

June 2018. “Knowing” is not enough! Workers generally know what safe practices are but good intentions do not always translate into action. Change unsafe workplace behaviors by developing “safety” as a habit.

Employees care enough about their own safety to apply new safety practices. However, the brain will take the path of least resistance. In practice, tiredness, hunger, stress, being busy, etc., overshadow motivation and willpower, with the worker reverting to an existing undesirable practice. The key to changing unsafe behaviors is to make safe practices a habit. A habit is a routine of behavior repeated regularly. When something becomes a habit, it occurs automatically without the need for conscious thought.

When the brain is doing something new, a physiological process occurs that is a lot of work. Physiologically the brain is a quick learner. The next time an action occurs, it is a bit easier than the first time. Each repetition makes the action more familiar to the brain and thus less mental work. When something becomes a habit, the brain does not need to pay close attention. Thus, safer work practices are in place and productivity increases.

Workers think of the habit as the visible result, e.g., wearing PPE. The actual habit is comprised of three parts: trigger, action and reward. To break a bad habit and replace it with a good habit starts with disrupting these three parts of a habit. When something is a habit, a trigger (something) causes a person to perform in a certain way (action) for a particular benefit (reward). To break a bad habit, disrupt any or all of these components.

The first step is to become aware of the bad habit as it occurs. This can be challenging. Any habit, bad or good, is by nature something people participate in without awareness or thought. To intentionally develop a new habit choose a trigger. Find a place or existing habit that will serve as a springboard. Then identify a simple, specific, attainable step employees can take. It generally works best to start small and work into the fully desired behavior slowly to optimize development of the brain’s new pathways. Finally, find a reward, physical, personal or social, to help the brain create a strong bond with the desired habit. Reward should occur as close as possible to the end of the action. This might be as simple as “catching” a worker as the safer practice occurs and acknowledging it.

Our brains are designed to take the path of least resistance. Humans are adaptable and can change. Harness the power of habits to transform knowledge into automatic safety practices.

Lipinski, Sharon. “Anatomy of a Safety Habit.” *Professional Safety*, Feb. 2018, pp. 20–21.