

Heads up: Good advice in an age of distraction

Have we all forgotten a basic playground principle?

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'Heads up!' It's one of the first commands we learn in group play and team sports. When an errant ball is about to descend on a schoolyard or playground, "Heads up!" is shouted, and everyone knows to duck and cover. It's a friendly, good-natured warning that we intuitively understand and appreciate.

Coaches, athletes, and commentators also use the expression to compliment a smart move. Or a coach may advise a team that they must collectively "play heads-up ball."

If you don't play heads-up, bad things can happen. That's why hockey players must learn to skate with their heads up - or else get whacked when trying to move up-ice.

The expression is also part of the business lexicon. The boss is famous for reminding employees to keep their heads up. From the CEO to the rank and file, nobody wants to be caught with a slumping head.

No matter what life brings each day, one is better served by keeping one's head up.

But today fewer and fewer people are heeding that sage advice. Much of our newfangled technology - including cell phones, PDAs, video game players, digital music players, and more - is drawing our attention, and our heads, downward.

At one level, this is an inconvenience or an annoyance. People performing the basic functions of life with their heads down are obstacles to the rest of us.

People checking their e-mails on BlackBerries slow down the herd as it moves through a train station. Traffic grows sluggish and cars meander as drivers peek at their iPhones. Store checkout lines grind to a halt when someone is summoned by a tone.

"Is that all, Miss?" No answer, because the head is down.

Why fret over these mundane proclivities of our fellow man? Because taking our eyes off the road of life is not without risk. People are literally missing a step (on stairways), making missteps (into traffic), or not stepping on the brake when they should be.

Most important, when the inevitable apocalypse comes, wouldn't it be nice to know what it was? Don't we want to know what took us out? And what if we had an outside chance of getting out of its way for a while?

Heads up, everyone. If your time has come, don't go out not knowing what hit you.

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