



Dealing with Danger

In a fast-moving world, no one is immune to accident or disaster. Yet few of us are really prepared to cope with emergencies when they arise. Here, a look at modern perils and how to treat them. It's a matter of not leaving too much up to luck . . .

□ Few people can have led such sheltered lives that they have never been exposed to danger. In a world bristling with hazards, it is almost impossible to go about our daily affairs without sometimes being threatened with injury or death. How we react to these threats depends on our age, experience, senses, nerves, and physical and mental agility. It also depends to a large degree on our basic attitude towards life.

Some people treat danger with greater equanimity than others. For instance, it comes naturally to a man born into a warrior class in an Eastern country to fear being branded a coward more than the prospect of sudden death. Similarly, a person with a genuine faith that he or she will enter into a happier state through dying is apt to be less afraid of mortal peril than one who thinks of death as the ultimate extinction. Some societies place a relatively low premium on human life, so that they pay less attention than others to physical risks.

A strain of fatalism runs through many of the world's religions and beliefs, conditioning people to accept passively whatever may befall them. It tends to lower one's guard against danger if one is convinced that "what will be, will be." The belief that fate will prevail no matter what is by no means confined to the superstitious. "I have been versed in the reasonings of men, and fate is stronger than anything I have known," wrote Euripides. Some 2,300 years later, the great lo-

gician Bertrand Russell would conclude: "Powerless is man's life."

The case for surrendering to fate, however, does not seem to agree with human instincts. The exhaustive anthropological studies detailed in J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* indicate that there has never been a society so submissive that it has not tried to influence events in advance through ritual, sacrifice, or prayer. From the earliest times, people have believed in unseen spirits that controlled their destiny. But they have never been wholly content to let the spirits have it all their own way.

Some of the most significant steps along the road to civilization have been taken to lead people out of jeopardy. These include the cultivation of crops and domestication of animals to reduce the risk of starvation, the founding of towns and cities to resist animal and human marauders, the development of medicine, and the formation of governments to provide protective services such as armed forces and police.

Still, for all the advances in social organization and medicine over the centuries, fatalism exerts a lingering grip on modern thinking. Whereas early man ascribed the good and bad things that happened to him to the whims of the gods, we in the twentieth century are inclined to put them down to something less identifiable which we call luck.

Think of the way people will talk about an accident: "I had an unfortunate experience"... "Luckily, I just happened to turn at the right moment"... "We were lucky we weren't killed." In matters of emergency, we are much closer to our primitive ancestors than we care to think.

A half-conscious trust in luck leads people to take chances with their health by clinging to habits which they know may be harmful such as excessive drinking, smoking and eating. Some go further to actively seek out danger by engaging in risky sports and other pastimes which lend excitement to their lives.

Underlying this nonchalance is the fatalistic feeling that when "your number is up," there is nothing you can do about it. This is reinforced by the human sense of uniqueness: if anybody can beat the odds, it's you.

We have all seen enough evidence of luck at work not to entirely deny its existence. We all seem to know someone who, as the saying goes, could fall in a sewer and come out covered with honey; and someone else like the individual described by Don Marquis who was "so unlucky that he runs into accidents which are starting out to happen to someone else."

To live at all is to live with a measure of danger

And indeed, if nothing were left to chance, life would hardly be worth living. In the past few years the public has been flooded via the media with warnings that everything from electric lighting to peanut butter can kill. If a person were to heed all the admonitions of scientists and environmentalists not to do this or that, the only recourse would be to stay in bed and eat health foods. Even at that, one would have to guard against a deadly temptation: the warning has been sounded that sleeping either too much or too little can shorten life.

Amidst this cacophony of alarm, it may be helpful to consider a little modern parable told by crime writer John D. MacDonald. It concerns a German industrialist with a mania about the safety of his only son. He had the boy confined in an antiseptic stainless steel capsule for 21 years, until he was

considered fit to face the world. On the day he was to be released, the young man dropped dead of excitement.

The point is that no one can expect to exist totally without risk, nor would any sane person want to. To live at all is to live a little dangerously; to live in the fullest sense of the word is to balance personal fulfilment against risk. There is always a chance that a plane might crash, but who would forego a vacation abroad because of that possibility? Some do retreat into a sterile limbo for the sake of illusory security, but most of us share Henry David Thoreau's dread of finding out when we come to die that we have never really lived.

At the same time, there are enough dangers around us that there is no call to add to them needlessly. The problem for the reasonably prudent person today is to distinguish between the risks that are realistic and those that are remote. There can be no doubt that this is a peculiarly unsettling age, in which the works of science and technology can compound natural perils. In at least one respect — the presence of nuclear weapons — it is a more hazardous age than ever before.

Paradoxically, though, day-to-day living has become incomparably safer today than at any other time in history. Despite all the talk about the dangers posed by science and technology, the fact is that they have given rise to far fewer new problems than solutions to old ones. To take a ready example, the world influenza epidemic of 1918 took the lives of 21.6 million people. This disease can now be forestalled by vaccination and treated with antibiotics developed by medical science,

Accidents have replaced disease as the chief cause of early death

Other once-fatal diseases such as smallpox, pneumonia, tuberculosis, scarlet fever and diabetes have been brought under control to an extent that would once have seemed astonishing. Vital statistics throw the relative safety of the present versus the past into sharp relief. At the time of

Confederation, the annual death rate in Canada is estimated to have been 21 per thousand of population; since then it has been slashed by two-thirds to about seven in a thousand. The average life expectancy of Canadians from birth has nearly doubled since 1867 to 78 for women and 70 for men.

While the odds have lengthened on people dying before their time, it has become relatively more likely that their lives will be cut short by accident. Accidents have replaced illness as the primary cause of death among Canadian males between the ages of one and 44 and of females from one to 19.

Mass tragedies and a whole new class of man-made disasters

In such an accident-prone society, it only makes sense to have some knowledge of first aid, which is easily acquired in courses offered by the St. John Ambulance Brigade and other organizations. Even in crises which are not strictly accidents, a trained person can save lives. More Canadians die of heart trouble than of any other cause, and it has been found that cardiopulmonary resuscitation on the spot can revive up to 54 per cent of heart attack victims. CPR is a combination of mouth-to-mouth breathing and carefully-controlled hand pressure on the chest that can be learned in as little as four hours. Various organizations offer "Citizen CPR" courses in Canadian centres. The Rotary Club of Montreal now has a project underway to train 250,000 people in the method. If the campaign succeeds, it will mean that if anyone has a heart attack in a crowd in the Montreal area, there is likely to be somebody present who can administer CPR.

The changes in causes of death have much to do with the modern lifestyle — an active, mobile, and convenient existence which few of us would give up willingly. But it has its special perils: the very

scale of the things around us — high-rise buildings, jumbo jets, massive oil refining complexes and the like — has multiplied the scale of potential destruction and death. If a driver lost control of a car on a typical two-lane highway 30 years ago, the occupants of one or two vehicles might be killed or injured; crashes on the freeways of today may set off a chain reaction involving 20 or 30 vehicles. A fire in a high-rise apartment or office complex might endanger, say, 50 times as many lives as in their earlier counterparts. As recently as 1959, the death toll in the worst aircraft disaster in history stood at 155; only eight years later, a collision of two 747s killed 528.

Thus technology has rendered people more vulnerable to the kind of mass tragedy that makes headlines, inspires disaster movies, and causes revisions to the *Guinness Book of World Records*. It has created a whole new class of possible disasters — satellites crashing to earth, oil spills, radiation contamination, gas explosions, and emissions of hazardous materials from truck and train wrecks.

Technology has also increased people's exposure to the effects of disaster. With their wood stoves, oil lamps, and stocks of preserved homegrown food, Canadians of three or four generations ago could sit out a blinding storm for days on end. Now that most of us, perforce, live in urban areas, the kind of storm that cuts power lines can be lethal. In most Canadian homes, the heating, lighting, cooking, and much of the food preservation depend on electricity. If a storm is severe enough to choke off road and rail transportation into a city, critical food shortages could arise within a few days.

The same general conditions are likely to be encountered in other disastrous situations. Emergency Planning Canada has compiled a list of 60 types of disaster that could happen in Canada, including nuclear war. This is not a particularly disaster-prone country compared to others, but it is certainly not immune to catastrophe. Parts of Canada are regularly assailed by floods, gales,

tornadoes, widespread fires and landslides. It is a sobering thought that there have been more than 30 serious earthquakes in Canada in the past 35 years; most of our land mass apart from the prairies is susceptible to earthquakes. This includes our three largest urban areas: Montreal and Vancouver are located in major earthquake zones, and Toronto is in a minor zone.

Looking at disaster from a fatalistic point of view

Yet, for all their vulnerability, Canadians still tend to view the possibility of disaster with the benign fatalism of a Himalayan guru. While warning that disaster can strike anywhere and anytime, EPC officials note that few Canadian families have even taken the elementary precaution of preparing a portable survival pack containing clothing, blankets, first aid supplies, and food and water for seven to 14 days. Most have never given a thought to seeing that there are live batteries for their radios, over which information and instructions in case of a mass emergency would be broadcast. Not many have ever heard of the vital rule of always keeping the tanks of their cars half-full in case they are called upon to evacuate.

Canadians have a sanguine tendency to leave emergency action to the public authorities. A report on a crippling week-long blizzard in the Niagara region in 1977 underscores the folly of this approach. Essential equipment proved to be less reliable than expected. The telephone system was swamped, one snow-plough got lost in a white-out, and another got so badly stuck that it could not be dug out for six days. The police radio system was useless, not because the radio did not work, but because the patrol cars could not move.

In other words, people in that particular emergency were left very much to their own devices. Despite the best efforts of EPC and provincial and municipal agencies, the same could happen to anyone in any emergency that might occur. It is only prudent to plan to fend for yourself in any accident or disaster. Even a nuclear attack can be survived if people are prepared for it. From the most minor mishap to the most devastating disaster, coping with danger is up to you.

Learning to Survive

Emergency Planning Canada publishes a series of free pamphlets on how individual citizens can deal with emergencies. These include advice on how to survive a nuclear attack, basic rescue skills, preparing an emergency pack, and what to do in the case of floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, severe storms, winter power failures, and getting caught in winter storms in your car. They are available by writing to Emergency Planning Canada at Box 10,000 in each provincial capital, or to the EPC headquarters at 125 Sussex Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0W6.