

## Should Safe Behavior Become Habitual?

We are “unconsciously *incompetent*” when we are unaware of our at-risk behavior. Then, when we learn the safe way to do something, we become “*consciously* competent or incompetent,” depending on what we do. In other words, after we know the safe way to do something we are considered “conscious.” If we do it safely, we’re competent; but if we’re at risk we’re incompetent.

Getting into a regular routine of doing something leads to fluency and automatic behavior. We perform the behavior without thinking about it. This state of mindless performance reflects the behavioral scientist’s term – “habit.” A habit is a behavior that occurs automatically without conscious thought. Is this the optimal state for safe behavior? In other words, should safe behavior become habitual, meaning it’s performed automatically without conscious thought?

Most behavioral safety trainers and consultants would probably answer “Yes” to these questions. In other words, many behavioral safety instructors and consultants advocate the use of intervention techniques to increase the fluency of behavior until it reaches a habitual state. This is when the right (or safe) behavior occurs spontaneously without any preceding or concurrent thought process. In other words, the performance doesn’t need a mental script to prompt or guide it. The behavior occurs almost reflexively to external stimuli or events.

To get people doing the right thing without thinking is often purported as the ultimate goal of a behavior change process. I don’t think so, and therefore I answer “No” to the questions posed above. This article explains why. I hope to convince you that “mindful fluency” is the best state to be in with regard to safety.

It's certainly advantageous to become fluent at performing a safety-related behavior. But there's also value to including a mental script before, during, and after safe behavior, regardless how fluent a person is at performing the behavior. Bottom line: The ultimate safety state is mindfully safe whereby performers talk to themselves before, during, and after their safe behavior. Lets explore this mental/behavioral state a bit further.

### **What is Mindful Fluency?**

Last year I devoted three *ISHN* articles to the concept of mindfulness (i.e., July, August, & September, 1999). When we are mindful about our proficient actions we talk to ourselves about the desirable behaviors we perform. Before executing a safe behavior, we might give ourselves a mental reminder that the particular situation calls for a certain response. During a behavior, mindfulness means we are describing our actions while we perform. And after a behavior occurs, the mindful actor ponders an evaluation or interpretation.

A post-behavior, mental script should include personal commendation that a safe behavior was performed, especially when it was inconvenient, uncomfortable, or inefficient. This mindfulness might include some evaluative statements relevant to improvement. If the behavior could have been more effective, for example, the mental script should include some specific suggestions for refinement. But it's certainly best to emphasize the positive. After all, the effort was on the safe side, and regardless of how large the room for improvement, that tips the balance to self-reward over self-punishment.

It's useful when a self-reward script goes beyond the specific behavior. That is, don't stop at self-acknowledging you did something safe. Add some general or universal praise to your post-behavior mental script. Tell yourself you're a safe person because you avoided the shortcut or easy way out. Or tell yourself you're a safety leader because you went beyond the normal at-risk routine to set a safe example for others.

### **Mental Rewards Can Increase Actively Caring**

When you actively care for the safety and health of others, give yourself mental credit for such action and become mindful of your good deed. Just like extrinsic reinforcement, self-reinforcement increases the frequency of the behavior it follows. In addition, mindfully recognizing one's safety-related achievements boosts the five person states – self-esteem, self-efficacy, personal control, optimism, and a sense of belonging. This in turn increases the probability of actively caring behavior.

As I've described in an earlier *ISHN* article (July, 1998), self-reinforcement is a key intervention strategy for safety self-management. More specifically, research has shown that people who reward themselves are more likely to remain self-accountable and improve their performance. This is most likely to occur when the mindful self-talk leads to an actual extrinsic reward like an opportunity to exercise, eat a certain food, spend money, watch television, or attend an entertaining event. In this case, the mindfulness following a safe behavior includes a decision to give oneself an opportunity to do something enjoyable after doing something less fun but important for safety and health.

And when enjoying the self-reward, it's useful to remain mindful of why you deserve it. Such justification keeps one thinking safety, and provides support for a personal label like "actively caring safety leader."

### **Mindful Self-Talk Prevents Human Error**

Perhaps the most obvious benefit of mindful behavior is that it prevents the automatic mode. How many times a day do you take your mind off the process and put yourself on automatic pilot. This can obviously lead to a serious unintentional error and an injury.

Recently, I lost the keys to my house, office buildings, and vehicle because I was mindless during the transfer of one set of keys to another. I make this same transfer every time I drop off a vehicle for servicing, so the behavior is quite effortless and fluent. I can do it without thinking; and that's precisely the problem. Last week, I mindlessly made the key-ring transfer and can't recall where I put the large ring of keys afterwards. I wasn't physically injured, but I sure was inconvenienced.

In previous *ISHN* articles, I defined various kinds of unintentional errors that occur in the workplace (December, 1997). And in a more recent *ISHN* article (July, 1999), I explained the role of mindlessness in causing these errors. Here, I use this discussion to make a case against mindless habitual behavior. Shouldn't we always be talking to ourselves about what we are doing? By avoiding the automatic mode, we prevent those errors and injuries that occur because we were "just not thinking."

### **Mindful Behavior Allows for Discrimination**

We get away with our mindless routine when the environment or context in which we are performing remains constant. But what if an unexpected environmental event,

such as a forklift truck speeding around a corner, requires us to immediately adjust our behavior. We need to discriminate quickly between the normal routine and the suddenly different work context. We need to be flexible and draw on new information rather than relying on the past.

Mindlessly following the same work routine can prevent prompt discrimination that the situation has changed. Without even realizing it, our mindless work practice can put us at risk for injury.

Mindless behavior can also make us oblivious to gradual changes in the work environment, such as an equipment leak or environmental litter, which can accumulate to a serious hazard. In fact, we can readily habituate to the incremental degrading of our work context, and not recognize a need to discriminate and adjust our behavior or fix the environment. All of this is less likely when we become more mindful of our everyday activities.

### **Mindfulness Facilitates Generalization**

Technically, generalization comes in two forms – stimulus generalization and response generalization. Stimulus generalization occurs when we transfer our performance from one setting to another. In other words, we recognize that a particular behavior is needed in another situation. It's the opposite of stimulus discrimination, discussed above, when we realize a change in the context calls for a different response. Just as mindless reflexive behavior prevents stimulus discrimination, it can also deter the appropriate transfer of behavior from one setting to another.

Response generalization occurs when the occurrence of one behavior influences the performance of another similar behavior in the same context. For example, Dr. Tim

Ludwig and I found in a series of field studies that certain safety-related driving behaviors (such as the use of turn signals and safety belts) increased after a behavior-based intervention improved another safe-driving behavior (such as intersection stopping before turning). Interestingly, this beneficial response generalization occurred only when the participants were actively involved in the design and implementation of the intervention process. A top-down, assigned intervention program improved the single target behavior, but did not lead to response generalization.

While it seems mindfulness benefits stimulus and response generalization, the type of behavior-change intervention used influences the nature of the self-talk or mental script, which in turn determines whether generalization occurs. Thus, interventions that influence participants to say to themselves “I’m doing this because I have to” are unlikely to promote much useful generalization. But when an intervention enables personal choice, self-direction, and perceptions of ownership, the mindful script is more like, “We are doing this because we choose to in order to benefit everyone.” This is the kind of mindfulness that results in beneficial generalization.

### **Safety Leadership and Responsibility are Enhanced**

Suppose the self-talk accompanying a safe behavior is something like, “I’m choosing to do this not because someone is holding me accountable but because it’s the right thing to do and I need to set a safe example for others.” This kind of mental script builds both responsibility and leadership. In other words, people at this level of mindfulness hold themselves accountable for following safe operating procedures and are likely to actively care for the safety of others.

Let's look at a simple example of what I'm talking about. Many people claim they buckle up in their vehicles automatically, without even thinking about it. Such mindless behavior is commendable but not optimal. When you habitually buckle up without self-talk, you lose an opportunity to reward yourself for going out of your way to be safe. Plus, in this automatic state you might not even notice that a passenger in your vehicle was not using a safety belt. Or, if you did notice this at-risk behavior, you might not be willing to ask the person to buckle up.

On the other hand, mindful awareness of your own safety-belt use, accompanied by complementary self-talk, increases the probability of noticing whether others are also buckled up for safety. And if your mental script supports the self-concept of "responsible safety leader," you will likely actively care for an unbuckled vehicle occupant. You'll ask the individual to buckle up in a friendly rather than controlling way. Why? Because you want the person to write the kind of mental script that will lead to using the safety belt in another vehicle (stimulus generalization) and perhaps performing other safety-related behaviors (response generalization).

### **In Conclusion**

In this article I presented a case against "mindless fluency" – when a behavior becomes so habitual or automatic it's performed without thinking. While it's obviously desirable to make safe behavior part of a regular routine, it's not desirable to conduct such behavior without thinking about it. Supportive mental scripts before, during, and after safe behaviors can prevent mindless human errors (or "brain cramps"), increase the probability of relevant discrimination and generalization, help people shift from being

held accountable to feeling responsible, and strengthen leadership qualities needed for people to actively care for the safety and health of others.

Bottom line: Talk to yourself about your safety-related behaviors, even when the behavior is fluent and part of a normal routine. Such mindfulness is good for your self-esteem, self-efficacy, personal control, optimism, and sense of belonging. The result: You feel better about yourself and you're more likely to actively care for the safety and health of others.

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NOTE: Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions teach the kind of behavior-based safety that strengthens beneficial self-talk. For information on related books, training manuals, videotapes, audiotapes, and customized consulting call SPS at (540) 951-7233 (SAFE) and visit our web site at [www.safetyperformance.com](http://www.safetyperformance.com)