

Kris Corbett



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Mindfulness means being present and living in the moment. In a work context, being mindful can help employees avoid complacency and stay focused on the task at hand. Kris Corbett explores how employers can help workers learn how to use mindfulness techniques to avoid autopilot behavior that can endanger their safety.

PS: What is mindfulness and how does it affect workplace safety?

Kris: Mindfulness is being in the present moment and attentive and aware to your surroundings. Today, mindfulness is being advanced as a key to health and happiness. It can be applied to many different issues, from productivity, to stress, to work-life balance, to improving relationships and listening skills.

It is sometimes easier to understand mindfulness by exploring mindlessness. Mindlessness occurs when someone goes into autopilot mode.

Autopilot is often referenced when people are doing something but are not really aware of what they are doing. For example, many people drive the same route to work every day. Often, from when they get into the car and drive from one point to the next on that route, they do not remember the drive. Their brains are in autopilot mode. Our brains enter autopilot when something becomes habitual or repetitive. The brain no longer needs to think about the task in the same way it did the first time it encountered that activity. Therefore, mindfulness involves bringing our brain out of autopilot so it can engage more actively in overall reasoning. This puts you into the moment, which requires using more thought.

PS: How can mindlessness lead to risky actions on the job?

Kris: Let me share an example. I was reviewing injury trends for a group I was working with, and I started to notice issues related to focus and awareness. This included people not being aware when they were walking, then tripping over curbs, or not noticing signs warning of a wet floor, then slipping on that floor.

Multitasking contributes to mindlessness and can lead to work-related injuries. For example, OSHA's top four hazards for construction fatalities are struck by, caught in, falls and electrocution, and they have been linked to factors related

to focus and awareness. Situational awareness is key to safety. If workers are unaware of their surroundings and are not paying attention to what they are doing, they are more likely to experience an incident.

The video *The Money Tree* (<http://bit.ly/2xLrVbO>) provides another useful illustration. In the video, someone hangs \$1 bills in a tree, then watches to see how many people who walk by notice the money hanging from the tree. The bills have nice messages written on them such as, "Have a good day." It is amazing how many people walk by without noticing the money in the tree. This experiment demonstrates how people often go about daily life on autopilot. In the workplace, if people are not aware of their surroundings, they will likely miss a hazard. Workers must be mindful and in the moment to recognize and act to avoid hazards.

PS: How do you introduce mindfulness to workers?

Kris: I am mindful to not use words like meditation or Zen because I do not want people to view mindfulness in that way. I am also careful not to start the conversation with a 15-minute mindfulness session. Instead, I begin with a brief exercise: "Let's take a minute and just breathe. Let's take a few seconds to listen to what is around us in the room." I focus on using brief, 5-minute mindfulness practices to introduce people to the idea before building up to longer exercises.

PS: How can managers help workers practice mindful techniques?

Kris: Similar to safety moments, when a supervisor asks a worker to share a safety moment, managers can use mindfulness moments. The first step is to define mindfulness and explain that it is normal for our brains to go into autopilot. Then, share an example of a mindfulness moment and a mindless moment, and ask workers to share similar experiences.

One training technique for building awareness is to take a picture of the human body, then ask employees to think about how their body is feeling in that moment. It is amazing how many workers experience aches and pains, and assume that is how they should feel at the end of the work day, or how many workers disregard shoulder pain until it turns into a recordable injury.

Often, safety professionals chase injuries after they have occurred. However, what might happen if you ask workers questions such as, "What are you feeling? Are your feet bothering you? Your back? Your shoulders?" The answers can reveal

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ers' brains automatically exit the habitual, repetitive autopilot state. Similarly, if someone actively thinks about how his/her body feels or does a body scan, s/he is pulling out of autopilot.

The easiest thing for anyone to do is to take a breath. If a worker finds his/her mind wandering, often just taking a deep breath can pull that person back into the present.

It is also important to recognize that those who are likely to experience autopilot while working are those who have been performing a job for a long time and know the job well. For them, the job is often repetitive and, therefore, habitual. They do not necessarily need to think about the task in the same way as someone new to the occupation or job.

Mindfulness can be done in as few as 30 seconds. It is recognizing that you are on autopilot and pulling out from it by taking a deep breath. That is really all you need to do to start.

what type of program, be it educational or an ergonomics intervention, workers need to combat the next possible recordable injury.

This is an example of body mindfulness, being aware of what the body is telling you. The answer need not be pain. It could be tightness or weakness. For example, if you wake up and feel a kink in your back, you will likely be more careful when putting your kids in the car, or when stepping up into your work truck. In this case, mindfulness involves being aware of present issues so that you do not make the kink worse.

Mindfulness is linked into everything that we do. Stress is prevalent today, and mindfulness can help reduce stress. So, it makes sense to teach a construction worker about mindfulness and body awareness so that s/he understands it in relation to specific individual concern, be it nutrition, stress or body awareness.

PS: What are some specific mindfulness techniques?

Kris: The first step is to help workers recognize when they are being mindless. Getting someone to recognize that s/he is on autopilot is half the battle because recognizing it and being able to pull out of it is the key.

We can use our senses to pull out of being mindless. By taking a deep breath, really listening to your surroundings, smelling or touching, you automatically switch out of autopilot mode. So, for example, ask workers who use tools to think about how the tool feels in their hands. Just by thinking about those sensations, the work-

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