



## AVALANCHE RESCUE: A Race Against Time

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Imagine standing on top of an open bowl filled with fresh powder and thinking, “I’m going to ski this. I’m wearing a beacon and my buddy is really good at doing searches. I’ll go for it”. Obviously, this borders on insanity. Avalanche rescue skills and rescue gear should never be a part of stability assessment or influence your decision to ski a slope. Performing a rescue means someone made a grave error.

In 92% of avalanche accidents, the victim, or someone in their party triggers the slide. A fully buried person has a 90% chance of survival if they’re uninjured and dug up in 15 minutes. Barring a miracle this can only happen if those on the scene perform the rescue. Being buried 30 minutes drops survival rates to less than 50/50, odds of simple coin toss. To increase the chances of a successful rescue everyone needs the right gear, must be sharp with their beacon and practiced for a worst-case scenario.

After an avalanche just buried someone, what now?

### **How many people go out for help?**

The answer is always NONE. It doesn’t matter if you’ve got 2, 4 or 8 people on the scene. With a 15-minute window to find the victim everyone helps search and dig. Even with a helicopter, a search and rescue team won’t arrive for an hour in the best of circumstances which turns a rescue into a body recovery. Leaving the avalanche to get help seals their fate, especially if the victim only has one partner.

### **What’s the first thing to do?**

The scene must be determined safe before rescuers put themselves in jeopardy. They should not be at risk of getting caught and adding to the body count. If safe, everyone should ski to the victim’s last seen point and follow the trajectory of the avalanche to the debris. The search starts here.

### **How many people perform a beacon search?**

If one person was buried, one person will do the beacon search. The most practiced, honed person should do this job. And if two people were buried, then two folks would search.

**What does everyone else do?**

The remaining rescuers turn their beacons off so they don't interfere with the search. More than one search has been needlessly delayed because someone kept transmitting a signal confusing the beacon searcher. All shovels should get assembled and probe poles snapped in place. One person will shadow the beacon searcher ready to probe and dig. Everyone else will perform a scuff search looking for clues in the debris; sometimes we get lucky and find an arm or leg on the surface cutting precious minutes off the search time. Probe around likely burial spots; near the toe of the debris, around any gear, and on the uphill sides of trees. Many people are alive today because they were found with a lucky probe strike or someone saw clothing barely sticking out of the snow.

**What happens when the beacon searcher starts to get close?**

The beacon searcher needs to communicate as he gets closer. Shouting, "Only 5 meters away", should be a warning that digging will commence in moments. Once the beacon does not get a lower reading the team should probe for the body and then furiously dig. The fifteen minute window goes fast. Probing for the victim will make digging faster since you'll have an exact location.

**What if there's more than one person buried?**

Ideally they'll be a 1:1 ratio of rescuers to victims, but that's not always the case. If there's only one rescuer with multiple victims the situation is ugly, but don't ever give up. Find the first person, dig up their head and try and get them breathing again, then move on to the next. Triage dictates that you can't spend too much time with any one victim. The clock is ticking.

**What if the buried person wasn't wearing a beacon?**

This is the worst situation of all, but don't leave the scene. Sometimes we get lucky and find a body part sticking out of the snow. Spot probe, overturn blocks of debris and don't give up for at least an hour. If I was the one buried I'd want my friends to look for me long and hard before calling it quits.

Rescue is a last ditch effort to turn a bad situation around. It's an adrenaline packed, stressful race against the clock. Be prepared and don't leave your brain behind; always have a plan.