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In the wake of a tragic accident on Mt Ruapehu, Hazel Phillips ponders subjective and objective risk

I'm writing this five days after a climber slipped and fell into Crater Lake on Mt Ruapehu. Magesh Jagadeesan, a 32-year-old climber who was well-equipped, experienced, and much-loved by many people, sadly lost his life.

On September 22, I was in a group that reached the col between Paretetaitonga and Dome to find a helicopter carrying out rescue efforts. As we watched, thinking it was a live person being pulled out, a man slipped off Dome, lost his ice axe and slid right past me. I wasn't quick enough to grab him, but another of my group charged over in case he didn't stop in time. He had already lost his pack, and he was lucky to come to a halt on a flat part of the col. I later learned a ski tourer without an ice axe had also slipped off Dome that day.

Conditions were icy underfoot, similar to the previous weekend when we had skinned around the base of Dome to reach the Summit Plateau and drop off the

Mangatoetoenui Glacier. Approaching Crater Lake, I could feel my skis starting to slide perilously. Conscious of the lake, I stopped to put on ski crampons for extra security. I almost didn't.

Let that sink in: I almost didn't.

My more confident touring buddies carried on and I didn't want to be left behind, but ultimately I knew I'd slip badly if I didn't put the crampons on. One of the guys popped a ski and another charged after it; thankfully it came to a stop and so did both of them.

There are eerie parallels here to Jagadeesan's situation. In comments made online by his friends, it seems gear began to slide and in what his friends called a gesture of kindness, Jagadeesan went after it. He slid, and fell towards Crater Lake.

Last year, Richard Ebbett also died after falling into Crater Lake. It seems implausible that two similar deaths could happen in such a short space of time, both so unlucky. Newspaper archives reveal at least two previous accidents.

In 1933, 19-year-old climber John Wall ascended Paretetaitonga and stopped at the lake. His companions, looking in another direction, didn't hear him fall or cry out and assumed he had fainted before falling. Looking into the lake, they saw him 'lying on broken ice about four feet from the hot lake'. He died from the fall.

In 1936, solicitor James Alexander Gordon fell in much the same spot as Wall. After having lunch on the edge of the lake, he and his companions began climbing Paretetaitonga. Cutting steps in the ice, one turned to him and said, "this is too dangerous". Gordon, sitting down at the time, 'started to slip, gained speed, and went right over the edge of the crater'. His friends looked over and could see him in the water a few yards from the edge. He managed to pull himself onto a small rock, and clung to it for nearly three hours while

others went for help. Exhausted and hypothermic, he eventually let go. Reports said, 'the locality is very dangerous, and the frozen surface is as smooth as glass'.

I've come to terms with the idea that, given the **amount of time I spend** in the wilderness, chances are **I'll die there**

Jagadeesan's accident, and being in such close proximity to the the rescue attempt, got me thinking about objective danger versus subjective danger. I'm the first to admit I've had multiple episodes on Mt Ruapehu where I've felt lucky to walk away. One in particular involved a frantic self-arrest on the crater face beneath Tahurangi. I realised then that my skills didn't match my objectives, and more upskilling was in order.

That's an example of subjective danger – where your skills are a mismatch to the route or objective. You could be the best climber in the country, attempting something that's too far beyond you, and the potential for subjective danger widens. In educational theory, what you need to learn is what you currently know 'plus one'. (What constitutes plus one varies for the individual, but it's generally scaffolded learning, or gradual increments of challenge.) Some people like to go for 'plus one' or 'plus two'. Others enjoy throwing themselves in the deep end and going for 'plus five' or 'plus 20'.

Issues can also arise with subjective danger when

your adventure buddies aren't well matched to

you, either in experience or in risk tolerance. There's danger to be had in others misjudging your skill level or pushing you to do something that widens the subjective danger too far for you personally.

Then there's objective danger – danger that will bite you no matter how good you are. A 200km/h wind will blow anyone off a mountain. A slab avalanche will kill any skier who gets in its way, no matter how much avalanche awareness training they've done. A swollen river will consume any trapper who doesn't respect its power.

In the five days since Jagadeesan's accident, I've thought a lot about my climbing and ski touring objectives on Mt Ruapehu, and whether or not my skills match what I want to do. In a few instances, they very much don't. But in other areas, it's a simple case of 'plus one' or 'plus two' – just a stretch to achieve something a tiny bit out of my reach. I'm okay with that, but I'm not okay to push the limits of my skill anymore. I've also thought a lot about what it means to take a risk if that means you're living your life as fully as you can, and I've come to terms with the idea that, given the amount of time I spend in the wilderness, chances are I'll die there.

Jagadeesan's climbing buddies made a public statement about the accident, pointing out, 'we were not climbing a hard route, pushing limits or facing terrible weather. Something similar can happen to anyone at anytime, anywhere. Accidents occur when you least expect them – never get complacent.'

Wise words. I take this away with me: Climb hard,
be kind and humble, and live fully.