AVSAR MINDSETS: A COMPANION FRAMEWORK FOR THE AVGAR

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ABSTRACT: The AvGAR is a decision-making tool for assessing and deploying avalanche search and rescue (AvSAR) missions, adapted from the United States Coast Guard's Green-Amber-Red (GAR) risk assessment model. Risk assessment tools that resolve to a numerical score are vulnerable to what practitioners call GARwashing: responders adjust category scores until the sum permits the deployment they already intend. This paper describes AvSAR Mindsets, a companion framework of six named operational postures declared before scoring the AvGAR. Declaring a mindset first fixes the team's stated level of urgency and risk tolerance in advance, so that subsequent scoring is checked against a commitment made when the team was least invested in a particular outcome. The framework follows a line of avalanche-sector work on mindsets, beginning with Atkins (2014), extended to avalanche education by Conger (2022), and first applied to search and rescue by Laverty, whose 2024 presentation directly inspired this work. The six mindsets are organized into three phases: a default state (READINESS), four mobilization states (REHEARSE, RESCUE, RAPID and RECOVERY), and a de-mobilization state (RESET) that closes the operational cycle and returns the team to readiness. AvSAR Mindsets are scoped to responses with a known incident and a confirmed subject, which is the activation profile of most avalanche rescue; search is out of scope. This paper presents the framework, maps it onto AvGAR's fixed and malleable categories, and proposes a mindset shift as an explicit trigger for the Tactical Pause. No outcome data are presented, and no claim is made that the framework has improved mission results. The author identifies reported uptake and practitioner observations as such.

KEYWORDS: avalanche rescue, decision making, risk assessment, human factors, search and rescue, mindsets

1. INTRODUCTION

When an avalanche search and rescue team is notified of an incident, the pivotal question is whether to deploy now, hold and discuss further, or decline the mission entirely. The AvGAR was developed to structure that decision through facilitated dialogue rather than arithmetic (Ackerman and Wilson, 2023; Ackerman, 2024). It reviews eight categories drawn from the United States Coast Guard's GAR model. It divides them into fixed categories, assessed at the start of an operational cycle, and malleable categories, which cannot be assessed until an incident has occurred.

Field use of the AvGAR has exposed a gap that the tool itself cannot close. The AvGAR structures how a team assesses a mission, but it does not establish what the team is trying to accomplish or how much risk that objective warrants. Two teams facing identical conditions may reach opposite conclusions because they are, without saying so, pursuing different objectives. This paper describes a companion framework intended to make that objective explicit before assessment begins.

The framework described here was developed from the author’s operational experience in AvSAR responses. Specifics of those missions are withheld out of respect for the families involved, and no incident is described anywhere in this paper.

1.1 Scope

AvSAR Mindsets are scoped to responses in which an incident is known to have occurred, and the presence of a subject is confirmed. This is the profile of most avalanche rescue: a witnessed burial, a reported party overdue from a known objective, or a beacon signal at a documented location. Where these are known, the mission is a rescue rather than a search, and the framework does not include a search mindset.

This boundary leaves a seam. The AvGAR's Planning category asks whether there is sufficient information on a subject's condition, or whether the team is responding to overdue individuals (Ackerman, 2024). A search is an overdue party whose location is unknown. Such missions activate the AvGAR but fall outside the mindsets described

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here, and teams should recognize the gap rather than assume the framework covers it.

2. MINDSETS IN AVALANCHE PRACTICE

Atkins (2014) introduced the concept of the strategic mind-set to the avalanche sector, arguing that decisions are shaped by an underlying disposition that forms whether or not a team acknowledges it, and that naming that disposition allows it to be discussed and deliberately adjusted. He described seven mindsets for helicopter ski guiding, each paired with typical conditions and a typical operating strategy, and noted that the specifics could be altered for other areas of avalanche work.

Conger (2022) extended the concept to avalanche education, defining mindset extensions for instructional, dry-run, validation, and practicum settings. Where Atkins pairs each mind-set with conditions, Conger pairs each with the opportunity for a misstep it permits, reflecting the different question an instructor is asking.

Laverty first applied mindsets to search and rescue, presenting the idea at the 6th Annual Mountain Medicine Symposium in Silverton, Colorado, in 2024 and publishing an adaptation for a volunteer SAR team in 2025 (Laverty, 2025). His five mindsets are organized around subject status and urgency, and include a search mindset representing the highest level of uncertainty.

Laverty's 2024 presentation directly inspired the framework described here, and the author gratefully acknowledges it as the origin point. Development after that point proceeded independently, and the two implementations reached publication within weeks of each other in autumn 2025: Laverty's in The Avalanche Review, and the framework described here as a keynote address by the author and J. Wilson at the ICAR Congress in Jackson Hole in October 2025. Readers reviewing both tools should expect differences in naming and structure, described in Section 4.

3. WHY SCORING ALONE FAILS

The original GAR model assigns points across eight categories and sums them into a green, amber, or red outcome. The arithmetic was never the point; the matrix was designed to provoke dialogue (Ackerman and Wilson, 2023; Ackerman, 2024). But a scored tool creates a target, and rescuers are motivated to deploy.

The result is GARwashing: personnel adjust the inputs until the sum produces the outcome they already want. The scores are not falsified so much as reinterpreted, one category at a time, each adjustment individually defensible. Teams report arriving in the green on every mission regardless of circumstances (Ackerman, 2024).

GARwashing is difficult to detect from inside the process because no prior commitment exists to compare the result against. Each category is assessed in the presence of a desired outcome, and the desire is rarely stated aloud. Bias is strongest exactly where it is most dangerous: when responders know the subject, when hope for survival outruns the evidence, or when a team overrates its own capacity and abilities.

The Coast Guard's GAR 2.0 addressed score manipulation by removing the arithmetic and layering additional models for risk and gain. The added steps did not produce better conversations (Ackerman, 2024). This suggests that the problem is not the presence of a score but the absence of a declared intent to check it against.

AvSAR Mindsets are proposed as that check. A mindset declared at the front of a briefing is a public statement of urgency and acceptable risk, made before scoring any category. If the assessment that follows drifts toward an outcome the declared mindset does not support, everyone in the room can see the discrepancy. This is a claim about mechanism rather than a demonstrated result; see Section 8.

4. THE AVSAR MINDSETS

Six mindsets are arranged in three phases. A team occupies exactly one at any time, and the transitions between them are operationally significant.

4.1 Phase structure

READINESS is the default state: Situation Normal and Operations Routine (SNOR), with no active incident. Four mobilization mindsets cover activity: REHEARSE for training, and RESCUE, RAPID, and

RECOVERY for missions, distinguished by subject status. RESET is the de-mobilization state, in which the team is non-operational and debriefing, and from which it returns to READINESS.

The phase structure is the principal departure from earlier mindset work. Atkins' mind-sets describe a continuous guiding operation across a season, in which one state gives way to another as conditions evolve. Rescue is episodic. A team idles, activates, operates, and stands down, then the cycle repeats. READINESS and RESET are not operational postures; they are the states on either side of an operation, and RESET explicitly returns the team to READINESS. The framework is therefore a cycle with a defined entry and exit rather than a list.

4.2 Relationship to Laverty (2025)

Readers familiar with Laverty (2025) will notice three differences. First, his RESCUE-HIGH and RESCUE-LOW appear here as RAPID and RESCUE. Second, his SEARCH mindset has no counterpart, for the scope reason given in Section 1.1. Third, READINESS and RESET have no counterpart in his set, which covers operations without bracketing them. Teams that have adopted either vocabulary should not assume the terms translate directly; in particular, RESCUE denotes the whole family of missions in his set and specifically the lower-urgency case here.

Table 1: The six AvSAR Mindsets, by phase, with associated conditions and risk posture.

Phase	***Mindset***	***Conditions***	***Urgency and risk posture***
Default	READINESS	Situation Normal and Operations Routine (SNOR). No active incident.	Team is poised and positioned to respond to any avalanche SAR incident.
Mobilization	REHEARSE	Team conducts training in a controlled setting.	Zero need for additional risk or elevated urgency. Training is designed to maximize educational value while minimizing risk, allowing instruction, dry-runs, failure, feedback, evaluation and validation.
Mobilization	RESCUE	Subject is non-critical and stable.	Act while balancing urgency against pragmatic risk assessment and the subject's ability to endure a delayed response.
Mobilization	RAPID	Subject is critical and/or unstable.	Higher risk acceptance due to the subject's vital need for critical care. Rescuers accept greater exposure and vulnerability to objective hazards in order to effect a rapid response.
Mobilization	RECOVERY	Field-based fatality.	Deliberately planned and paced response. No need to rush or to accept unnecessary risk, exposure or vulnerability.
De-mobilization	RESET	Team is non-operational and debriefing a previous mission.	Membership reflects on and refines the tools, tactics and techniques used. Learnings are implemented through a complete reset of resources, systems and cycles, returning the team to SNOR and READINESS.

5. INTEGRATION WITH THE AVGAR

The AvGAR divides its eight categories into fixed categories, assessable at the start of a shift before any incident exists, and malleable categories, which become apparent only once a mission emerges (Ackerman, 2024). That division maps onto the phase structure described above.

The fixed categories, Supervision, Team Selection, Team Fitness and Environment, describe the team itself and can be assessed in READINESS. The malleable categories, Planning, Contingency Resources, Communications and Task Complexity, describe a specific mission and belong to the mobilization mindsets. A team that has done its fixed assessment during READINESS arrives at an incident with half the AvGAR already complete.

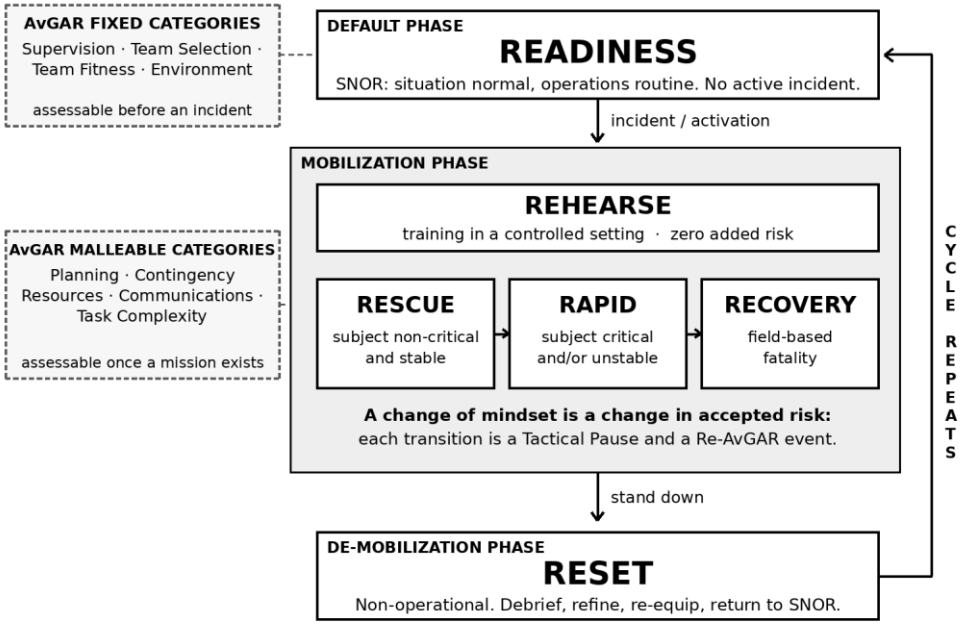

Figure 1: The AvSAR Mindset cycle and its relationship to the AvGAR fixed and malleable categories.

5.1 The mindset as a Tactical Pause trigger

The AvGAR asks teams to establish in advance when they will initiate a Tactical Pause, a reassessment of risks and conditions mid-mission (Ackerman, 2024). In practice, this is a judgment call, and judgment under time pressure is exactly what the pause exists to protect against.

A declared mindset supplies an objective trigger. If a subject reported as stable is found unresponsive, the mission has moved from RESCUE to RAPID. If a subject is confirmed deceased, it has moved to RECOVERY. Each transition changes the risk the team has agreed to accept, and each is therefore a Re-AvGAR event. The team does not have to decide whether enough has changed to warrant a pause; the mindset change answers that question.

The RECOVERY transition deserves particular attention. It moves a team from elevated risk acceptance to the lowest posture in the framework, and it typically arrives at the point of greatest emotional investment. Teams report that this is the hardest transition to make, and naming it explicitly is intended to make it harder to skip.

6. AN ILLUSTRATION

The following briefing is constructed for illustration. It is not drawn from any actual mission, and it describes no real incident, team, or subject.

A team is notified of a single burial witnessed by a partner who has established a beacon signal but has been unable to reach the subject. At notification, the burial time is sub-thirty minutes. The Incident Commander opens the briefing by declaring the mindset: RAPID, on the basis that a subject buried for under thirty minutes with an established signal has a plausible chance of survival, and stating that the team should expect the mindset to change to RECOVERY if that assessment does not hold.

The AvGAR follows. Environment returns a HOLD from the safety officer on the grounds of rapid loading on the approach. Under a declared RAPID mindset, the team operates with elevated risk acceptance, and the discussion is what would move the HOLD to a GO. Had the same HOLD been raised under a declared RECOVERY mindset, the correct response would have been different, and visibly so, because the declared posture would not support accepting that exposure.

The value of the declaration is that it was made before the category was scored. A team that reaches green on Environment after a declared RECOVERY has a discrepancy on the record that someone in the room can name.

7. INSTRUCTION, APPLICATION AND REPORTED USE

Three levels of evidence are reported below. They are deliberately distinguished because they support different claims, and only the first has been observed directly.

7.1 Demonstrated application in training

The AvGAR and the AvSAR Mindsets are taught in Silverton Avalanche School's ProAvSAR and Pro-Rescue courses and introduced during custom team trainings. The school runs eight such programs annually for SAR teams, ski patrols, guide services, law enforcement agencies, federal land management personnel including NPS, USFS, and BLM staff, and military units from across the United States.

Every team trained has demonstrated and deployed the framework in exercise: declaring a mindset at the front of a briefing, running the AvGAR against that declared posture, and adjusting the mindset when the scenario changed. The author and instructional staff observe this directly, and it shows the framework is teachable, teams can apply it without prolonged familiarization, and it integrates with the AvGAR in practice rather than only on paper.

7.2 Reported field use

Avalanche School faculty, rescue colleagues, former students and trainees report continued use of the framework on live missions. These anecdotes are self-reported and unaudited, and they are offered as evidence of utilization beyond training courses rather than as evidence of performance.

7.3 What is not established

Demonstrated application under training conditions is not evidence of performance under operational conditions. Atkins (2014) argues that automatic, emotionally driven processes dominate decision-making under pressure and that a single salient event can reshape a mindset within moments. A framework that performs in a controlled exercise has not thereby been shown to hold when the subject is known to the team and the slope is loaded. No claim of that kind is made here, and the publication of future case studies is encouraged by the author.

Practitioner observations, offered as impressions rather than findings, find that the vocabulary has made discussion of acceptable risk more direct, and that after-action debriefs improve when teams can name the mindset they were operating under and then ask whether the response matched it.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

No outcome data are presented. The author is not aware of any documented mission in which declaring a mindset has been shown to change a decision, and nothing in this paper should be read as evidence that the framework improves mission results. The argument in Section 3 is a claim about mechanism and remains untested.

The framework originated within a single organization and has been disseminated largely through that organization's courses. Independent evaluation by teams with no connection to its development would be more informative than further reports from those trained in it.

Search is out of scope, and the overdue-party seam described in Section 1.1 is unresolved. Extension to non-avalanche and non-winter response has not been evaluated.

The framework is nonetheless offered to other rescue disciplines as a candidate for adaptation, not as a finished tool. Technical rope, swiftwater, wildland, and confined-space response all involve a subject whose condition sets the tempo a team can justify, and the structure described here may transfer. Nothing in this paper tests that. Any such adaptation would need to be built and evaluated by practitioners in those respective disciplines, who are better placed than the author to judge which mindsets their work requires.

Useful next work would include structured debrief data recording the declared mindset alongside the AvGAR outcome, which would allow the mechanism claim to be examined directly, and a reconciliation of the two published mindset vocabularies so that teams are not working from divergent terms.

9. CONCLUSION

The AvGAR structures how an avalanche rescue team assesses a mission. It does not establish what the team is trying to achieve or how much risk that warrants, and without a prior statement of intent, a scored assessment can be bent toward a preferred outcome without anyone noticing. AvSAR Mindsets supply that prior statement: six named postures, arranged as a cycle from readiness through mobilization to reset, declared before scoring begins and used as an explicit trigger for reassessment when the mission changes. The framework is offered as a companion to the AvGAR and as one possible approach, in the spirit of the mindset work it descends from.

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