Habit Mastery – A Two Part Series by Sharon Lipinski

Part 1- How Habits Are Formed

Safety managers know that when an employee has done a particular task many times, that individual can become so familiar with the action that they no longer have to pay close attention while performing the work. As they become complacent in their ability to successfully complete the task, the risk of accident increases. But familiarity is not an emotional state. It’s a physical condition. Familiarity is the byproduct of habit, and a habit is a neural pathway created in the brain through repetition.

How Habits are Formed

When the brain does something for the first time, the prefrontal cortex (PFC) is activated and communicates in a loop with the striatum.

The PFC is the part of the brain that sits above the eyeballs. It’s essential in making decisions, planning ahead, focusing thoughts, paying attention, learning and considering several different yet related lines of thinking. It’s used for evaluating the future consequences of current activities, working toward a defined goal, predicting outcomes, interpreting social cues, moderating social behavior, and determining good and bad, better and best. The PFC helps retain information while performing a task, determine what information is relevant to the task in progress and keep the objective of the task in mind, all at the same time.

These behaviors make up a wish list of employee behavior. Just imagine how much safer and more productive your employees could be if they were using their PFC all the time. The PFC is advanced, powerful and an amazing safety resource, but it’s also intensive in its use of energy and effort. The brain does not want to fire up the PFC if it doesn’t have to or for any longer than it needs to.

The striatum is found in the center interior of the brain at the top of the brain stem. It is the habit, reward and goal-motivated behavior center of the brain.

When the brain is doing something new, it activates all the neurons along the path between the PFC and the striatum. It’s working hard to make sure you’re successful at this action. However, the brain is a quick learner. The next time it repeats that action, it’s a little more familiar. The brain doesn’t have to work quite as hard, so fewer neurons fire. Then you perform the action again and again, and it gets easier and easier. Fewer and fewer neurons fire. When a person has done something often enough that the action is habitual, the PFC is no longer required. It’s just the striatum. On top of that, it’s only the neurons at the beginning of the action and the end of the action that fire.

Habit Creation in Real Life

We’ve all experienced the habit creation process in our own lives. For example, I learned how to drive on a stick shift. Not only did I have to pay attention to the lights and signs and other drivers, but I was also learning how to press in the clutch, put the car in gear and then step on the gas while releasing the clutch with the right pressure. I sat through more than one green light in an utter panic, stalling my car over and over again. In the beginning, driving was stressful and overwhelming. All I could do was focus on driving. But now? I’ll be honest, I’ve gotten in my car in the driveway and arrived at my destination thinking, “I hope I stopped at every light because I don’t even remember driving!”

Once driving becomes a habit, the brain doesn’t have to work very hard; only the neurons at the beginning and the end of the action have to fire, and in the meantime, you can think about other things.

Stay tuned for next month to discover the antidote to habit. You’ll get two strategies you can use to short-circuit familiarity and complacency so you can use habit when it will keep you safe and avoid it when it could be dangerous.

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.