

WHEN IS AN ACCIDENT NOT AN ACCIDENT?

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

Accidents are unexpected, negative, events that tend to surprise us because we don't believe they'll occur (especially to us). When they do, we're oftentimes taken aback. Yet, accidental injuries are the fifth leading cause of death in the U.S. By far, the biggest cause of injury deaths is traffic accidents followed by falls, poisoning, drowning, and fires and burns. Accidents are not as rare as you might think.

But how accidental are accidents? Do we have more personal control over some accidents than we tend to think we do? Are some people more accident prone than others? Do a rash of mishaps spell more than a stroke of bad luck? While the answers are complex, there are some obvious factors that influence how likely we'll become an accident victim. According to experts, most accidental injuries can be prevented.

We play a role in accidents

The term, "accident prone" was first coined in 1918 when researchers questioned the relationship between certain personality traits and risk for injury. To date, the research has been futile. However, the choices and decisions an individual makes may contribute to a history of accidents. For example, lack of sleep or medications that cause drowsiness can impair judgment and slow reaction time. Drinking alcohol depresses breathing and heart rates and control mechanisms of the brain impairing motor coordination and thought processing. Simply paying closer attention to physical health, alcohol consumption, and medication intake could prevent many accidents.

One's emotional state is another important factor too. Stress, anxiety and depression can leave individuals vulnerable to accidents. Stress can take several forms. But when we are preoccupied or worried about something or someone, it can reduce our level of attentiveness (i.e. driving or watching the kids in the pool). Individuals who suffer from anxiety, especially panic attacks, may have limited attention when driving, as they focus on their bodies and the fears they experience, rather than monitoring the road for potential danger. In short, research shows that stress is linked to heart disease, cancer, and lung ailments as well as accidents and suicide. An astonishing 75 to 90% of all physician office visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints.

Individuals who are depressed may not care enough about their own well-being. Hence, they may neglect their health and ignore preventative medical strategies. They may also ignore practical steps that could prevent future accidents, or simply behave in a careless or reckless manner. For instance, I had a client who was too depressed to care about the upkeep on his home. As a result, a weak step on the front porch rotted and later cost him a broken leg and more time off from work. His depression spiraled downward.

I would warn people against labeling themselves as "accident prone or simply a klutz." Such permanent self-labels are not only disempowering, but also misinformed. Why? If you believe you are accident prone, you tend to give up on preventing injuries. You

come to believe you have no control over your environment. Psychologists have found that people with an “external locus of control,” are more likely to take less responsibility for their actions and experience accidents as something out of their personal control. Hence, they will spend less time anticipating risks or taking normal precautions.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), some 84% of Americans realize that good mental health plays an important role in their overall health and well-being, yet almost half of Americans don’t know when it’s appropriate to seek professional help. In conclusion, if you have more accidents than most people you know, you might want to consult a therapist. Oftentimes, a careless life can be an early warning sign that something deeper is taking place.

Take steps to actively prevent unnecessary accidents

If you are a frequent victim of various kinds of accidents, realize you can take more control of your life. Ask yourself some key questions:

- 1) With hindsight, were some of my accidents foreseeable? Could I learn from this information?
- 2) Do I engage in preventive measures? (i.e. replace worn car tires; throw out old makeup that could be contaminated; wear sun screen; etc.
- 3) Do I take extra precautions when I know my mental state is not up to par (i.e. don’t drink alcohol when I’m already feeling depressed.).
- 4) Do I try to do too many things all at one time? Having divided attention has been identified as a major cause of accidental injuries.
- 5) Do I engage in health promoting practices as a lifestyle? (i.e. meditate, have annual mammograms, drink plenty of water, get plenty of sleep, exercise, etc.).

We can’t prevent all accidents. For instance, a random shelf in the grocery store may give way as we walk past, knocking us in the head and rendering us unconscious. On the other hand, some accidents result from procrastination, carelessness, lack of concern, denial, laziness, lack of positive self-care, and more. We are all partially responsible for how often we suffer from accidents in life. With this recognition of personal responsibility, comes an increase in control over our lives. In short, we need to recognize and manage our own risk for accidental injury.