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How Not to Step on That Banana Peel

Utility workers wrangling high-voltage cables are as safe as anyone at home. Kitchen knives send 300,000 people a year to the hospital. Edward Kosner reviews 'Careful: A User's Guide to Our Injury-Prone Minds' by Steve Casner.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner

June 4, 2017 3:28 pm ET

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Growing up in Manhattan in the 1940s and '50s, I climbed the Palisades across the Hudson, rode between subway cars, took 15- and 20-mile bike rides along busy highways...

As it turns out, Steve Casner, a NASA psychologist who has devoted his career to studying why people get into accidents and how to prevent them, flirted with even more dangerous things a few decades later...

There's certainly enough to worry about. Deaths from accidents—"avoidable injuries" in safety speak—are down drastically from the good old days of the early 20th century.

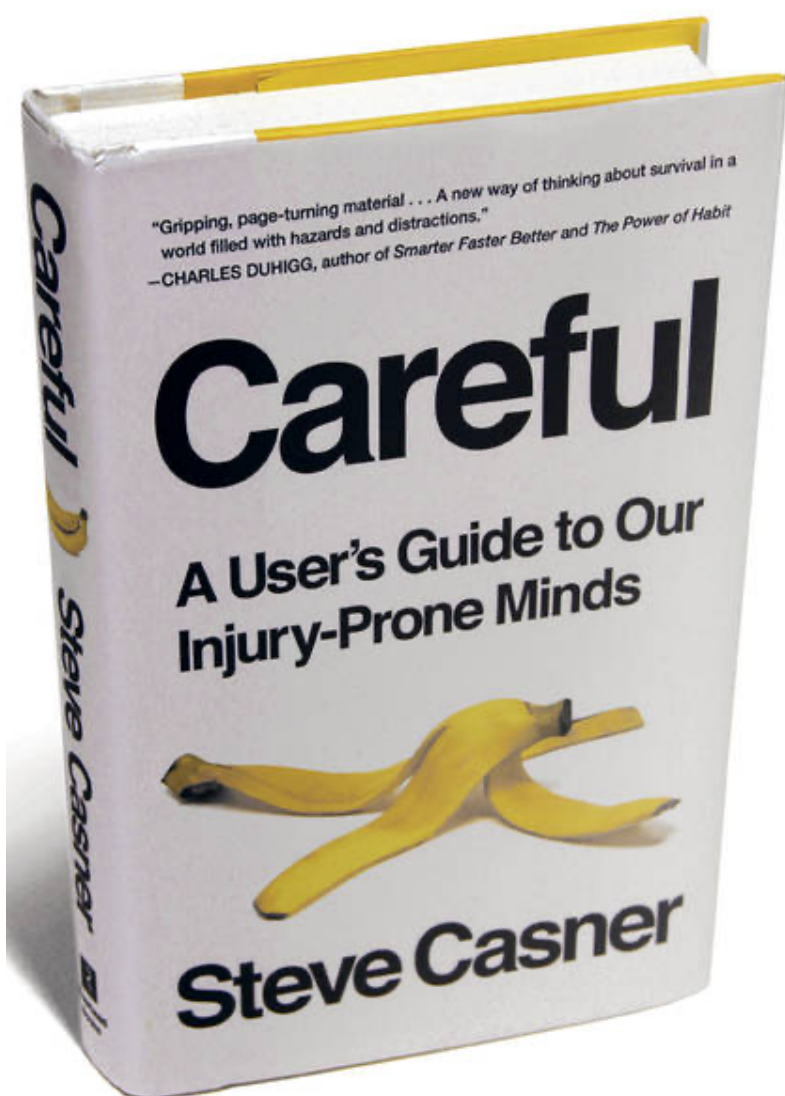


PHOTO: WSJ

CAREFUL

By Steve Casner | Riverhead, 326 pages, \$26

kids frolic in the pool? You were—but now you're probably thinking of the hot new associate at your law firm, how your Apple stock is doing, the latest episode of 'The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills' or the utility slot in your fantasy-baseball lineup.

Mr. Casner's generalizations are backed up by an array of studies by ingenious psychologists all over the map. These invariably show that people are overconfident about their own capabilities, more open to risk than they imagine, less cool in a crisis...

And then there's "risk homeostasis." That's the tendency of people to accelerate their dangerous behavior when new safety features are introduced—say, by driving even faster in a car with the latest safety technology.

So what to do? Mindfulness—easy to imagine, hard to sustain—is Mr. Casner's prescription. People should be constantly aware of their limitations, visualize driving, walking, working and other situations in advance, and program their responses to danger.

It turns out that people are far safer at work than they are while walking down the street or in their houses. In 2014 Mr. Casner reports, 333,527 emergency-room visits in the U.S. involved kitchen-knife injuries.

Some of Mr. Casner's lessons are common-sensical. For example, when making a turn at an intersection, always remember that a van or truck may be shielding a car about to pass into your path. But some are counterintuitive: Keep in mind that most drowning victims don't splash around making noise, but simply sink under the surface.

So life can be a crapshoot. The players who know how the odds can be stacked against them and stay focused have the best chance to keep on rolling.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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