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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.



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By Edward Kosner

SAVE PRINT A TEXT

June 4, 2017 3:28 pm ET

Growing up in Manhattan in the 1940s and '50s, I climbed the Palisades across the Hudson,

bodysurfed the breakers at Long Beach in the summers, played hardball on lumpy playgrounds with my glasses on, swam in pools during polio season, flicked my switchblade, set off cherry bombs and had BB guns fired at me. And I never suffered more than a scuffed knee and a cut lip. 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, like dangling out of the bed of his grandfather's pickup. Most of

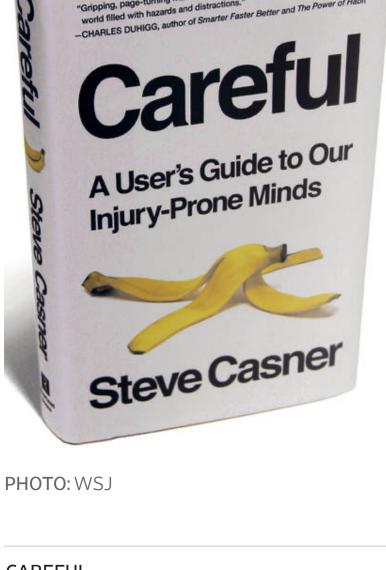
batting helmets, shatterproof lenses, inoculations and endless precautions. Yet people feel

that behavior wouldn't be tolerated these days—and for the rest there are bike lanes,

rode between subway cars, took 15- and 20-mile bike rides along busy highways,

less safe than before. "Being careful today seems harder than it used to be," writes Mr. Casner, in his useful new book, "Careful: A User's Guide to Our Injury-Prone Minds." There's certainly enough to worry about. Deaths from accidents—"avoidable injuries" in safetyspeak—are down drastically from the good old days of the early 20th century. But the downward curve flattened out in 1992, Mr. Casner writes, and then began to rise. This is partly because smartphones and other driving distractions offset safety improvements in

cars and, inescapably, because people are living longer and thus have more opportunities to get killed in accidents. That observation is just one of a fascinating and chilling—array of facts and stats that Mr. Casner marshals to buttress his case. Did you



CAREFUL

By Steve Casner

Riverhead, 326 pages, \$26

know that more than one person per second in the U.S. suffers an injury needing medical attention? Or that some of them are among the more than a quarter-million Americans who die each year because of "medical errors"? Or that injuries caused by washing machines sent 40,000 people to the ER in 2014. Mr. Casner is one of those pop writers who tell you what they're going to tell you, then tell you, then tell you what they've just told you. Still, his

repetitious analyses and guidance are worth reading. His central point is that human fallibility is a fact of life. People—smart or dumb, young or old, highly educated or dropouts—can't

concentrate on a single task for long before their attention wanders. Multitasking is a myth: It generally means doing two things badly at the same time. Remind yourself—or someone—to do something in a few minutes and it will be forgotten. Confident that you're watching your 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 prone

to error. He distinguishes between "slips"—minor distracted errors like absent-mindedly dropping your sweaty T-shirt in the toilet rather than the washing machine—and "errors": like misdiagnosing Lyme disease as the flu. 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 cars with the latest safety technology. Or the inclination to use the right tool, a

screwdriver, say, for the wrong job: not to tighten or loosen a screw but to pry open a

jammed lid—resulting in a maimed forearm.

knocked herself out colliding with a shelf in her bathroom.

and stay focused have the best chance to keep on rolling.

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. "How could this go wrong?" is the question, he says, that should always be at the top of one's mind. When you reach for that screwdriver to pry open a lid, "visualize the blade . . . snapping in two and the bottom half of the blade taking flight." Being careful can be as simple as looking both ways before stepping off the curb on a one-way street and as

complex as long checklists for pilots and surgeons. If you're watching a child in a pool, don't even talk to anyone; concentrate on the kid. Remember that using a cellphone handsfree while driving is as distracting as holding one to your ear. 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. Power-line workers wrangling high-voltage cables are as safe as anyone at home. He tells the story of a champion Hollywood stunt woman who

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. When people switch tasks, it takes the brain nearly 30 seconds to focus fully on the new one. A third of young men in one survey admitted to SWD—having sex while driving. But Mr. Casner, who flies jets and helicopters, was surprised to learn that SWF in single- and twin-engine private planes is more prevalent than he imagined, with fewer fatal consequences than one might think. So life can be a crapshoot. The players who know how the odds can be stacked against them

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

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

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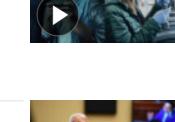
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