



How Safe Are Your Habits?



Habits are behaviors that occur spontaneously without any preceding or concurrent thought process. The behavior occurs almost reflexively to external stimuli or events.

To the contrary, it's most beneficial to talk to yourself before during and after your safe behavior. This is not mindless, habitual behavior, but rather a cognitive state called "mindful fluency."

What is Mindful Fluency?

When we are mindful about our actions, we talk to ourselves in different ways. Before starting a job, we might give ourselves a mental reminder that certain safe behaviors are required. Then we might mentally review our actions while doing the work. Afterward, we might look back and evaluate our actions. A post-behavior, mental script should include personal commendation that a safe behavior was performed, especially when it was inconvenient, uncomfortable or inefficient. If some behavior could have been safer, the mental script should include some suggestions for improvement.

"If we do what we are capable of doing we would literally astound ourselves."

Thomas Edison

Benefits of Mindful Behavior

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. Perhaps the most obvious benefit of mindful behavior is that it prevents the automatic mode. How many times a day do you put yourself on automatic pilot? Obviously, this kind of mindless, habitual behavior can lead to a serious unintentional error and an injury. Shouldn't we always be talking to ourselves about what we're doing? By avoiding the automatic mode, we prevent those errors and injuries that occur because we were "just not thinking."



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Another benefit is that mindful behavior allows for discrimination.

It's easy to be on automatic pilot when we're operating in a familiar environment. But what happens when a forklift truck speeds around a corner? We need to discriminate quickly between the normal routine and the suddenly different work context. Mindlessly following the same work routine can prevent this kind of prompt discrimination. Mindless behavior also can make us oblivious to gradual changes in the work environment. Equipment leaks or environmental litter can create serious hazards over time.

But as creatures of habit, we may not recognize a need to adjust our behavior or fix the environment. When we become more mindful of our everyday activities, we notice these gradual changes. Being mindful of what we're doing facilitates generalization, the transfer of behavior from one setting to another (stimulus generalization), or a transfer between behaviors (response generalization). With stimulus generalization, we recognize that a particular behavior is useful in another situation. It's the opposite of stimulus discrimination, when we realize a change in the context calls for a different response. Just as habits prevent stimulus discrimination, they also deter stimulus generalization. Response generalization occurs when the occurrence of one behavior influences the performance of another, similar behavior in the same context. For example, when you mindfully buckle your vehicle safety belt, you might remind yourself to perform a number of other safe-driving behaviors, (e.g., use your turn signal, stop completely at intersections and comply with the speed limit).

Ref: Geller, E. Scott; <http://ehstoday.com/safety/should-safe-behavior-become-habit>

