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Walking disaster? Why some are accident prone

The more distracted and stressed we are, the harder we fall, research says



Kim Carney / msnbc.com

One in 29 people is at least 50 percent more prone to having an accident than the rest of us, researchers found.

By Diane Mapes

msnbc.com contributor
updated 8:17 a.m. ET, Thurs., May 14, 2009

Steve Roe's catalogue of self-induced injuries reads like something out of The Spanish Inquisition Handbook: fractured skull, torn rotator cuff, shattered fingers, broken wrists, fractured elbows, torn muscles, sulfuric acid burns, self-stabbings, multiple broken noses and, as of last month, a ruptured tendon in his ankle.

"I didn't trip or anything," says the 46-year-old patent attorney from Madison, Wis. "I was just walking down the hall, in a hurry, and I went around the corner and it suddenly felt like somebody hit me in the ankle with a baseball bat."

Hurry, worry, multitasking, stress — you might call them the four horsemen of the accident prone. Stress is such a huge factor when it comes to accidents, in fact, it was recently linked to an increase in post-9/11 traffic fatalities by researchers at the University of Minnesota.

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Unfortunately, since we're currently in the middle of two wars, a recession, a health care crisis, a banking crisis, massive unemployment, global climate change and a swine flu outbreak, we're eating, sleeping and breathing stress. And, yes, some of us are tripping over it, too.

Stress fractures

"I have more accidents whenever I'm stressed and distracted," says Christine Champ, a 36-year-old freelance writer from Seattle. "Once I fell into a ditch and sprained my ankle and two days later hit myself in the back with my car door and injured my shoulder blade. I've even had a bed fall on me. Maybe if I was paying more attention, I would have seen it was teetering."

Debbie Mandel, author of "Addicted to Stress: A Woman's 7-Step Program to Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life," says people who are under stress aren't living in the present — they're thinking ahead or thinking behind — and as a result, aren't paying attention to where they're going.

"We're all so busy, we go from chore to chore, and while we're doing one chore, we're thinking about what we're going to be doing two hours from now," she says. "Or you might be angry at something somebody said earlier in the day and thinking about what you should have said. You're there, but you're not where you should be. That's when you get hurt. That's when you're accident prone."

But limping, lacerated souls like Roe, who, by age 11, had fallen out of a tree house, set himself on fire, knocked himself unconscious and cracked his kneecap raise the question of whether there are other factors at play besides stress and simply trying to do too much.

Why me?

Roe thinks there are, attributing his accident-prone nature to a pattern of risk-taking and attention-getting behavior that began when he was a small child.

"When I was younger, it was literally not on my radar screen to care whether I got hurt or not," he says. "If I didn't get hurt, I did something that was impressive to my friends. And if I did get hurt, I got attention from my mom. It was a win-win situation."

After working with a therapist for the past few years, though, Roe says he's much more cognizant of his well-being — and as a result is having fewer accidents.

"Before it was kind of like being divorced from my body," he says. "Now I'm paying more attention to the risks and managing them as opposed to just wildly throwing myself into things. These days, I'm substantially better except for weird things like that recent accident with my ankle."

But others, like Teresa Joyce who once injured her shoulder, developed aspirin poisoning and fractured her toe all within a span of three days are completely baffled as to why they have so many accidents.

"I cannot imagine why this stuff happens so often," says Joyce, a 48-year-old sales executive from Austin, Texas, who is also prone to kitchen accidents such as setting herself on fire. "I would say maybe carelessness except some of the stuff has nothing to do with me except that I'm there. Like I'll be sitting at a red light or a stop sign and I'll get rear-ended."

The accident-prone brain

After reviewing the results of 79 studies which recorded the mishaps and misfortunes of nearly 150,000 people from 15 countries, researchers at the University Medical Center Groningen in the Netherlands found that accident-prone people do actually exist. In fact, one out of every 29 people has a 50 percent or higher chance of having an accident than the rest of us.

"Meta-analysis ... of the general population revealed that accidents cluster in individuals, and that this clustering is higher than the clustering one would expect by chance alone," the researchers

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concluded in their 2007 study, published in Accident Analysis and Prevention.

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Are you accident prone? Tell us your stories

Unfortunately, they couldn't identify what was responsible for all the bruises, bumps and broken bones, although another study conducted by the University of Delaware offers enticing clues.

The study used neurocognitive tests regularly administered to athletes to measure brain processes like visual and spatial skills and reaction time before and after an injury, in this case, a "noncontact" knee injury, such as one resulting from an error in coordination as opposed to one caused by being tackled. When the test scores of 80 athletes who had injured themselves were compared against 80 athletes who had remained injury-free, researchers discovered something interesting.

"We found that the group that had injured themselves had slower reaction time, they had slower processing speeds and their visual/spatial skills were not as good as the other group," says Dr. Buz Swanik, associate professor of health, nutrition and exercise sciences at the University of Delaware.

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Throw a monkey wrench like stress into the works and the person's reaction time slows even further.

"Stress and anxiety can slow it down, so can something we call task uncertainty, if you're not sure what's going to happen," says Swanik. "But the biggest issue is multitasking. If you're presented with a lot of stimuli you have to filter out what's most important to you. If you're chopping something with a knife, you have to take that serious enough to stay focused on it. You can't let loud noises or children or anything else disturb your train of thought."

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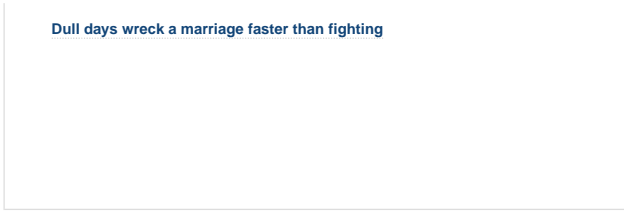
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