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Raising Ergonomic Mindfulness

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A wide array of people are, well, minding "mindfulness." Perhaps because leaders realize many workers are basically going through the motions, not fully connected with their tasks, environment, others, or even their own bodies. And you might add to this list employees admitting to feeling disengaged, disillusioned, and distrustful. All this can result in subpar performance, poor communications and customer service, and increased risk of injury. After all, how many times have you heard of someone who's gotten hurt in an activity they've previously done thousands of times—using a tool, getting caught between objects, tripping on stairs, even picking up something light off the ground, and much more? Resulting in some managers frustratingly labeling these incidents as "stupid" or due to workers "not paying attention" or "being complacent."

No question that mindfulness can potentially make a positive difference in safety and overall performance. Mindfulness ultimately describes where you direct your attention to sensing what's going on, both internally and externally. Is your focus coordinated with what you are doing or split/thinking of something else, or just foggily drifting?

But despite the messaging of those offering training and books and seminars, there are few easy answers as to how to remediate this. That is, it's unlikely we'll develop a workforce of Zen monks. Sure, meditating or counting breaths can be useful methods for some. However, they won't fix all complex ills, especially those that have numerous simultaneous contributors. But out of experience with numerous organizations worldwide, I've seen how practical applications of mindfulness—well beyond eyes-closed calming exercises—can significantly help reduce specific

ergonomic-related injuries. The key is to incorporate an easy-to-do, specific approach.

Most ergonomic problems—generally, strains and sprains to the back, shoulders, neck, knees, and other vulnerable areas—are typically cumulative in nature. That is, they're akin to the straw that breaks the camel's back. It's not the "final straw" that "causes" lower back pain, it's that combined with all the other small stresses on the lower back adding up over time toward a potentially limiting or disabling injury. These forces are small, often easy to take for granted as they typically fly below triggering a radar alert; for example, few would think twice about merely picking up the weight of a penny from the floor. Even the Revised NIOSH Lifting Equation, with its emphasis on "Recommended Weight Limit," won't realistically flag risks that emanate from engaging in a range of low-load tasks, especially when these stem from *different* motions that stress the same soft-tissue area.

But raising ergonomic mindfulness can considerably help. How to accomplish this?

1. *Develop a "small changes" ergonomic mindset.* This entails moving away from acute thinking (where people get hurt from engaging in one heavily exertive task) toward understanding that seemingly insignificant daily actions can build up units of physical stress in the body that mount toward injury. Such activities might include bending over to tie shoes or pick up a piece of paper, reaching all the way out to turn off a light switch or pick up a pen, jumping down even one step off a forklift, and many more seemingly innocuous tasks.

It's important to become mindful of forces accumulating as early as possible and then unload these before they accumulate into a wear-down/breakdown, which can take a long-term toll, potentially creating a weak spot that can lead to ongoing pain or limited range of motion.

2. *Mindfully recognize the "invisible."* While it's relatively easier to be aware of moving our bodies or transporting objects or maneuvering tools or using machines, holding positions overlong can also generate static-loading shearing and other forces that lead to soft-tissue problems. So help people mindfully note when they're *not* moving—standing in place (either talking or at a machine) without changing position, holding a tool (even when it's "light"), working for periods with arms extended overhead, and sitting for protracted periods.

3. *Apply only the minimal force needed.* Ergonomic injuries increase when people wrongly assume the contents of a closed container. This can lead to over- or under-

exerting, rolling up units of physical tension like a taxi meter racking up a fare. Ergonomic Mindfulness entails sensing and then using only the minimal force needed to move an object, and doing so efficiently, through its center of gravity. This skill can be readily transferred.

4. *Self-monitor "buildup, breath & balance."* Check in with yourself regularly, self-scanning tension "batteries" — such as the lower back and neck — to see how charged these are with physical stress. In our MoveSMART® system, we've seen dramatic reports of soft-tissue injuries that are in significant part due to people learning how to regularly self-scan, minding accruing of forces in vulnerable body parts such as back, neck, shoulders, and knees, quickly sensing when they are off balance or out of natural alignment, then adjusting before physical stresses overflow into injury.

Holding breath both reduces range of motion and also adds units of cumulative tension into the physical system. It's therefore important for workers to self-monitor when they're holding their breath and learn to better sync breath cycles with exerting force.

Especially self-monitor balance; this is one of the most critical ergonomic indicators to self-monitor. Even momentary drifts in balance can spawn excessive tensions as a person unconsciously attempts to compensate to regain equilibrium. And minor balance loss combined with lifting, pushing, pulling, lowering, raising, and stepping can significantly compound cumulative trauma, potentiating risk of injury.

Ergonomic mindfulness is practical, readily transferrable, and critical to attaining real breakthroughs in multitudes of soft-tissue injuries.

About the Author

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