

## **The Motivational Benefit of Emotion: How to get more engagement for safety**

In my last two *ISHN* columns (April & May, 2008), I reviewed 12 evidence-based strategies for developing resilience to emotional pain and suffering. This article offers an alternative perspective by addressing the intentional elicitation of emotion as a way to motivate action for injury prevention.

The words *motivation* and *emotion* come from the same Latin root *movere*, which means “to move.” Both motivation and emotion spur us into action. Here I propose we activate people’s emotions in order to motivate them to pay more attention to environmental and behavioral risks and act accordingly.

### **Make Safety Personal**

A powerful way to increase participation in safety-related programs is to teach and motivate with personal stories. I experienced this with my friend, Charlie Morecraft.

Many readers have seen Charlie tell his riveting story, either in person or on videotape. Audiences sit on the edge of their seats as Charlie relates the details of his severe burn injury at an Exxon oil refinery, including the painful and long-term consequences to himself and his immediate family.

He shows authentic affect throughout his presentation and evokes emotional reaction from the attentive spectators. The observers increase their commitment to safety—heightened motivation to do whatever is necessary to prevent personal injury and the kind of physical and psychological suffering endured by Charlie Morecraft.

### **The Why and the How of Safety**

On several occasions I’ve had the privilege of teaming with Charlie for presentations at professional development conferences and at industrial sites. Charlie tells his story first, and then

I follow with specific things people can do to help themselves and others prevent unintentional injuries. First I ask the audience to be mindful of their current emotional feelings, triggered by Charlie's story. That emotional state motivates them to listen carefully to practical ways to keep people safe and to make a personal commitment to use these techniques on a daily basis.

Charlie claims he is the "why," for taking extra time and inconvenience for safety. He sets the stage for my follow-up talk by telling the audience I will discuss the "how." In other words, after people's emotional reaction to hearing the horrific consequences Charlie suffered because he didn't follow the prescribed safety regulations, they are receptive to learning what they can do to prevent personal injury. In this case, emotion benefits both learning and motivation for safety-related action.

### **Motivating Engagement for Safety**

Charlie Morecraft tells his emotional story several times a week at companies around the world. Listeners feel immediate self-motivation to actively care for the safety of themselves and others. They become more mindful of environmental hazards and participate more enthusiastically in their workplace safety programs, from paying more attention at team safety meetings to delivering and accepting feedback about safe vs. at-risk behavior.

But, how long does this augmented engagement for occupational safety last? Before long the emotionally-laden memories of Charlie's story fade, along with self-motivation to go beyond the call of duty for injury prevention. For many, the natural activators and consequences of the daily work routine take control again, and they revert to giving safety a lower priority than the efficient, sometimes at-risk, completion of work assignments.

What if you were periodically reminded of the personal side of safety? What if someone at your workplace reminded you of the motivational emotions you once experienced from a

person's safety-related testimony? This would happen naturally if the testimonials came from your co-workers. In other words, if you cultivate a culture that encourages employees to discuss their injuries and close calls, workers' emotions and concomitant motivation for safety can be regularly provoked.

### **An Illustrative Example**

Does the right hand in the photo below elicit any motivational emotion for safety? Probably not; although, you might feel disturbed, sadness, or sympathy for the individual. Such was the case for the co-workers of Rich, a highly regarded engineer at a prosperous construction company. This all changes when Rich tells his story.



Rich is not shy about his deformity. Whenever he is introduced to someone, he immediately offers his right hand for a hearty greeting. Co-workers have questioned the cause of Rich's disabled hand to one another, but not to Rich. One day the safety director of this construction firm stopped ignoring the obvious and with authentic compassion asked Rich, "What happened to you?"

With openness and enthusiasm, Rich shared his personal story. He related his experience to me in a phone conversation. As a 22-year-old student at NCSU, Rich worked at a lumber company in Brookville, PA to complete a required 10-week forestry internship. Rich was directed to use a milling machine he knew was risky because the guards had been removed for efficiency and faster production. He mentioned this to his immediate supervisor, who then reported the problem to the owner. The owner ignored the issue.

After using this unguarded machine for 49 days, the unthinkable happened. In a split second, Rich's right arm was pulled into the feed rollers which began grinding up his hand like hamburger. Realizing immediately the milling machine could swallow up his entire body, Rich pulled his bloody limb from the engulfing rollers.

Rich described the excruciating pain he experienced, not only at the time of his injury, but throughout his six months in the hospital while enduring 13 operations that enabled him to save parts of his hand. Rich also discussed the negative consequences of having a deformed hand, including his observation that young children avoid him with expressions of fear.

Hearing Rich's ordeal over the phone was enough to make me pause and reflect on my good fortune of having two normal hands. I also considered the hand protection I've used over the years when chopping firewood, using a chainsaw, and biking. Thus, Rich's story not only elicited some emotion, it also triggered mental imagery that was both directional and motivational. The value of more people hearing this personal story is obvious.

### **The Bottom Line**

Because the safety director had the courage to ask an employee about a prior injury, and because the employee had the courage to share his personal story with others, many workers at this construction firm have experienced heartfelt emotion linked to safety. It's likely this emotion

increased several individuals' self-motivation to do the right thing for injury prevention, not only for themselves but also for others.

Perhaps this personal story and the emotional consequences will influence public disclosure of more aversive consequences from an unintentional injury. The emotional impact of these personal stories will enhance listeners' self-motivation for safety. Does this possibility motivate you to follow the lead of the safety director and engineer of this story?

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