

Notes on the Nature of Injury in Outdoor Programming

Outdoor environments have inherent risks. Most often, these risks are associated with physical injuries. However, outdoor environment can also lead to psychological injury.

It is important to consider that just like physical injury, a spectrum exists for psychological injury. By that we mean that a scrape is a physical injury, albeit it is a minor one, where a pneumothorax is a major injury. The same is true for psychological injuries. Experiencing fear, being bullied and living a traumatic experience are all examples of different degrees of psychological injuries.

The Field Leader program is an integrated program designed to manage both physical and psychological injury. Field Leaders are provided tools to avoid major injuries and create conditions where minor injuries are likely, but can be managed in the field with some attention and care. However, it is important to recognize that the patterns are different for physical and psychological injuries.

Physical Injury in Outdoor Programming

Unfortunately many administrators and risk managers believe that outdoor programming presents a high level of risk. The facts do not support this belief. While extreme outdoor sports do carry a very high risk of physical injury, the overwhelming majority of outdoor activities are at least as safe as typical team sports. Activities like skiing and snowboarding carry approximately the same risk as football or basketball. Activities like walking, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing or top-roped rock climbing carry a much lower risk of physical injury. Currently there are no clear national standards for managing injury risk for non professional outdoor programming. This is this deficit that the Field Leader program is addressing. The absence of such a standard has resulted in a very small number of high profile accidents. These accidents have contributed to the illusion that outdoor programming is dangerous. These high profile events have been the result of systemic failure at the organizational level. The risk management strategy employed by the Field Leader program is carefully designed to avoid exactly these sorts of organizational failures.

Psychological Injury in Outdoor Programming

All programming has a potential for psychological injury. This is especially true when participants are children and youth. However, Outdoor programming is no more or less susceptible to psychological injury than are other types of programming.

These injuries are common and are typically less recognized because they are less visible. Since psychological injury makes a far larger contribution to the overall injury burden than does physical injury it should be of greater concern.

Psychological injuries fall into three categories:

- *Direct psychological injury* happens as a result of bullying, insensitive, or demeaning behaviour by other participants or leaders. This is the most acknowledged type of psychological injury.
- *Indirect psychological injury* happens when poor program delivery causes a participant to dislike either the subject taught or outdoor activity. This type of psychological injury risk may be as serious as the more recognized direct injury risk. Participants who dislike an experience will receive less benefits from said experience. Participants who come to dislike outdoor activity are less likely to adopt a lifelong active lifestyle and sedentary behaviour is very strongly associated with reduced life span, reduced productivity, reduced quality of life and increased chance of suffering from chronic and serious physical and psychological diseases.
- *Lost opportunity psychological injury* happens when a program fails to deliver quality educational or experiential content because of poor design and/or delivery. This type of injury is the least serious on a small scale, but when it becomes endemic to a program it can also have serious consequences similar to those for indirect psychological injury.