Habit Mastery – A Two Part Series by Sharon Lipinski

Part 2- The Antidote to Habit

Last month, you discovered that a habit is a neural pathway created in the brain by repeating an action over and over again. Sometimes that is great. For example, always wearing the appropriate PPE is a good habit to have. But habits are a double-edged sword and can also be dangerous. Habit allows the brain to hang out in the striatum and function on autopilot, during which time it isn’t paying attention to what it’s doing or what is going on around it. For example, instead of focusing on the task at hand, your employee might be thinking about the fight they had with their spouse before they left the house that morning or what errands they need to run on their way home from work.

Mindfulness is the antidote to familiarity, complacency and habit. The term “mindfulness” gets tossed around a lot, but it’s simple: Mindfulness is noticing. It’s noticing thoughts, feelings, body sensations and the surrounding environment in the moment as they’re being experienced. Mindfulness is why someone can say, “It sounded wrong” or “The vibration felt off.” They stop work and avoid an imminent accident.

Mindfulness is the antidote to habit because it moves the brain from the striatum to the PFC and brings back online all of that advanced functionality. While meditation sometimes is equated with mindfulness, meditation actually is a mindfulness practice. Think of meditation as exercise for the mind. The body’s natural state is to lie still, so to exercise the body, you have to move it. The mind’s natural state is to move, so to exercise it, you must still it. Meditation can help create a stronger mindfulness muscle, which helps people be more mindful while out in the real world. But meditation isn’t the only mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness in the Moment
What I like to call “Mindfulness in the Moment” practices help you to short-circuit familiarity, complacency and habit, and to then bring the PFC back online. Following are two Mindfulness in the Moment strategies you can implement in your workplace immediately.

1. Ask questions. But do not ask yes or no questions. If you’ve ever asked someone a series of questions, and they answer so fast that you wonder if they’re even listening to what you’re saying, they’re not. Before the PFC can engage, the striatum chimes in with the answer. To prompt the brain to move back into the PFC, ask questions like, what would be a wise course of action? How would you manage this job if your child were doing the work? What could go wrong here? How can we do this so that if it goes wrong, no one gets hurt?

These types of questions can’t be answered by the striatum. They involve critical evaluation, during which time the PFC engages.

2. Control the breath. Breathing is a unique bodily function because it can be unconsciously or consciously directed. When breathing is unconsciously directed, the brain stem controls it. The brain stem is responsible for keeping you alive and provides other valuable services, such as the fight-or-flight response. It operates instinctively without a person’s conscious intention.

However, when a person consciously controls their breathing, the PFC is in charge. For this reason, the conscious manipulation of breath has been used by monks for centuries to calm and focus the mind.

There are dozens of different conscious breathing styles that can be used at strategic points during the workday or even while working that will trigger the PFC and prompt the mindfulness your employees need to stay safe on the job.

Tactical breathing is one such exercise that is taught to Navy SEALs and police officers throughout the U.S. It’s also referred to as “box breathing,” and the pattern is to inhale for a count of four, hold the breath in for a count of four, exhale for a count of four and hold out for a count of four. This pattern can be repeated a few times in a row or for several minutes at a time. It’s best to start with just a few repetitions and work up to longer durations as it’s actually quite difficult to do.
Conclusion
Familiarity and complacency are a result of ingrained neural pathways in the brain that allow employees to operate on habit and in the striatum part of their brain, but safety managers can strategically cause the PFC to engage by asking questions that require thoughtful evaluation or by directing employees to use exercises to consciously control their breath. Mindfulness can be another line of defense between your employees and an accident.

About the Author: Sharon Lipinski is the Habit SuperHero and CEO of Habit Mastery Consulting (www.habitmasteryconsulting.com), which helps organizations increase their targeted safety behavior by up to 150%. She is a Certified Corporate Wellness Specialist, certified CBT for insomnia instructor, speaker, TV personality and coach dedicated to helping people create the right habits so they can be happier, healthier and safer at home and in their work.