Blind-Spot: Near Miss Trauma

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Case Study 1

• A white water canoe instructor cancels a contract.

• Discussion reveals that the instructor had been guiding with another company, and had a near miss with several canoes capsizing simultaneously on a flooding, glacially fed river

• The instructor was experiencing anxiety, panic attacks, sleeplessness, especially when she tried to canoe again

• We agreed to find a replacement for the course
Near Miss Trauma

When a significant Near Miss / Near Death experience happens on a program, participants can experience symptoms of trauma, irrespective of the event’s positive outcome.

These symptoms can be experienced much more severe in the leaders, due to their heightened position of responsibility and expectations of control.
Case Study #2: Flood on Solo
Case Study 2

A group hiking in the Canadian Rockies is struck by a flash flood while on solo. Two instructors had separated from the group in order to rendezvous with a resupply vehicle. These instructors had a separate near miss while fording the flooding river while making their way back to the group. All three instructors experienced significant trauma symptoms.
Recognition

Evasiveness about debrief
Difficulty talking about event
Atmosphere of nervous tension
Tears
Anger (at you!?!)
Confusion
I’ve never seen a river/ocean/mountain act like that before
Normal vs. Not-Normal
Case Study #3: Alaska
Case Study 3

A group is ascending the Muldrow Glacier route on Mt. Denali, Alaska. At their high camp, they are hit by a storm which brings sub-zero temperatures, blowing snow, and winds gusting in excess of 100 mph. The group loses essential gear to the wind, including ropes and their plastic outer boots. The group spends several days descending the mountain while lacking important equipment. Trauma symptoms seem to scale with the level of responsibility in the instructor team.
POST TRAUMATIC STRESS

Stimulus
Retrieval Cues
Stress Response
Language

Acute Post Traumatic Stress Response  Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Operational Stress Injury (OSI)
POST TRAUMATIC STRESS

In Some Cases!
Flashbacks
Re-immersion in past event
Panic
Anxiety
Physical Manifestations
Conditioned Responses

Guilt
Shame
Depression
Suicide Ideation
Intentional Culture
Interlude: A Tale of Two Wars

Referenced a study comparing trauma rates in veterans of the Finnish Winter War in 1939 with the US War in Vietnam (1955-1975). The study noted very high rates of PTSD in Vietnam War veterans and almost none in Winter War veterans. The study concluded that the societal response to the war (honouring veterans in the case of the Winter War and deriding them in the case of the Vietnam War) contributed to the extent of PTSD in it’s veterans.
Case Study 4

A 30 day canoe trip in the far north of Canada’s Yukon Territory experiences flooding conditions. The group manages the river without significant incident, but it is clear that a leadership mistake at any point will likely result in a fatality. The lead instructor notices, a year later, significant tension and terseness when guiding even moderate rivers.
Healing

Amateur

Professional
First Aid

Create a safe place
Gather & confirm facts
Avoid blame
Avoid promising there won’t be disciplinary measures
Watch your language! Eg Response vs Injury vs Disorder
Validate: *it seems like you are experiencing a normal reaction to an abnormal situation*
Thank
Discuss first aid options: *what do you need right now?*
Professional Help

$ Support for Counselling
Worker’s Compensation
Recommended Counsellor
EMDR Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing
Other Image Based Therapy
Provide Info on PTS
Medication as short-term intervention
Healing

Peer Support
Time Off/ Other Duties?
Exercise
Growth