

# It's Not Your Fault

BY DR. SARA BOILEN

**D**ear Avalanche Professional,  
It's not your fault.

Trust me, I'm a doctor.

Well, not that kind of a doctor but I'm a Doctor of Clinical Psychology and perhaps that is even a bit more relevant to this discussion.

I see you: riddled with guilt as you wander among the debris piles and wander, loosely dissociated, into the burial pit. I have heard your daily anxieties as you overthink your forecast and obsess over your words. I've gotten emails from you in the night, when you should be sleeping, but can't.

And I need you to know this: it's not your fault.

Hang with me as I explain. As a clinical psychologist, I often find myself in the unique position of feeling fiercely compelled by the stories of my clients, fantasizing, perhaps desperately even, that my words may shift their path, get them back on track, resolve their anguish, somehow alleviate their suffering. And sometimes it even feels like they do; that my care and accountability offer something of a protective factor to those who need it most. But often, they do not. My words have little effect on eroding years, decades, perhaps even generations of adaptive structures that at some point worked well to keep this person afloat. Perhaps in my office, they will find clarity and at the bar, they order another.

And I, like you, have to let it go.

For two reasons.

First, it simply isn't yours to carry. People are these (rather predictably) irrational beings who make decisions frequently outside of their own best interests. Stoke and fear are master manipulators of logic and send people down slopes only hours earlier they swore off for the day. Communication and interpretation are impossible enemies; they collude to make decision-making a challenge for even those of us who converse for a living. Mistakes are a part of life and while the mistakes in our lines of work are sometimes profound, even fatal, they are still a part of the process. As parents must acknowledge both their weighty influence and profound irrelevance in their children's lives, we must hold this truth: we cannot predict how the things we write (say) land with our intended audience and that how someone behaves is quite literally beyond our control. Read that again, if you have to, which you might.

Second, it just isn't sustainable for you. It is just not possible to carry the weight of an entire forecasting region's uncertainty. Your plight is noble and your intentions good, but I suspect that many more years of this burden will render you less able to help those you set forth to benefit. Your community needs you to build a tiny little semi-permeable membrane around your heart so that you continue to feel the grief and sadness right alongside your brethren but so that the guilt and self-blame are kept out, where they belong.

Sincerely,  
Dr. Sara Boilen

**Sara Boilen** holds a doctorate in Clinical Psychology from the University of Denver. She runs Sweetgrass Psychological, a community minded practice in Northwest Montana. She is a committed skier and mountaineer and has been working to combine her professional and personal passions by advancing the avalanche community's understanding of human variables for the past five years.



BY DREW HARDESTY

**H**i Sara,  
What wonderful timing. I've been forecasting for 20 years now.

You sent the letter to Lynne (my dear friend Lynne) Saturday morning. I put out a HIGH avalanche danger that morning.

The avalanche that killed four people occurred a few hours later.

Lynne forwarded your *Dear Avalanche Professional* letter to me that night.

I don't feel guilt but I do feel sorrow and grief with the families and friends. I know people look to us to help with that. As a young avalanche forecaster, I had no idea that we would be one part snow scientist, one part risk communication specialist, one part "country doctor," if you will. I have long worked in the Tetons as a Jenny Lake climbing ranger and life, death, joy, sorrow have always been front and center to me and my wife.

I remember your piece in TAR from a few issues back. Thanks Sara. You are doing important work and making an impact with our community.

—Drew

**Drew Hardesty** is in his third decade of avalanche forecasting at the Utah Avalanche Center. He's given up writing essays for other art forms: letters, parable, and satiric cartoons (see TAR 39.2). He and his wife Zinnia welcomed a new trailbreaker into the world in March.



Don't you want to peel your skins and drop in right this minute? Photo of Maybird by Billy Haas