

Avoiding Getting Lost (or Staying Found)

Participants, particularly ones without much field experience, need to be taught early on how to avoid becoming separated from their group as well as what to do if they become disoriented or lost.

Guidelines for Staying Found

In and around a field camp:

- Walk your group around camp and establish landmarks and/or handrails that define the perimeter.
- Establish a simple call and response within your group. If someone feels disoriented around camp, they can call out and anyone within earshot can respond to help direct them back to camp. Akin to the “Marco-Polo” game played by kids in a swimming pool, this can create a fun low-stress way to encourage participants to communicate to their group before they get completely lost. This also can become an easy way to call your group together for meetings.
- At night, encourage participants to bring a light and not walk very far from the main camp.

When leaving camp such as on short day hikes,

- Take some minimal “survival” supplies- such as water, layers, food, maps, flashlight, basic first aid supplies, fire-making supplies, whistle, cell phone, etc.
- Make sure all individuals or groups inform instructors where they are going, when they plan to return, who is going with them, and why.
- Encourage participants to pay attention to the landscape around them when out walking: what cardinal directions are they walking, did they walk up or down hill, what significant landmarks did they pass or walk beside (streams, cliffs, meadows, etc.)
- Time the walk- this can help determine how long it may take to return to camp

When out on long hikes, do all of the above for short hikes and

- Seriously consider teaching participants basic map/compass skills, GPS-use, etc. before sending participants far from camp without instructors/leaders.
- Stay together and travel in groups of at least 4. If one person gets injured, one can assist them while the other 2 can return together to camp to get further help.
- If cell service is available, make a cell-phone contact plan.
- Set clear expectations for what participants should do if they are lost, delayed, or cannot make it back to camp as planned. (see section below on what to do if lost)

What to do if Disoriented or Lost:

People who become separated from others in a remote outdoor setting tend to panic and often end up moving hastily in the wrong direction from others and can quickly become truly lost. For this reason, it's critical to brief your participants beforehand on what to do if they feel lost or disoriented.

- Stay calm. Do your best to get your bearings. Look for landmarks. Listen for people. Yell using the call/response technique described above. Blow a whistle if you have one.
- If you are at all in doubt about where you are and which direction to proceed, STAY PUT! Search parties will be sent out once it's clear someone has not returned to camp when expected. Yelling or blowing a whistle frequently may be helpful.
- If having to spend the night out becomes a possibility, look for a comfortable place well before dark. It's drier under overhangs or thick low-canopied trees. It's warmer higher on hills and out of the wind. Put on all clothes and consider covering up with leaves and branches to create trapped warm air pockets. If you wake up cold in the night, get up and run in circles or do situps to warm up
- Look for water to drink if you aren't carrying any.
- Make efforts to be obvious to searchers. Stay in open areas; mark your site with clothing or a campfire. Stay on or close to trails.
- If in a group, support one another and stay together.

Responding to a Lost Participant or Group

It's important to establish clear procedures for what to do when someone is missing. This should include the response that the group leader will provide, when the program should contact their supervisor at UC, and if/when/how authorities should be notified. Following are some guidelines for an initial response from a field leader.

- Small scale hasty searches may be warranted during the first hours after someone is overdue back at camp or a rendezvous point. Searching all of camp, backtracking to the point last seen, yelling using an established call/response, or attempting to call them on a cell phone may be enough to find them.
- If the lost party hasn't arrived for many hours and/or hasn't checked-in by the morning of the following day, extensive search efforts should be undertaken and your UC supervisor should be notified immediately:
 - Determine to the best of your ability the point last seen and mark it on a map.
 - Study the map and your knowledge of the terrain for clues as to what could have happened (think about poorly marked trail junctions, difficult terrain, or likely accidents).
 - Divide the search area into segments and establish search teams of 4. Search by looking, yelling, listening. Leave notes or markers at trails junctions. Make sure your camp is very visible. Record what you've searched.
 - Try using a cell phone to call anyone in the lost party. Keep your cell phone on in case they try to call you.
 - Do not search at night.
 - Remember to consider the physical and emotional well-being of everyone in your group. Support each other and give all who want it an active role in helping (even if just staying back at camp and making a good dinner for everyone).