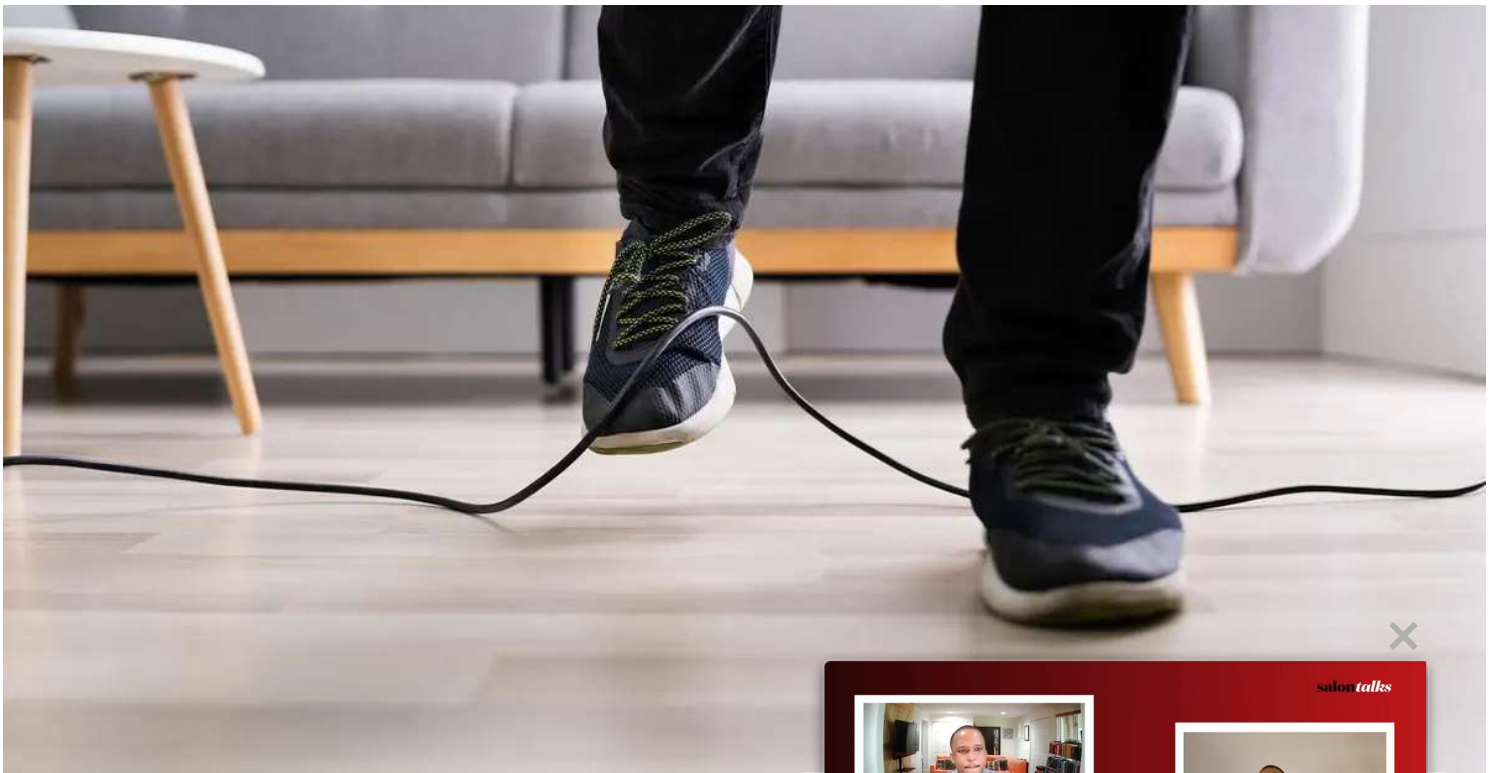


EXPLAINER

Your "clumsiness" may be a health problem hiding in plain sight

We all stumble sometimes, but klutziness can be a sign of something serious

By **MARY ELIZABETH WILLIAMS** PUBLISHED JUNE 19, 2022 2:00PM (EDT)



Stumble Over Cable (Getty Images/AndreyPopov)

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"I remember being at a resort in Mexico and I don't know, I just kept stumbling," recalls [Angela Bradford](#). "I thought it was my sandals, my flip flops, or maybe it



The problem wasn't her shoes, or her margaritas.

"May 25th, 2019 was the last day I could wear high heels," Bradford, a Senior Marketing Director at World Financial Group in Alberta, Canada, says now. "I went to an event I was speaking at. I was having a tough go, so I took off my high heels and put on sliding shoes. Even then, that was a hard day." Soon, she says, "I started going to the gym, trying to get in better shape. I was like, maybe I need to work out more. I don't know. Am I that weak?" A month later, she was diagnosed with **multiple sclerosis** (MS).

Lack of coordination is among life's subtler shames. It's embarrassing to bump into things. It's a real-world slapstick comedy for a person to fall down. And most of the time, our stumbles are benign. They're usually just a moment of humanizing vulnerability, a source of snickers but also, maybe, a little empathy from the more vertically stable among the crowd. Sometimes, however, there's more to the story than a slippery sidewalk or a strong cocktail.

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feet. That doesn't mean they should be ignored, though.

Let's start with the more straightforward — and usually transitory — causes for occasional clumsiness. **Fatigue, anxiety**, distraction and drugs and alcohol will all raise your odds of banging into walls and tripping over your own two feet. That doesn't mean they should be ignored, though. After all, if you're not the hero of **an eighties teen comedy**, falling down drunk is a not a sustainable lifestyle. And if you're so exhausted and stressed that it's affecting your coordination, your body is sending you a pretty clear message that something's got to give.

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There may be deeper, biological reasons for clumsiness. Her earliest symptoms of MS. The central nervous system affects **approximately 2.3 million people**, can often be difficult to diagnose, in no small part because the symptoms can masquerade as something as seemingly innocuous — if awkward — as



For author Rebecca Schiller, a frequent series of falls turned out to be **one of the symptoms of her ADHD**. As she describes in her candid and insightful memoir "**A Thousand Ways to Pay Attention**," Schiller's slip-ups represented an increasingly recognized aspect of the neurodivergent experience for many people. Writing for Medium in 2021, Jillian Enright observed, "It turns out that neurodivergent people are **not really 'clumsy' after all**. In fact, there's a perfectly reasonable scientific explanation for these types of issues: we neurodivergents often have difficulties with **proprioception and interoception**. I have a neurobiological disorder that influences how my body perceives itself and the world around me, among many other things."

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"Poor motor coordination or motor planning is a common coexisting difficulty in children with ADHD. This issue has received less attention in research."

Paying attention to coordination issues can mean getting our kids the right diagnosis and help they need. According to a 2019 study from the South African Journal of Psychiatry on children



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"As a child, I clearly see now that a diagnosis of dyspraxia was totally missed," says London physician **Dr. Brian Kaplan**, the author of **"Almost Happy: Pushing Your Buttons with Reverse Psychology."** "Instead of being diagnosed and having appropriate responses from my school and parents," he says, "I was simply mocked and bullied for being inept at sports at a school where the sportsmen ruled the show. My son inherited the condition and we picked it up quickly. After assessment by psych ed he was diagnosed with dyspraxia. The way his school and university dealt with this gave me both tears of joy (at helping him) and sadness in how missing this in me had impacted my life in a bad way."

At the other end of the lifespan, clumsiness can also...
Though the **"I've fallen and I can't get up"** trope has...
spills seem inevitable, falls can actually be an import...
Gilbert, a communications associate with **the Mason**...
research center in Utica, says, "There's a lot of munc...
the reason for clumsiness. But especially if it's major...
and again, if there's a pattern, it can be a sign of a lot of different things, including Alzheimer's



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"If someone can't feel because their nerves are damaged, then there's a reason behind that clumsiness."

Those incidents can also signal **neuropathy**, a painful and common side effect of diabetes and other conditions. "When you have neuropathy, it's nerve damage," says Gilbert. "If you can't feel, you're not going to feel what you're touching, so you can step on something that's dangerous. You can stumble much easier. You can fall much easier. You could mistake that for just clumsiness, but if someone can't feel because their nerves are damaged, then there's a reason behind that clumsiness."

So how can you tell the difference between everyday klutziness and a deeper issue? Context is everything. For most of us, our gracefulness or lack of it are fairly stable states. Having less coordination than anybody else isn't a cause for concern. But if it's becoming a bigger part of your life — or that of someone you care about — it deserves your consideration and think about talking to a trusted medical professional.

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"When you're going through it, it's a weird feeling because you don't know what's wrong with you and you think you're crazy," says Angela Bradford. She advises anyone noticing similar red flags to "Just look into deeper causes. If it's something completely new that you haven't had before, normally that can be a symptom of something happening. If you haven't been that tripping person, why are you all of a sudden tripping?" She adds, "Then see if it's connected to anything else at the same time. My vision would go blurry too. Is there something else that is weird? Are there things that set it off and make it worse?" Tony Gilbert concurs, "If there's a pattern that's noticed, if it's unusual in comparison with other people of a similar age or similar health type," he says, "that's something that probably should be looked into."

All of us will, from time to time, **pratfall over the ottomans in our living rooms**. Usually, the remedy is to just pick ourselves up with a sheepish smile. But falls can also be a symptom of a bigger problem, a clue hiding in plain sight disguised as those blundered moments we'd rather forget. If anything about how you move starts to feel like it's not normal *for you*, then maybe it's not normal. Get it checked out. You don't have to stumble over taking care of your own well-being.

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