

# Just a Day Walk

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The events that occurred on a recent day walk that I led in the Flinders Ranges were a timely reminder to me of how easily a relatively benign walk can quickly become a precarious situation. I thought that it would be worth relating the lessons that were applicable, particularly for newer members and walk leaders.

A group of 18 of us set out for a 20 km walk along the Heysen Trail and through two gorges very similar to a walk I had completed there with five people three years earlier.

Just over half way through the walk one member dislocated a shoulder and, being able to walk, was escorted by two others of the group across flat country to a major road approximately 12 km distant.

The remaining group continued on, with the intention of reaching the base camp and then sending a small party to walk out to the vehicles to check that the injured person had been picked up as expected and was OK.

It soon became obvious that the main group was making slower than expected progress over some rough terrain, and it was getting late. It was decided to send ahead a small group of four to follow up on the injured person and escorts.

This group reached the camp with an hour of daylight to spare and headed off on their mission to confirm the situation of the injured party. As it turned out, after a fast 5 km walk and 90 km drive they found the injured person safe, comfortable and well in the local hospital and her escorts having a beer in the local pub. All but the injured party returned to camp by 11.30 pm.

However the remaining party, now 11 in number, albeit including some experienced members with maps and GPS, were struggling through a spectacular but rugged gorge to make camp before nightfall, added to which a cold, wet and squally change had overtaken the area. Many of the group did not have torches and some were not carrying adequate waterproof clothing.

Eventually, 45 minutes after dark, they arrived safely but cold and damp, to be welcomed by a beacon of fire tended by one of the advance party who had stayed at the camp. It was, overall, a happy ending due to the excellent team effort by all concerned; however, the outcome could easily have been different in the circumstances at the time.

So, what were the lessons?

Lesson 1: that walk, in that terrain, was too long for a party of that size. What was easily completed previously by a party of five in plenty of time was challenging for a larger group.

To illustrate the point, consider that each member has to negotiate an obstacle that requires 30 seconds to overcome. If the party is to stay together, as it should, a four-person party can take two minutes at each obstacle. A 16-person party will take eight minutes at each obstacle. If there are, say, 10 such obstacles (there were more in this case), the larger party is going to be 60 minutes slower.

This may seem technical, but the principle does apply in practice, and the above assumes that all walkers have the same ability or experience which is also often not the case.

The lesson and reminder to me was to think more carefully about my route planning and walk timing when leading a larger group. Consider splitting the party into two or three and doing crossover or intersecting walks if you have enough experienced leaders. Otherwise just shorten the walk.

Lesson 2: be sure that all members of the party have adequate gear in their daypacks regardless of how long or short the walk is or what the weather *appears* to be doing.

In our case, if the first injury had been more serious or if there had been another injury later, the party could have been out in the dark and wet much longer and possibly all night.

Common sense should prevail but, in remote areas, daypacks should include the basics to allow members to survive a night out if hurt or if supporting someone else while others go for assistance. In Tasmania, my guide is that a daypack should contain what you need to survive a night huddled under a rock in a severe storm.

Without going into precise detail here, the minimum carried in a day pack in isolated or remote areas should be a waterproof jacket, beanie, first aid kit, space blanket, torch, spare batteries, matches, snack food and water.

My lesson was: don't just talk about what should be in daypacks or assume everyone knows what's needed. At the risk of being painful, make sure!

Overall though, it was a great walk, apparently enjoyed by those who completed it; the injured party will make a full recovery; and, most importantly, everyone was still talking to me next morning.