

# Professional Safety

Journal of the American Society of Safety Engineers

## Drive Excellence By Managing Fleet Risk

### Safety Training

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Safety Joins the  
Smart Revolution



# Anatomy of a Safety Habit

## Changing Unsafe Behaviors

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It is no secret that unsafe workplaces are expensive in terms of money and productivity. Companies around the world have committed to creating safe workplaces and have invested heavily in expensive safety training for employees. But the number one problem that companies face today is transforming expensive training into consistently safe practices.

The painful truth is that knowing is not enough. Employees often know what to do. They may even want to do it, but they do not do it. It is frustrating for employers to send employees to training, then watch them not apply what they have learned. It is tempting to place blame on the employees' shoulders. But it is not their fault. They are fighting a losing battle with the physiology of their brains.

Good intentions do not translate into results OSH managers can count on when safety is on the line because good intentions, new knowledge and process improvements require a person to call on a scarce but valuable resource: willpower. Willpower is a form of mental energy used to control thoughts, emotions, impulses and performance. Unfortunately, it is an unreliable resource that is easily drained by physical and emotional stress, and by making too many decisions.

The idea that employees do not have enough drive, determination or intelligence is ridiculous. The idea that employees do not care enough about their own safety is wrong. But if they make a decision to apply a new safety practice, then rely on their motivation and willpower to make that decision stick, they will fail. Whether it is because they are tired, hungry, stressed out, busy or maybe they just plain forget, the brain will eventually take the path of least resistance, which can be an existing habit.

With willpower, employees must think about what they want to do (e.g., "Remember to wear your PPE"). But when something is a habit, no thought is required. Habits bypass the willpower account. No one needs to remember to drink a morning cup of coffee. People do not talk themselves out of brushing their teeth before bed. Those things happen automatically without thought or decision. The most effective way to change how employees typically think, respond or act is to transform the desired behavior from

a conscious act to an unconscious act. In other words, make it a habit.

### What Is a Habit?

A habit is a routine of behavior that is repeated regularly and tends to occur unconsciously, but what is actually being discussed is a physiological phenomenon. When the brain does something for the first time, the prefrontal cortex (PFC) is activated. The PFC is the most recently evolved part of the brain and resides above the eyes. It is powerful but also intense in terms of energy and effort. The PFC fires and communicates in a loop with the striatum, which is located in the center, interior of the brain at the top of the brain stem. The striatum is a much older part of the brain, known as the habit-, reward- and goal-motivated behavior center of the brain. When the brain is doing something new, it is a lot of work and all the neurons along this path between the PFC and the striatum fire.

However, the brain is a quick learner and the next time it repeats that action, it is a little more familiar. The brain does not have to work as hard; as this process is repeated, it gets easier. Fewer and fewer neurons fire. When the brain launches a habit, the PFC is no longer involved. In addition, only the neurons at the beginning and end of the action fire. The bulk of the action is on autopilot—freeing up all that mental activity.

Repetition is the mother of habit. Through repetition, the neural pathway moves from the PFC to the striatum and then deeper into brain, firing fewer neurons.

Everyone has experienced the habit creation process. For example, I learned how to drive on a stick shift. Not only did I have to pay attention to the lights, signs and other drivers, but I was also learning how to press in the clutch, put the car in gear and then step on the gas while releasing the clutch with the right pressure. It was stressful and overwhelming in the beginning. All I could do was focus on driving. But now? I will be honest, I have gotten in my car in the driveway and arrived at my destination thinking, "How did I get here? I hope I stopped at every light, because I don't even remember driving."

That is the habit creation process. When driving becomes a habit, the brain does not need to pay close attention. Only the neurons at the beginning and the end had to fire and in the meantime, I can think about what I have to pick up from the

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grocery store or what phone calls I need to make when I get to the office.

Habits are a wonderful productivity tool for the brain. Relying on habit frees up the brain for other activities. Habits literally save energy, because fewer neurons must fire. The brain loves habits. It loves the neurological shortcut, and it does not like to fire up the energy and attention intensive PFC. A habit is the path of least resistance that the brain does easily and automatically—without even thinking about it.

Habits are agnostic. By themselves, they are neither good nor bad. They are simply a neurological pathway in the brain. What makes some habits bad and some habits good comes down to the consequences of the action.

The important takeaway of understanding behavior as a result of neural pathways is to accept that employees are not bad people. They have unhelpful neural pathways, or they do not have desired neural pathways. This means that employees are not unsafe, they simply have neural pathways created by successfully repeating unsafe actions. Or they have not created a deep neural pathway for a specific safety behavior.

### Breaking & Creating Habits

Breaking bad safety habits is about bypassing or disrupting an existing neural pathway, and creating good safety habits is about creating new neural pathways. Both of these can be achieved by tapping into the anatomy of a habit, which is made up of three parts: trigger, action and reward. The action is typically what people associate with

the habit, because it is the visible part. Whether it is drinking coffee in the morning, wearing PPE or bringing a sack lunch, the action is just one part. The actual habit consists of all three components. When a behavior is a habit, something (trigger) has caused a person to perform in a certain way (action) to achieve a particular benefit (reward). For example, walking into the kitchen in the morning is the trigger for drinking a cup of coffee to receive a rush of caffeine.

To break a bad habit, disrupt any or all of these components. Can the trigger be removed? Can the reward be achieved by a better action? The strategies used to disrupt a bad habit depend on understanding the specific anatomy of the habit, the employee's personality, the depth of the habit and the reality of the job site. Breaking bad habits is challenging because it often requires a person to be aware of what s/he is doing before s/he can stop. Unfortunately, habits are by nature something people engage in without awareness or thought. The first step is becoming aware of the behavior as it is happening.

To create a new habit, intentionally craft a habit anatomy designed for success. First, choose a trigger. Find a place or an existing habit that will serve as the springboard for the new, desired habit. Second, identify a simple, specific, attainable step that employees can take without fail. It may be necessary to start small and build into the full desired behavior slowly as the neural pathway gets deeper. Third, find a physical, personal or social reward that engages the brain's dopamine center, located in the striatum, to create a strong

physical and emotional bond with the new desired habit. The reward should happen as close to the end of the action as possible. OSH managers, like many in the workplace, tend to focus on externally directed social or financial rewards, but the most effective rewards vary from person to person and are often internally directed.

### Conclusion

Our brains are designed to take the path of least resistance, but OSH managers can tap into that neurology to disrupt the bad behaviors and program in the right behaviors. Harness the power of habits and transform knowledge into automatic, unconscious, habitual safety practices.



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