



Alpine Lakes Wilderness, Washington State

DEBRIEF & LEARNING

CLUSTERFUDGE CHRONICLE # 1

(for "Setting the Stage" prequel, scroll to the bottom of www.solowfa.com)

No "Right" Answer

There are multiple ways one could have dealt with this situation; each has its pros and cons, and so there may be no "right" answer.

Max = actual trip leader. After the adventure, Max emailed some fellow outdoor adventurers, and asked them what they would have done:

Post-trip Ideas Trip Leader Max Received Which He Didn't Do, with Max's commentary:

- Make a campfire to get people warm and clothes dry
 - It's too wet & rainy out. Max did not feel they could build a fire with wet wood and get it going big enough to have four people plus clothes around it actually getting toasty (presumably after using tent fly & ground sheet to build a rain roof and wind-block wall)
- Donate dry clothes to Stan
 - Yes, perhaps so long as the precious few remaining dry items don't just get wet again from the rain...
- Stop and set up camp for the day and night
 - Could do, should be able to get warm and dry while inside tents. John and Max felt the risk of trail freezing over (and potentially not melting for days at this high elevation) was too great. One of Max's other friends later aptly pointed out: "the weather patterns of the Northwest and the unpredictability of sudden winter any time of the year." Had people brought all items on the required list, they would have been prepared. They did have 5 days of food on hand though, and so could have set up tent and if the trail iced over perhaps it would have melted within 5 days ... or perhaps not as it was autumn and winters have set in September before in this area. (Side factoid: On July 4th of the year of this clusterfudge, one of the trails they hiked on still had 10 feet of snow on it from last winter!)
- Stop and set up camp for a while until Stan is warm, then press onward
 - Setting up camp in the wind, getting things all ready for Stan to get into sleeping bag with warm water pouches / bottles on him, having a meal, then packing up camp and moving on for lower elevation overnight camping ... would risk the group's losing too many precious daylight hours, with the added risk that it was not possible to tell from the map if there were any sites suitable for camping before reaching their planned camping spot.
 - Stan would warm up, then likely just get cold again going back out without proper rain gear.
- Call for helicopter rescue for Stan and Jeff
 - Overkill in Max's opinion. Both were capable of walking to the road, and neither needed hospital E.R. care.
- Move Jeff's extra food into other packs, helping Jeff hike faster
 - Good idea

- Make a crutch out of a tree branch for Jeff
 - Cool idea! Jeff was doing well transferring weight onto a hiking pole, but if they could make an actual crutch, that would be better.
 - Challenge: time taken to make the crutch functional and sturdy ... Stan is in greater need of care so they'd need to find a way to get & keep him warm during the crutch-making process
- Keep the group together, get to below 5,000 feet and make a fire
 - Stan is the more critical patient ... Keeping the group together = walk slowly = Stan becomes more hypothermic = risk of Stan getting to stumbling stage of hypothermia = risk of traumatic fall off mountain slope.
- Split the group into 2+2, with Stan in the front group to keep him moving quickly
 - In the thick of it, Max chose not to do this to avoid risk of ending up with four people needing help, not just two (concern that they'd get lost if they didn't have both John and Leader Max together in the front group conferring which way the trail goes)

Key Thoughts in Max's Mind:

- See notes above. Also:
- Stan was not yet at the stumbling stage of hypothermia. Hypothermia treatments include eating sugar and exercise. Max felt if he could get Stan to eat one of his candy bars and get him moving at a faster pace, his hypothermia would not worsen and might improve.
- Jeff was moving slowly but consistently, using a hiking pole was helping, he was warm, dry, and in good spirits. On day 1 his knee didn't hurt but he still moved slowly. On day 2 (yesterday) his knee hurt, but he moved slowly and steadily. He was happy with hiking on.
- The trail ahead could (and likely would based on previous trail segments) have several spots which take up to a half hour or more to figure out the way through fallen trees, overgrown trails, or unmarked intersections ... making it helpful if they could get the trail figured out and marked in such locations by the time Jeff got there
- Max needed to find a solution which:
 - gets Stan warm or at least stable (Stan was the priority patient)
 - avoids the risk of icy trails starting the next day(s)
 - ensures they don't follow a wrong path / get lost (side note: John's GPS, while helpful, wasn't guaranteed to get them out of a lost situation – he had left it on overnight earlier in the trip and was concerned about the battery)
 - adheres to first aid protocol, including safety of leader & caregiver Max, next the un-injured, and then the patient(s).

What Max Chose to Do in the thick of the situation

With the above in mind, Max:

- Wrapped Jeff's knee with an Ace bandage, instructing him to loosen it if he felt circulation getting cut off; reconfirmed with him that he was warm, dry (except for shoes) and wanting to keep on hiking; re-checked that their walkie talkies were communicating (and they both had extra batteries); and reminded him that he had waterproof shelter in his pack and a whistle
- Asked Stan to eat a candy bar
- Hiked on at a more regular (faster) pace with Stan so the exercise could keep him stable or perhaps get warm, and with John so that together they could be sure we're choosing the right trail paths ... avoiding creating four patients (everyone lost).
- Stayed in radio contact from time to time with Jeff, finding out where he was, and always reconfirming with him that he was warm and dry (which he always said he was).

As mentioned, all options we've discussed so far have pros and cons. As Max hiked on, consistently in his mind he hated the fact that the con of this plan was having Jeff hike alone. Max was comforted a bit knowing that Jeff was in warm, dry, in good mental state, and had everything with him that he would need to stop anywhere, get out of the elements, get under a large durable waterproof tarp, wrap himself in it if need be, drink and eat. Max thought more and more about first aid protocol, asking himself was he doing the right thing according to protocol, which starts with scene safety. The scene was not safe, it wasn't

possible to make it safe (when considering both short and longer term) for reasons noted above; if Max hiked more slowly – with his soaked feet, general not-good circulation to his hands & feet, and waterproof glove failure – he could start to enter hypothermia, and without full use of his hands, he would be pretty unable to help (adding one more patient to the list – hence protocol protecting against that).

Stan, John and Max hiked ahead, Max orange-tape-marked the trails where they appeared confusing, he kept his walkie talkie on at all times, Jeff turned his on from time to time to check in or ask a question (at each of which time Max learned where he was, and confirmed that he was still warm, dry, and mentally fine), and then only Jeff turned his off to conserve battery.

As they hiked on, they came across a tent with two guys camping. Max told them of their group including Jeff behind them. The campers said the road was just a few miles further. To Max, the road meant help available should they need it. When they reached the road, Max asked John to heat up some water and put it in a pouch (small plastic platypus) for Stan to hold to his body core to warm both his core and his hands (which he said helped a lot), and then to warm some water to get Stan a hot meal. Meanwhile Max built a shelter for Stan (with John's help at times), and when it was ready, got Stan in it on a pad out of his wet clothes into a dry fleece layer and into his sleeping bag. Stan said he was warming up. (If Max remembers correctly John was starting to get chilly and so) next Max helped John put up his tent, checked on Stan again who said he was warm and all set, gave him an emergency blanket and whistle in case he needed it (his shelter was suitable for one person only) and finally proceeded to have a meal. It was dark by this time, and Max couldn't reach Jeff by radio perhaps because he hadn't turned his back on, or perhaps because he was too far behind – unknown. Stan was warm stable and happy, John and Max were exhausted. At last check-in Jeff was fine and about one hour behind. Max figured he'd either arrive at camp later, or camp out with the other two guys they passed. Max left his radio on high volume and he and John went to sleep, too exhausted to consider going back up the trail. Yes, Max was worried for sure, too exhausted to hike back up the trail (all uphill), but confident with the fact that Jeff had all he needed to spend the night safely if that's what he chose to do, and that Max had discussed this with him not long ago. The risk was of course was if Jeff fell, got hurt, and was out of radio range (or radio broken) and unable to wrap a tarp around himself. Jeff's moving slowly mitigated this risk, making it be less than the general risk of anyone falling on any trail.

Morning came, no sign of Jeff and no luck reaching him on radio. Every prior morning Jeff was slow and by far the last to be ready. Yesterday morning he wasn't ready until 10am, that with the rest of the group encouraging him to get going. Max figured 10am would be the earliest Jeff would get going, more likely later without the encouragement of the rest of the group to get him moving. Thus Max didn't expect to see or hear from Jeff until very late morning.

Thankfully the rain stopped for the most part. Early and mid-morning Max explored the (closed) campground a short distance down the road, hoping for a shelter with fireplace that campgrounds often have. He found one (a 5-minute walk off the road), gave Stan and John his wet items, sent the two of them to the shelter to try to make a fire and start drying their and his things out. Meanwhile Max blocked the road with some branches and hiking poles at the key location of the trail / road intersection, where he waited (1) for Jeff to come off the trail (or radio contact from him), (2) perhaps for the two campers to come off the trail with some info on Jeff, and (3) for anyone coming along the road. Soon some bicyclists came along the road, it wasn't quite late yet – still earlier than when Max expected to see Jeff, but Max wanted them to put a Search & Rescue team on stand-by alert ready-to-go in case it got later and no Jeff. The bicyclists happened to be off-duty rangers; they radioed in and did exactly that. Now that they had rescue on stand-by, together they decided it would be best for the rangers to wait there, and John and Max to pack up their packs again – lighter weight this time but with enough to stay one night out there, and head up the trail. Max radioed John to come back from the shelter with their stuff; Stan would stay at the shelter keeping the fire going and getting his things dry. John and Max started up trail, and literally five minutes later Jeff radioed in saying he's 100% fine, slept at the site where the other guys were, and is on his way down. John and Max returned to the road, reported, asked the rangers to tell the S&R team thanks for being on stand-by they won't be needing them, and then Max asked them to have a 20/20 hindsight lessons learned debrief discussion.

[Later, Jeff arrived at the road, he was fine and had slept fine & warm. Jeff with his knee problem, and Stan with his unpreparedness, those two decided to abort the rest of the trip and make their way to town (the campers Jeff stayed with gave them a ride). John and Max altered (shortened) their trail plan for the upcoming days, and met Jeff and Stan in town a few days later as planned.]

20/20 Hindsight Lessons Learned / What Max Would Have Done Differently:

- First try using an emergency blanket, or the cutting & using duct tape on the big waterproof ground sheet or rain fly to make a rain coat for Stan. If it worked, borrow clothes from dry people to put on him and get him out of wet clothes.
- The scene wasn't safe for Stan or Max to stay back and walk slowly (or for any of them to stop for a long time) so that was out of the question. Ask John if he felt he could stay warm and safe hiking at Jeff's slow pace, in which case perhaps the scene could be safe enough for John, satisfying that basic first aid protocol requirement. If so, have those two stay together and just Stan and Max move ahead, swapping the risk of Jeff being alone for the risk of not having John present with Max to confer with in making trail direction decisions and possibly their all getting lost. Max is good with a map and compass, and reading topography so if he gets far off trail he should be able to figure it out (though with daylight time lost). Perhaps ask John to show him how to use his GPS and take that with him too. Ponder: is this the right solution ... what's the greater risk: (a) increased likelihood of all four of them getting lost without John in the forward group to confer with in choosing direction, or (b) leaving Jeff to hike alone as was done, knowing that he has everything he needs to make camp alone for the night, and that his walking slowly makes his likelihood of falling and becoming helpless be less than that of any hiker on any trail.
- Have Jeff leave his radio turned on at all times, like Max's. Set a regular contact schedule (such as once every 15 or 30 minutes) to check in and report status. If at any point the forward group isn't able to make one of these regularly-scheduled contacts, stop and backtrack to make contact, and don't get further ahead beyond radio range.
- Consider renting a satellite phone and having everyone split the cost (this was a zero-fee expedition – everyone just paid for their own transportation, food, lodging etc.)
- Buy some rain pants which go over boots and have a string that go under each boot (like some gaitors have) so the rain pant doesn't ride up above the boot when taking a steep step up (so water never has a chance to get into boot), and which can be put on/taken off without removing boots.
- Buy some dry-suit gloves.
- Bolster the trip's written Qualifications section, stating that if you don't meet these qualifications (pace, equipment, etc.) at start of trip, sorry you can't come even if you bought your plane ticket as it jeopardizes your own and others' safety ... and the leader is not the person to be upset with in this case, as you have had this section in writing for many months.
- Have a pre-trip meeting requiring everyone to bring 100% done fully packed packs in large room with multiple tables: one for rain gear, one for food, etc. On each table mark off one section for each participant. Everyone fills in the tables with their gear, and they go from table to table discussing what new & creative, and what's inadequate and must be made adequate prior to the trip. Then, prior to or at trip start, check that all inadequacies were made right; if not, refuse passage.
- Refuse passage if participant does not meet experience (proof of certain # of times doing that activity) and stamina (proof-positive ability to maintain pace with loaded pack) requirements. Much easier said than done (as with any of these refuse-passage cases) ... if someone trains a bunch and come trip time doesn't qualify, has already bought plane tickets ... maybe there are not enough people to go if s/he doesn't go and then the whole trip has to be canceled despite plane tickets purchased ... have a back-up plan for a lesser adventure at the destination in case of this happening.

After-Comments / Feedback from Stan, Jeff and John:

- Stan was the most serious patient, and expressed being very happy with the plan Max chose and the care he got.
- Jeff said he understood the situation and had no problem with the three of them moving ahead and him being alone, so long as he was in radio contact.
- When Max later asked him, John said that though he was a bit chilly, he probably could have stayed back with Jeff and not been too cold. John had an extra layer, though it's not so easy to remove a raincoat, open up your backpack, take out that extra layer, put it on, and put the rain coat back on and not get your clothes and pack wet while it's raining the whole time and we're above tree line. Doable, just not easy. (The day started out with hiking a lot of uphill to get to where they were, so they couldn't start out with wearing all of their layers lest their clothes get wet from perspiration.)
- All enjoyed the trip overall from what Max gathered; all got to see some beautiful nature, John and Max got to see even more; and Jeff and Stan enjoyed their relaxed time in the pretty mountain town.

Again, there may be no right or wrong solution in this scenario. Max learned from the one he chose, and hopefully they all learned something. If you're thinking Max made bad choices, consider that's easy for one to say when not in the thick of it all... After all, in the end, following protocol resulted in curing the most serious patient, maintaining the less serious patient in stable condition, and preventing the creation of more patients. But still there was a better way Max could have done it (as noted above), and Max learned from that.

Thanks for reading. Your learning increases wilderness safety for all. Names changed to protect identities

FUTURE ISSUES DEPEND ON YOU. *Please submit, in similar format, your own or acquaintances' true stories of when multiple problems clustered to create seemingly-no-perfect-answer challenges in wilderness medicine and/or leadership decision-making. MEDIC will select, edit and share in future issues. Frequency of issues depends on you.*

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