” argument I referred to earlier, he was definitely following its flawed logic.

It’s a hard message to miss in our sport, because it’s been woven into a lot of sea kayaking brochures, books, and instructional programs. Randy knew it was riskier paddling alone and that a cold-water capsized could be dangerous, yet he chose to leave his wetsuit at home, figuring that he simply “wouldn’t need one for a flatwater paddle.” At the time, of course, his decision didn’t seem at all reckless or ill advised. As he wisely and candidly notes in retrospect: “It’s easy to dismiss these concerns because we have no intention of swimming.”

When Randy reached the launch site, the deceptively tranquil conditions on the river offered up nothing to change his mind. The water exhibited that seductively peaceful, flat-calm look that an intermittent 1/4 inch layer of ice imparts to a big, slow-moving river. Unfortunately, it only looked non-threatening.

With the water temperature near freezing, his forget-about-the-wetsuit decision left him with absolutely no margin for error, guaranteeing that any capsized would instantly morph into a life-threatening event—a desperate race against time and the terribly lethal power of cold water. All it took to set that race in motion was a tiny miscalculation on his part, a little slip of his paddle on some ice.

Far more often than we’d like to admit, our moments of decision are overwhelmed by emotion and the power of memory and feeling. Randy had a lot of really wonderful memories of paddling and how great it felt to be out on the water in his boat. By contrast, he had zero memories of how excruciatingly painful and terrifying it is to be suddenly immersed in near-freezing water. At best, all he had was some dry information about cold water safety. When it came to decision time, it was no contest.

Here’s the scary part: That kind of mental gymnastics happens all the time in life. A valuable conclusion we can draw, and use to our advantage, from recent scientific discoveries, is the sobering fact that in many situations you really don’t think at all – a bad idea can pop up and before you have time to think, you can act on it based solely on your feelings. You don’t so much fall for it as go for it.

In nature, many conditions have the potential to change with amazing speed and little or no warning. One thing, however, that won’t change during the course of your

outing is the water temperature. And when it comes to cold water, experienced, safety-conscious paddlers have developed an elegant work-around for this entire reason-versus-emotion, skills-versus-conditions problem. It's a simple, easy to follow rule: When paddling on cold water, they always dress for the water temperature. No exceptions! I suspect Randy would be the first to tell you what a great idea that is.

About the Author

Moulton Avery directed the Center for Environmental Physiology in Washington, DC for 10 years, and spent 6 years running a wilderness school in North Carolina. He's an authority on cold water safety, and a former ACA Sea Kayaking Instructor, and SK Instructor Trainer.

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Suggested reading: Deep Survival by Laurence Gonzales