

The Anxiety of Safety: *A positive connection*

In the last two issues of *ISHN*, I addressed a person factor that influences our motivation and attitude toward occupational safety. More specifically, you can place yourself in one of four person-state categories by considering whether your personal approach to safety is seeking success or avoiding failure. Exclusive success seekers are the most optimistic, while exclusive failure avoiders are most pessimistic. Overstrivers seek success and avoid failure; while extremely motivated, they often feel distressed and insecure. Although the failure accepters are most unmotivated and apathetic, they are typically more content than the failure avoiders and overstrivers.

States vs. Traits

I must urge caution, however, when using this four-way classification system. Firstly, the motivational state of an individual varies from one situation to another and from one time to the next. In other words, a certain manager could be a failure avoider for safety, a success seeker for productivity, and an overstriver for quality. And, one serious injury could move a person from failure avoider to failure acceptor for safety.

This paper introduces a personality trait that can influence which of the four success/failure states an individual is experiencing and whether a transition to a more healthy or productive state might be expected. I'm referring to a trait rather than a state, which is an enduring personality characteristic a person brings to every situation and influences one's state and relevant behavior. The trait we're considering here is general anxiety as measured 50 years ago by a

highly researched survey instrument developed by Dr. Janet Taylor Spence. It's called the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale (TMAS).

What is Anxiety?

My American Heritage Dictionary defines anxiety as “a state of uneasiness and distress about future uncertainties”. Clearly, anxiety is an unpleasant state we want to avoid. But, here I'm not talking about a state, rather a trait. As a trait, anxiety is a relatively stable personality quality that determines one's motivational and emotional responsiveness to a particular circumstance. If the situation is anxiety provoking, state anxiety combines with trait anxiety to produce a most unpleasant and distressing situation.

As measured by the TMAS, high-anxious people are energetic, high-strung, self-conscious, more nervous than average, and generally work under tension. They worry over money and business matters, and have difficulty keeping their mind on one thing. Regarding the success/failure typology defined above and detailed in my *ISHN* columns last February and March, high-anxiety individuals worry about being unsuccessful. They tend to be overstrivers or failure avoiders.

At first, high anxiety seems to be an undesirable personality trait. But, this is not necessarily so. Before bemoaning your own proneness toward high anxiety, consider the following reliable research finding.

While high-anxious people perform less competently than low-anxious people on novel tasks or jobs they could not prepare for, they typically outperform those with lower anxiety on tasks for which they could prepare. Why,

because their strong desire to avoid the aversive anxiety feelings accompanying failure motivates them to do as much as possible to succeed. With proper proactive preparation, these individuals become success seekers.

As Illustrative Anecdote

Many readers have experienced test-taking situations they could not prepare for, like the scholastic achievement test (SAT) high-school students take for entrance into college. On average, high-anxious individuals do worse than low-anxious people on these tests. Why, because their nervousness and heightened arousal energizes a wide range of behaviors, many of which compete with execution of the correct response.

Perhaps you won't be surprised to learn that SAT scores are often not predictive of academic performance in college, as measured by grade point average. Why, because students can prepare for tests that determine their grades, and high-anxious students are typically very proactive when given opportunities to prepare for success. Their strong need to avoid the negative emotions of being unprepared motivates them to work hard to avoid failure. And, if they prepare well and become confident they can make good, they can develop an achievement mindset and become success seekers.

Relevance to Safety

I hope you agree the anxiety trait defined here can be good for safety. Recall the dictionary definition of anxiety as a state of uneasiness about the future. People who have constant anxiety about the possibility of a workplace injury are going to do everything they can to put themselves in control of

preventing injuries, and thereby put their safety-focused anxiety on hold. These folks do not need an actual injury or fatality to get their attention. However, such unfortunate events are often a necessary wake-up-call for the low-anxiety employees.

It's noteworthy that the term anxiety has negative connotations, and therefore the premise that anxiety is good for safety might be difficult for some people to accept. In this case, try substituting the analogous term "concern" for "anxiety". Then the bottom line is that people who have an ongoing internal concern about the safety of themselves and others are more likely to do whatever it takes to prevent the occurrence of personal injury. Isn't this the kind of personality trait we hope to find in our safety leaders? These are the passionate safety pros who are most likely to cultivate a **state** of anxiety or concern for safety throughout a work culture.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help people develop, refine, and implement interventions that prevent workplace injuries. SPS is offering a series of seminars throughout 2004. For more information about these seminars, related books, training programs, video and audiotapes, and customized consulting and training options, please visit safety@safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233. Also log on to www.spcoach.com to learn about an innovative internet approach to teaching these and other principles and procedures for improving the human dynamics of your workplace.