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Heuristic Traps in Recreational Avalanches

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FAMILIARITY

The "tendency to believe that our behavior is correct to the extent that we have done it before." Our brain creates shortcuts and used past actions to guide our decisions. Things that are familiar to us appear to be safer even when they may not be.

ACCEPTANCE

The "tendency to engage in activities that we think will get us noticed or accepted by people we like or respect, or by people who we want to like or respect us." People may follow other tracks into unsafe terrain because others have done it, or they could make riskier choices in order to be accepted socially by others in their group.

CONSISTENCY/COMMITMENT

"Once we have made an initial decision about something, subsequent decisions are much easier if we simply maintain consistency with that first decision." The brain again makes shortcuts that make our decisions easier. Completely re-evaluating a plan can take a lot of brain energy.

EXPERT HALO

Groups tend to follow a leader, even when this leader may not have adequate experience or decision-making skills, because the person gives off a halo of expertise. This leader could lead a group into dangerous situations.

TRACKS/SCARCITY

The "tendency to value resources or opportunities in proportion to the chance that you may lose them, especially to a competitor. Backcountry skiers may find themselves pushing into more dangerous terrain to find fresh tracks.

SOCIAL FACILITATION

The 'tendency to believe that a behavior is correct to the extent that other people are engaged in it. When a group is confident in their skills, they tend to make more risky decisions. Also, groups or members may follow other groups just for the sake of following.