

**FEAR**  
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written for **WomenSki** by Claudia Carbone

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Sugarbush Women's Ski Discovery (WSD) is a 3/5 day program designed specifically for women and taught by women. With the help of our Sports Psychology team, we have put together a program that addresses the unique qualities of women in skiing, both physical and emotional. Many of the concepts and techniques we use have become standard fare in the field of sports psychology. We thank and acknowledge those who have contributed richly to this field. The literature in this area is extensive. We have come to rely on several key books, and these are listed at the end of this chapter. At the same time, we consistently strive to turn the familiar into something fresh, the obvious into something unique. Most important, our goal is to help women discover or, in many cases, rediscover the joy of skiing. For many, fear is a major obstacle to achieving that goal and we consider it our mission to help our participants deal with and ultimately alleviate that fear.

Women seem to experience fear more often and more intensely than men. It occurs at all levels and for many reasons. It is important to understand the difference between appropriate fear and inappropriate fear. Fear can be appropriate; by giving us proper respect for the task at hand, it protects us from doing something dangerous. Fear can also be disproportionate and interfere with performance. It can paralyze us or drive us away from a situation that might in fact have been quite safe and even fun. A novice skier may be afraid of speed. An advanced skier may be just as afraid of bumps. Adverse conditions scare some. Terrain may scare others. Some are afraid of wind, some of heights. We have even seen people who are afraid of powder. Almost everyone is afraid of being hurt. We have yet to meet a woman who is unafraid of losing control. Unfortunately, we don't have any control over weather or conditions. The terrain is already laid out before us. However, we do have the skill to gain or regain control. Through skill development and positive psychological training, we can learn to look at each threatening situation that presents itself and, rather than panic or respond in an inappropriate manner, we can say to ourselves, "I can do this. What skills and attitude do I need to accomplish the task?" Through repetition and continued success, our responses will become more and more automatic. We learn to trust our skills and ourselves. We allow realistic fear to guide us while inappropriate fear lessens, even disappears.

## Skill Development

First and foremost, everyone from the *never-ever* to the advanced skier needs the appropriate skills. Just about everyone benefits from proper coaching. The broader our repertoire of technical skills, the greater number of challenges we can meet with confidence. Other chapters in this book deal more specifically with the technical aspects of skiing under conditions which often generate fear. In this chapter we will focus on how we help women *choose* the skills they might want to use in fear-producing situations and how we frame our teaching in a way that develops confidence and minimizes anxiety. Traditional ski teaching often teaches these skills in a manner that is not comforting to most women. For example, how many of us have been told to “launch ourselves down the hill” when initiating a turn? How many of us have had our lack of aggressiveness thrown in our faces? Even the term, ***fall-line***, one of the first we learn, contains extremely negative connotations. WSD approaches skill teaching in a much less threatening manner. The ***fall-line*** becomes the ***flow-line*** (a more descriptive term anyway). After all, would you rather *fall* down the hill or *flow* down the hill? We will teach our skiers to become more masterful, not necessarily aggressive. Never will they be told to launch their bodies down the hill. Instead, one of our participants imagined that Mel Gibson was standing down-hill from her and she was rising across her skis to embrace him. Now which image would you find more appealing?

Not only do we use less threatening language and imagery; we also introduce new skills and concepts on less threatening terrain. It is important for everyone to remember that they will be less likely to experiment with something new if they are concerned about the terrain. We only need to cope with one challenge at a time. An important component of learning to ski is trust; trust in the new skill, trust in the instructor and most of all trust in ourselves and our own abilities. It is very hard to trust if we are afraid before we even begin. There is plenty of time to practice these newly acquired skills in the *real world*, i.e. more difficult terrain and conditions after we have begun to understand and feel them in our own skiing.

Another way in which we try to create a more positive learning environment is that we never just take away an old skill. You have been getting down the hill: you’re still unscathed. Obviously, what you have been doing works in one way or another for you. We may modify your movement pattern. We may enhance certain skills and de-emphasize others, but we want you to keep everything. (Unless it’s completely counterproductive.) The bigger your bag of tricks, the more versatile you can be and the better you can cope if you find yourself in a situation that makes you uncomfortable. Everyone has an occasion to be very happy that they learned to *snowplow*. The side-slip is incredibly useful to help us get over a particularly difficult section. We don’t want to lose these skills just because we now know how to make a parallel turn.

As much as it is essential to learn the technical skills, women also are very appreciative of those little tricks that help them keep out of - or emerge from - trouble. We call them ***survival skills***. It’s all well and good to know how to

make a perfect carved turn on a groomed intermediate trail, but that may not help when unexpectedly you find yourself on icy, steep, expert terrain. It certainly doesn't help you in the bumps. We want you to have these survival skills that you can key into so that you can get yourself through the crisis at hand with a minimum of anxiety. Some of these skills are discussed later in the section about alternate positive responses. Again, some of them involve keying into technical knowledge you already have. For example, a racer may rely on a strong outside ski edge and pressure to hold on a steep section and still maintain speed. You, on the other hand, might rely on steering the inside ski up the hill to decelerate at the end of each turn and therefore maintain a slower and more controlled speed all the way down that same portion. Skiing is often about making appropriate choices for you. Again, the more choices you have, the more you are in control of your own destiny.

It is important to keep challenging yourself, to move in and out of your comfort zone. If you don't, your comfort zone will begin to become smaller and smaller until you have regressed or are anxious about everything. You will never improve or learn to use your new skills. You still need to overcome this fear so that you can keep moving forward, both physically and emotionally. We don't advocate throwing yourself out of your comfort zone. We like to think of massaging it's barriers. Ease yourself in and out. Whenever you leave it, return on the next run. When all is said and done, moving out of your comfort zone *does* promote anxiety, even fear. This is where some of the Sports Psychology techniques utilized by WSD enhance our participants' learning and enjoyment of the sport.

### **Psychological Techniques**

As important as technical skill development is, fear is an emotion, a very strong emotion. We still need to learn how to manage our fear, and when appropriate, overcome it. The most skilled skier can forget everything in a moment of fear or worse wholesale panic. Unfortunately, that is usually when we most need to tap into the technical and survival skills that are going to get us out of the dilemma at hand. We need to find a way to empower ourselves to accomplish the task.

First and foremost, it is important to learn to make appropriate choices for yourself, to know what you can and can't handle. It is also very important to learn to say "no" when peers (often male) ask you to ski something you know is beyond your ability. Learn to choose an alternate easier route; meet them later, and feel good about your choice. When you do make the choice to leave your comfort zone, learn to listen to yourself. You might choose to challenge yourself early in the day when you feel good, not late in the afternoon when you are exhausted. Challenge yourself *if* and *when* you want to, not because you or someone else feel you *have* to. The choice should always be yours. Often the best way to overcome fear is not to allow yourself to get into a situation that you feel you can't control.

All that said, there will be times when we find ourselves in a state of fear. The conditions changed. You misread the trailmap. Someone told you a trail had been groomed, and it is all bumped up. A well-meaning friend got you in over your head. Whatever the situation, you're in it, and it's up to you to get yourself out. By training yourself to take control, to be proactive, you will be able to trust your own ability and ski down to safety.

One of the first techniques WSD teaches all it's participants is **Progressive Relaxation**. First we establish a general state of relaxation *before* we go out on the hill. This is done by systematically tensing specific muscle groups, holding that tension and then relaxing those muscles while we feel the tension flow out through the extremities. Tension and contraction alternate with release, letting go - a metaphor extremely important in maintaining flow and rhythm in our skiing. Try one right now. Make a fist and tighten the arm muscles throughout the forearm right up through the bicep. Now hold that tension for 30 seconds. Take a deep breath and allow everything to relax. Feel the tension flow right out through your finger-tips. Now try it with the other arm. You can then move through the whole body; shoulders, trunk, legs and feet. For maximum effect, try it with relaxing music on in the background. You should feel much more relaxed and open to what lays ahead. As you get more practiced, you can start associating a word or sound with the state of relaxation. Ideally, you will be able to invoke this relaxed state by calling up your word whenever you find yourself in a fear-producing situation.

You can also do a mini-relaxation on the chairlift or right out on the hill whenever you start to feel anxiety take over. As you get more adept at recognizing where you carry your tension, you can isolate that part of the body and relax only it. For example, how often have your feet cramped up on the ice? You just know that if you try hard enough, you can hold onto that ice with your toes right through the sole of your ski boots. All you have gained is pain and chances are, you never used the appropriate ice skill because you wasted all your energy trying to hold on for dear life. Next time you find yourself on ice, try stopping and *scrunching* up your toes. Hold that tension, and feel it. Take a deep breath and allow the tension to flow out right through the bottom of your feet as you allow them to assume a relaxed position in the boots. Start again, and see if you and your feet aren't more relaxed for the rest of the run.

WSD also utilizes imagery to enhance learning and to aid us in controlling fear. In heavy crowds, try imagining a white light emanating from your center and enveloping you. Nobody can penetrate that white light, so you can just keep skiing down the hill in it's protection. In the moguls, think of your ski tips as playful dolphins. Now imagine how dolphins ride the swells. They plunge; they jump; they cavort. Most important, their flexible bodies undulate up and around, in and out of the waves just as your skis can do in the bumps.

Progressive relaxation *combined* with visual imagery is an even more powerful tool for dealing with fear. While in a relaxed state, you can learn to introduce vivid images of yourself skiing. You can create your own drama on the slopes as rich and detailed as your creativity and imagination will allow. Sports

psychologists and professional athletes most often use imagery to enhance performance. We have found that it has helped women gripped by fear or apprehension to create an alternate script. Imagine yourself gliding freely down a favorite trail rather than careening out of control. Some picture themselves skiing confidently down a trail where they had experienced a frightening fall or worse, an injury. What you see is what you get. A positive inner image and expectation will more likely lead to a positive real-life experience on the slopes.

Finally, during any WSD program one central theme runs throughout both the indoor and outdoor sessions. We find that most women need some attitude adjustment. If they make 10 turns and 5 of those turns felt good, we will ask them if they remember the 5 good ones or the 5 bad ones. Almost every single individual will answer that she remembers the bad turns. Women also tend to approach fearful situations in the same way. We need to teach them to **reframe** those negative attitudes, to look at themselves, the sport and anxiety-producing situations in a positive light. We need to teach them to be more proactive and less reactive so that they can take control of the situation.

On a basic level, how do we view the mountain? Do you see the mountain as an adversary or as a partner? Do you fight the mountain, holding onto each turn, leaning up the hill, not allowing gravity to help you perform? Many do. Instead of thinking in terms of *Woman vs. Mountain*, reframe that attitude to *Woman and Mountain*. Look at the view. Enjoy being outdoors. You have spent a great deal of money to have a good time with this mountain. Use your skills to let gravity start to pull you into your turns so that you can let go and allow yourself to float down the hill, one turn flowing into the next. Suddenly, you're dancing down the hill with ease instead of expending unnecessary energy struggling against an inanimate foe. You are in harmony with your surroundings rather than in conflict.

Now you can start to reframe some other basic attitudes. How about viewing fear as respect. You don't ski slowly -- you have excellent speed control. If you have good speed control, you can gradually start to carry more speed with less apprehension. You are not a *wimp* -- you exercise good judgment. If you trust your judgment, you can start to explore new horizons. You can even resort to humor. Ice becomes loud powder. Rubble created by lousy grooming becomes death cookies. Humor doesn't make the problem disappear but at least it allows us to pause, put it in perspective and settle on a strategy.

Finally, when confronted by a fear-producing situation, we need to replace a useless panic response with what we call a **positive alternate response**. The more we learn to rely on the appropriate positive alternate response, the more automatic its use will become; eventually the fear will disappear. If you find yourself on a trail with trees, try looking in between and around the trees instead of at the trees. How many times have you focused on an ice patch and found yourself right on top of it a split second later? Try looking for the good snow next time. When confronted by a steep section of the trail, try looking at the flats beyond. It is a much more comforting focus and you will find that in a few turns you have reached those flats unscathed. Look at the bumps as a

series of predetermined opportunities to turn rather than a minefield of potential disasters. You can already make turns, so look for the paths and go at your own pace. It may not always be a pretty sight, but you *will* get down.

Our survival skills provide excellent positive alternate responses. In WSD we teach key words to help us tap into those survival skills in times of stress. For example, as many of us approach ice, our mind screams, "ICE!" Our downhill arm flies up in the air and our skis slide out from under us. Sound familiar? Instead, try this. As you are sliding over the ice looking for good snow on which to turn, fully extend your downhill arm out in front of you and much lower to the ground than normal. This will help you balance over your more stable downhill ski. It also helps you keep your center over your feet so that your weight doesn't get back allowing your skis to shoot out from under you. The stabilizing movement allows you to focus on the safe haven of soft snow ahead and sustains movement down the hill. You will find that you will easily slide over that heinous substance and reach the relative safety of the good snow on the other side. Give that positive alternate response a name. We simply use *arm*. Before you know it, with practice and repeated success "ICE" will automatically be replaced by *arm* and you will begin to feel a mastery over this extremely threatening condition.

What about steepes? Remember our survival skill, steering our inside ski up the hill to decelerate at the end of each turn? We have named this *tips up the hill*. Again, you can automatically call on this response to control your speed right from the start instead of invoking the power panic turn after you have already lost control. Instead of leaning up the hill holding onto each turn as you struggle down the trail, replace this with *reaching down the hill* with each pole touch allowing you to let your energy flow in the correct direction. Don't forget; the sooner and more efficiently you start your turn, the more time you have to finish it and that is the portion of the turn in which we gain control. When you hold back out of fear, your weight drops back, your skis get away from you and you lose control. Replace this with *contact* with the front of your boots. Every time you begin to lose that contact, you can make an immediate adjustment before things get away from you.

As you become more proficient and gain more technical knowledge, you will be able to create your own positive alternate responses, responses that will be uniquely useful to you and your skiing. You will learn to anticipate those situations which have the potential to provoke fear or panic. You will also learn to respond in a positive, proactive manner. At least you will head off a counter-productive reaction. At best, the fear may eventually disappear altogether.

Fear, both appropriate and inappropriate, can be managed effectively on the ski slopes. The above psychological techniques combined with skill development will provide a sense of well-being, confidence and mastery. If we know we can control our own destiny, then we can let go of inappropriate fear and that fear can become a thing of the past. Without fear we can really have fun, experience joy. Most important we can look at our accomplishments and feel a ***Justified Pride*** in all that we have accomplished.

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