

Pillowcase Parachutes And Temptations of Fate

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Protecting Yourself from Yourself

Local youngster jumps out of second story window using pillowcase as parachute. Fall broken by bushes." We've all read headlines like this, right? Somebody does something really stupid but gets lucky and walks away from it.



Before we're too quick to judge though, let's look back on our own personal inventories of stupid people tricks - those red lights we ran, playing with matches, the time you chased your kid brother on the porch roof, lighting that oven with the safeties bypassed? You knew I'd get around to that, didn't you?

Most of us have done all sorts of things that could have injured or killed us, but we got away scot-free. How come? Luck. You crawl along in a traffic jam, fuming that you wouldn't be wasting all this time if you had left home a few minutes earlier, until you see the reason for the jam: a gruesome traffic accident. You realize if you had left earlier, you might have been trapped in that wreck. Timing, dumb luck, your Guardian Angel - call it what you like - this was your lucky day. Truth is, most of our days are lucky. Usually, nothing seriously bad befalls us - only a few of the other guys stumble into misfortune and tragedy.

It's probably no exaggeration to say that we can do the same risky thing 99 times out of 100 and get away with it. We take our luck for granted and continue our foolish ways, but if we happen to be in the wrong place that 100th time, we become one of the unlucky other guys.

And that's the problem with luck: It isn't foolproof - it needs help. That's why there are safety standards, along with all sorts of limit switches, interlocks and safety valves for ovens and furnaces. Frankly, they probably aren't needed most of the time because everything proceeds normally, and no unsafe situations arise. Unfortunately, when people see nothing bad happen, even after they've done something risky, they get overconfident. "That safety equipment? Aaaahhh, that's just there because the insurance company insists on it. We've never had a problem."

Good luck can feed macho attitudes. People cruise along in that lucky zone, doing things they know are dangerous, and they begin to think they can control their luck. Ask them why they took a chance, and they'll brush it off with, "Hey, I can handle it - it's no problem."

Some of this cavalier attitude may also be due to a lack of appreciation for what explosions and fires can do. Get this straight: Hollywood action movies are bad science. You cannot outrun an explosion.

The longer the good luck runs, the more people take it for granted. Finally, they're ready to tolerate a safety system that's not functioning. Now they've set themselves up to get nailed when that 100th time comes around. Sooner or later, it will.

So let's review a few of the basics about staying safe and healthy when working around process heating equipment:

1. Most of the time, you will be lucky, whether you deserve it or not. Good luck, or more correctly, the avoidance of bad luck, is a matter of timing and circumstance. Rarely do they combine to put you in danger.

2. If you do the same potentially hazardous activity enough times though, sooner or later you'll run into that set of circumstances that expose you to danger. Your number has come up, but you won't know it.

3. You are probably not fast or clever enough to get out of a really dangerous situation if it confronts you. Don't feel offended -- no one is.

4. Your only hope for avoiding this dangerous situation lies in the safety equipment and procedures that force you to do things in a way that steps around the hazard.

5. If you blow off those procedures or operate with disabled safety equipment, you have stripped away your only layer of protection, and sooner or later, you, or someone else, will pay for it.

6. You have a responsibility to yourself, your coworkers and your company to ensure that all safety equipment is up to the requirements placed on it and is properly maintained. In addition, all safe operating procedures should be strictly followed.

Look at it this way - of all the past occasions you started and operated process heating equipment, how many times did the safety equipment and procedures keep you from having an explosion or fire? Don't know, do you? And you never will, because they did their job. Ignorance can be bliss. Keep it that way.