

Mindfulness: focusing on the present moment for safety

Mindfulness done right

Alaska Tanker Company carries crude oil from Alaska to west coast ports. They launched an initiative on mindfulness and emotional intelligence that greatly reduced workplace injuries and accidental spills.

Part of their strategy included daily mindful moments designed to pay attention in a specific way, on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgment. This practice was designed to rewire brains, so employees would be more engaged and less in the automatic brain.

Here is their strategy:

- *Become aware of when you get distracted*
- *Bring the mind back into focus*
- *Stay focused for longer periods of time*
- *Adjust awareness level when needed*
- *Enhance job performance and reduce complacency*

What is mindfulness and how can it help workplace safety? It's the practice of being consciously aware of what is going on around you and can be an effective strategy against distractions or impulsive acts that can lead to workplace injuries.

Systems thinking for the brain

Let's start with the brain, and a book by Daniel Kahneman called *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. He writes about two systems in the brain: system 1 is automatic, unconscious, and emotional; system 2 is logical, conscious, and slow.

System 1 is more than just the fight or flight response (these are our reactions when we are under extreme stress). It also covers behaviors that are learned to the point that they are automatic, such as responding to a fire drill alarm after having done so numerous times. It also allows us to solve simple math equations, read short and easy text, and determine the source of a sound. System 1 thinking has its place, as in the fire drill example. Training ourselves to respond in a certain way when we are in the fight or flight part of our brain can be beneficial. But if your brain goes to autopilot during regular work, it can lead to injuries.

System 2 involves activities like concentrating your attention on one person in a crowded room, comparing the benefits of two cars you are looking to buy, and looking for specific patterns. This type of thinking requires you to be more present and engaged with what you are doing.

The goal of mindfulness, based on this model, is to stay in system 2 thinking—engaged and present.

Mindfulness benefits

Because brains have neuroplasticity (the ability to form new pathways), practicing mindfulness can result in benefits beyond the ability to stay in the present moment. It helps you become more engaged in what you are doing, which allows you to get more enjoyment from life. Research has shown that practicing mindfulness can enhance your ability to deal with negative events, improving overall resilience. All of this leads to improved well-being, better physical health, and less stress.

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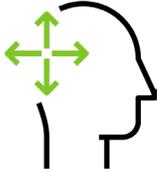
Mindful safety

Here's a list of some ideas for promoting mindfulness for safety:

1. **Focus on breathing.** This is a great technique for mindfulness. Just paying attention to the breath as it goes in and out helps your brain relax and get centered.



2. **Body scan.** This popular meditative technique requires you to be aware of the sensations in your body. You close your eyes and become aware of tension or stress you may be feeling. You can start at your toes and work your way up to the top of your head.



3. **Mindful pause.** This is just stopping to remind yourself to stay in the moment. It is normal for the brain to want to jump around and think about other things, especially when you are performing duties that you have done many times. This time to stop and think for a second brings you back to the present moment.



4. **Actively notice new things.** This requires scanning the environment and noticing anything that may be different or new. This requires your brain to focus on the present.



5. **Count backwards in your mind.** This is a great way to get back in system 2 thinking because it requires us to put items in a different order. This can bring you back to the present and can also help you become calmer if you are experiencing stress.



6. **Color, doodle, or draw.** There's a reason why coloring books have grown in popularity, no matter your age. Coloring is another mindfulness practice that brings you to the present moment and promotes relaxation.



Mindfulness can be a useful strategy for improving workplace safety. The practice can protect against distractions or complacency that can lead to trouble. Equipping employees with a few easy techniques can improve workplace safety while simultaneously enhancing overall wellbeing—a win-win for employers and employees.

Activity ideas

- Think about your workforce and their tasks. Are there ways to build mindful practices into your schedule?
- Several apps provide resources for centering attention, including meditation practices that help rewire your brain to be in the present moment. Some examples are Calm, Headspace, and Insight Timer (some have a subscription fee).
- Bring a mindfulness speaker to an employee meeting or gathering who can instruct on its benefits and provide suggestions for daily practice.