Six Mental Skills for Strengthening Soft-Tissue Safety

By Robert Pater  Jun 01, 2008

These are proven to dramatically drop strains and sprains.

Don’t be soft on soft-tissue injuries. These problems—typically, strains and sprains to the back, shoulders, neck, and other areas—plague numerous organizations and, even worse, often escalate as workforces age. Initially, many companies try to injury-proof the workplace, from ergonomic design fixes to job redesign/rotation. These definitely help but, regrettably, often to a plateau. In last month’s column, I wrote about organizational strategies for corralling these common injuries. Now, I’ll focus on specific skills everyone, from executives to workers in fields, plants, and offices, can apply to have more usable strength and control, as well as prevent pain and injury.

Start by defining a “skill.” More than just motivation or policies/procedures, mental skills for soft-tissue safety are:

• Individually applied—by anyone.

• Tangible, not theoretical—readily applicable to a wide range of tasks (e.g., not just to lifting a certain box off a distribution center pallet).

• Personally motivating, so people want to use these wherever they can, at work and at home. To accomplish this, individuals have to see skills lead to real improvements they value (not just to their employer).

• Demonstrable, easily transferred to a range of people, easily duplicated.

• Practice-able, fostering continuous improvement in performance, with less energy input for ever-better results. Best skills build higher levels of expertise, further than “I got it.”

• Accommodate action styles—shown and practiced kinesthetically, beyond checklists or visual examples.

• Focus on next steps and how to be more effective, not just how to prevent injuries that many don’t believe will really happen to them.

• Emphasize habit development by offering a range of applications, both at home and at work.

Of course, physical actions are soft-tissue safety’s bottom line. But the more you understand what you’re trying to do, the better you’re able to make continuous course-corrections for refining higher physical skills. Here’s a brief overview of six mental skills proven to dramatically drop strains and sprains.

1. Prepare yourself for Safety. Prior to their events, great athletes engage in mental rehearsal for significant performance gains. Similarly, each of us can enlist mental skills to prevent major injury—self-motivation, reminders how to best recover from initial “twinges,”
even mental rehearsal/mental warm-up and warm-down.

2. **Higher thinking.** Think beyond strenuous lifting. Develop around-the-clock thinking that accounts for piling up tension from “insignificant” activities—bending over to tie shoes, picking up a shirt off the floor, etc.—reported by many “the straw that broke the camel’s back,” leading to disabling lower back pain. Exposures also occur from pushing/pulling/using tools, etc. Focus on “small changes” that leverage into significant improvements in soft-tissue strength and control.

3. **Self-monitor to self-regulate.** Check in on current weak areas (that can change daily); protect/offload weak areas in favor of stronger ones. Adjust your pacing. Monitor your weight placement/balance, breathing (careful not to hold your breath when exerting), and other “internal shifter” cues.

4. **Direct attention.** First, recognize your default attention pattern (e.g., do you focus first on details of a task vs. broadly scanning your body for incipient pain?). Next, develop skills for directing your attention (hint: broadly and narrowly, internally or externally) to best fit your tasks and demands. Honing eye-hand coordination can even widen your range of motion, making strains/sprains less likely.

5. **Control stress.** Over-tension can put you in the soft-tissue danger zone, just as a cord pulled taut is easier to cut than one that is slacked. Further, unmanaged stress can upset your balance, leading to poor decisions and even physical clumsiness. Think of stress as “the feeling of being out of control.” The key to all Safety—and stress power—is to take personal control of your decisions and actions. Again, go beyond wishful thinking or platitudes toward tangible skills.

6. **Use the Laws of Motion.** Understand and apply the 3 Laws— 1. Inertia/A body at rest, 2. Force equals mass times acceleration, 3. For every action there is. . . . —to take mechanical advantage every time you push/pull/lift/use tools. First, scope out your task; second, position yourself most effectively; third, align your body for safest force transfer; fourth, make a strong connection with the object you’ll move; fifth, winch out the slack out between you and your object; sixth, shift yourself to move the object.

All of the above are tangible, practice-able, easily transferable mental skills, proven to significantly reduce soft-tissue injuries in numerous people and in a host of companies. By developing these, each person can live and work safer, stronger, and more in control.

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