Mental Strategies for Soft-Tissue Safety

By Robert Pater   Feb 01, 2008

Consider that the next frontier in Safety lies within, in helping to enlist workers' minds toward high-level performance.

Do you believe a person's mind can make him sick? Or, on the flip side, the way we think can potentially boost our health?

Surveys show medical doctors report 70 percent of illness is psychosomatic-related. This doesn't mean most people are hypochondriacs, imagining they're sick, just that our mental states can affect or contribute to negative or positive well-being. Psychosomatic literally means "of the mind and body."

Similarly, Safety also has psychosomatic impacts, strongly affected by mental states of attitude, attention, motivation, willingness to listen, understanding of directions or procedures, inner stresses, and more.

Leaders have successfully enlisted technology to reduce external contributors to injuries. But many companies have arrived at the point of diminishing returns; a second scissors lift next to the first probably won't cut remaining back injuries. Many companies report they have "picked the low-hanging fruit" yet are still mired in a plateau of pains.

Not surprisingly, strains and sprains continue to be the bane of many companies. Especially with increasingly autonomous workers who act as they think best, or with an aging workforce, affected by sarcopenia (age-related muscle loss), lessened ability to react quickly, reduced flexibility, and more.

While all Safety performance is strongly affected by mental states--from driving accidents, struck by/against, and slips/trips/falls to hand injuries, etc.--soft-tissue injuries are especially so. We've found state of mind affects numerous critical actions--planning out positions, work set-up, selecting techniques to employ, redirecting force, choosing alternative actions as loads shift or footing changes, as well as pain tolerance and more.

But you can help all people readily increase their mental control, elevating Safety. Here's how to start:

1. Identify and overcome current "mental approaches" that have shown limited success. Because many companies realize the impact of the mental aspects of Safety, most try to address this in some--but, regrettably, not in most-effective--ways. These may include:
   "Write it off" ("How can we possibly manage an employee who injures his back just picking up a pencil--or wrench, etc.--off the floor?")
   predominantly enlisting reminders (signs, notices) that fade into the attentional background, defaulting toward writing even more policies and procedures in hopes of mandating safe actions, applying solely awareness-based education programs that focus on understanding or incenting but not actually transferring the skills and motivation needed for boosting safer actions.

2. Recognize and reduce workers' mental blocks to soft-tissue Safety. We've heard denial comments such as "I'm too old/young/smart/experienced to get hurt" or "Hasn't happened to me" or "It's a management/tools/equipment problem." Or resignation: "I'm already hurt, too late for me" or "Just a part of getting older" or "Can't teach an old dog new tricks," and more.

Remind people that increased mental control and skills are attainable at any age...
(showing examples of older athletes or those, like Grandma Moses, who've taken up new skills later in life).

3. **Enlist positive, not threatening, motivation.** Show employees how safe behaviors can help them improve favorite personal activities. (For example: Strengthening balance is a necessary physical skill for elevating soft-tissue Safety and is simultaneously critical for heightened performance in most sports or physical activities—golf, tennis, softball, and more.)

4. **Set your own and others’ expectations.** To optimize behavioral change, start by asking yourself, "What do I want workers to really be able to do?" Responses might range from:
   - **Perceiving:** Seeing the "unseen," such as small-but-significant forces at work/repetition or static loading? Realizing potential impacts of off-work activities that can contribute to cumulative trauma?
   - **Remembering:** Recall and apply policies/procedures/PPE? Remember and use previous training—both underlying principles and the specific applications covered?
   - **Thinking:** That they're responsible for their own actions? Being able to think and plan ahead? Listen with an open mind? Have high expectations of their own Safety?
   - **Responding:** Select and use the best tools for a given task? Adjust to changing conditions? Port what they know to a range of other jobs? Embrace changes/modifications? Respond receptively to audits? Actively participate/support Safety?
   - **Communicating:** Report near-misses and incidents quickly and accurately? Alert/help others make needed adjustments? Actively participate in incident investigations?

There's a lot more you can do to elevate "mental Safety." In a future column, I'll cover specific mental skills that have proven to dramatically reduce soft-tissue injuries.

Consider that the next frontier in Safety lies within, in helping to enlist workers' minds—beyond apathy, ignorance, or resistance—toward high-level performance, culture, and health.

**About the Author**

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