

# HILLBILLY BRAIN

## BACKCOUNTRY DECISION-MAKING CHECKLIST

**Pre-walk pause point (before starting out from carpark or hut)**

**Significant change of circumstance (anticipated)**

### Equipment - Who has the:

- Vehicle keys
- PLB (including how to activate it)
- First aid kit
- Map
- Shelter (bivvy bag, tent)

### Knowledge – does everyone know:

- The route
- Key navigation points?
- Weather forecast?
- Where there is cell coverage?
- Who the first aiders are?
- When to activate PLB? What circumstances?
- Sunset and sunrise times?

### Personnel –consider:

- Medical conditions
- Fitness and fatigue
- Injuries (on-going, blisters, sore muscles, sore joints, etc.)
- Expectations: individual goals for trip
- Distribution of pack weight

### Leadership:

- Who will make the decisions in a crisis? The leader? Individual or team?
- What happens if the leader is injured or knocked unconscious?
- Potential medical crisis – leader may over-ride wishes of unwell person and activate PLB

### Consider:

- Anticipated difficulties and hazards
- Likely worst scenarios (the ‘what ifs?’)
- Biases and heuristic traps (see overleaf)
- Trend: getting better or worse? Weather, river levels, fatigue, medical condition, etc.
- Verbalise transitions (to sub-alpine, to snow, etc.).
  - “We’re entering a snow-zone; ice-axes off packs.”
  - “We’re fording the river now; undo top pack straps.”
- Consequences of risk:
  - Traversing above slope with good run-out vs above a bluff
  - Uncomfortable night out vs marginal river crossing and possible death
  - Marginal river crossing with long gentle run-out downstream vs rapids or waterfall

### Worst scenarios (what ifs). What will you do in the event of:

- Running out of daylight
- River rising
- Track washed away (slips, riverbank)
- Medical event
- Injury
- Lost party member
- Wasps, Ongaonga/nettle sting, etc.
- Hut availability (are there any in the area?)
- Hut full/locked/destroyed

## Major change of circumstance (unplanned – accident, party split or lost, sudden storm, avalanche, etc.)

**Slow down.** Tactical (or square) breathing; in for 4, hold for 4, out for 4, hold for 4. When calm:

- Observe
- Think
- Plan

Then, when planning **consider**:

- Anticipated difficulties and hazards
- Likely worst scenarios
- Biases and heuristic traps (see below)

### General:

- Who is best qualified to manage a crisis?
- If cell coverage, consider seeking external advice prior to PBL activation.
- Should the PLB be activated? If yes, activate immediately; don't wait until morning.
- If no PLB, who is best qualified to go for help?
- Who is best qualified to stay with the injured?

### Heuristic traps:

- Familiarity (“I’ve done this route many times...”)
- Social acceptance (“The others will be impressed if I...”)
- Expert halo (“Our leader is an expert.”)
- Scarcity (“My one chance to bag this route...”)
- Blind determination (“We’re going to achieve our goal no matter what...”)
- Group complacency (“I’m safe with other people.”)
- The map must be wrong (“The bridge that’s supposed to be here must have been washed away without a trace.”)
- Summit fever (“We’re so near the top; look, it’s right there!”)
- She’ll be right (Actually, she won’t always.)

### Examples:

- Marginal river crossing - hut/car on other side; uncomfortable night out vs death.
- Narrow snow chute crossing - 5 metres or 500 metres wide; a slip can still kill. Crampons needed for 500m? Then consider crampons for 5m.
- Will miss ferry/flight/train etc., - extra night vs death by falling, drowning or hypothermia.