

Climbers are constantly trying to increase their strength and improve climbing technique, while belaying the leader is often viewed as a stagnant skill: Once you know how to feed out rope, take in slack, and catch a fall, you're done. False. All climbers should strive to refine their belaying practices throughout their climbing career, which means learning and practicing the subtleties that make a truly great belayer. We've talked to guides, longtime climbers, and even a physicist about how to give the best catch possible in a variety of situations, and we've compiled all that information here. Dial in these methods every time you go to the gym or the crag, and your top-notch belay services will mean you'll never have trouble finding a partner again.

## Before the climb

- >>Wear a helmet. Climbing with a helmet is extremely sensible but, given the amount of loose rock in the region, belaying with a helmet makes even more sense. Even a nut sized pebble coming from above might ruin you day, if not your life. Also keep kids and picnikers away from the potential shelling zone.
- >>Wear closed-toe shoes to protect your feet if you're being pulled up through obstacles, jumping into the air, and deflecting off the wall. It will also provide you with some protection against the odd snake/scorpion/spider that might roam at the bottom of your favourite crag.
- >>Belay gloves will give you increased control of the rope (including better grip on skinny cords), as well as protect your hands from rope burns and anything that might get stuck in the rope as it drags across the ground toward your brake hand. (Think: A cactus needle stabbed one belayer in the hand and resulted in him dropping the rope completely.)
- >>Check your belay stance by making sure you have a clear path between you and the cliff (in case you get pulled into it), and be aware of loose rocks as you shift your position by stepping forward or backward. Tripping in this situation can pull your climber right off the wall.
- >>This is more of a belaying basic, but it can't be stated enough: Always double-check your belay setup and the climber's tie-in knot before he leaves the ground.
- >>Communication between climber and belayer is key. For more info on this, check out [Know The Ropes](#).
- >>If you are a lighter belayer, don't anchor yourself to anything on the ground. That would result in a hard catch on the climber and a violent jerk for you. If the climber is significantly heavier than you and long falls are possible, consider finding another belayer.
- >>Golden rule of belaying: Belay others as you'd like to be belayed. Focus on your leader, don't get distracted, and pay attention.
- >>Talk through how to belay a route beforehand. Maybe there are slab sections, roofs, near-groundfall clips, etc.; it helps to agree on how each section should be belayed so both partners are on the same page.
- >>If you're heavier than your climber, know how to give a dynamic belay (see below).

# During the climb

- >>Smaller belayers should consider using an assisted-braking device and standing really close to the base of the wall, near the first clip. This will help catch a fall and minimize the distance the heavier climber falls, which also minimizes the distance the climber has to yard up to get back on the route. Since lighter belayers will get pulled into the wall naturally, be aware of the lowest pieces of protection. We've heard horror stories of broken fingers as a result of being catapulted into the first draw.
- >>Whenever you're not feeding slack, be prepared with your brake hand in a locked position. The climber might be tired, off-route, out of sequence, scared, or even just evaluating a loose hold. If the climber isn't climbing, he might be falling, and even when he is climbing, he might be about to fall!
- >>Exercise situational awareness; know where your climber is and what he might hit if he takes a fall. He might need a bit more slack to clear a roof and fall into space, or he might need less to avoid hitting a ledge.
- >>Keep tabs on the rope: the location of the midpoint (will you still be able to lower the climber?), where the end is, the amount of stretch you expect, that the coil is feeding smoothly to you, there are no knots in the rope, etc.
- >>It's your job to alert the climber if his leg gets between the rock and the rope (this can cause him to get flipped upside down in a fall and hit his head). If you see this happen, alert the climber by yelling up to him: "Joe, watch your leg!" or "Joe, watch the rope!"
- >>It's also your job to alert the climber if he has Z-clipped (clipped the rope from below a lower piece into a higher piece) or back-clipped (instead of the leader's rope running up through the draw and away from the wall, the rope runs up through the draw and out between the biner and the wall. If you didn't already know what these things are, consider taking a basic lead-belay course.) Yell up to him to correct his mistake.
- >>When the climber is low to the ground, you'll want less rope out to keep him from hitting the deck. As he moves up, you can keep a bit more slack in the system so he has ample rope to pull up and clip.
- >>Anticipate clips and be super-active with the rope, whether he's clipping below his waist or way above his head. You'll need to quickly feed out slack to avoid short-roping him (meaning you stop the rope from feeding through, which is not only annoying for the climber, but could cause him to fall at an inopportune time), but if he can't make the clip or drops the rope suddenly, you'll want to quickly reel in slack to avoid a huge fall.
- >>On the very start of a climb, the belayer might need to stand off to the side of the climber so he doesn't land on your head if he falls. The belayer also might need to help the climber step over the rope by moving in closer to the wall or repositioning the rope.
- >>Encourage and reassure your climber as much as you can. He might need that extra push to get through a hard or scary move. Simple words like, "You got it!" or "Keep fighting, Joe!" might go further than you think.

>>An assisted-braking device might not lock up completely if your climber is very light, if the climber sits back on the rope (instead of falling), or if there's a lot of rope drag—more reasons to always have a hand on the brake side.

>>Before the climber makes the first clip or places his first piece, spot him by standing slightly behind and having your hands up, ready to guide his fall safely to the ground.

>>If the climber takes a fall higher on the route, you can assist him in getting back up by sitting back and putting all your weight on the rope while he pulls the rope down toward you. Time it right so you're weighting the rope while he's pulling himself up, and then quickly pull slack through your device. Repeat this process until he's back to where he wants to be. Same goes for boinking: Make sure the rope is fully weighted when he's pulling up.

>>To avoid aches and pains while belaying, shift your weight between feet, take a step to the side to slightly change your stance, move your neck and eyes as much as possible, and stay loose. To prevent and treat the dreaded belayer's neck, check out [this handy guide](#).

>>When lowering on a sport climb, step forward so you're practically leaning against the rock directly under the first bolt. Lowering the climber while standing away from the first bolt puts a tremendous amount of outward force on a bolt that is primarily designed for a downward force. Plus, this bolt sees more traffic and impact than almost any other bolt on the climb.