

Health and Safety

RESOURCE

Oregon OSHA • June-July 2017

Volume 53 — online

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Going the Distance

You gave a presentation – “Overcoming Self-Defeating Behaviors” – during the recent Northwest Safety and Health Summit. In what ways do self-defeating behaviors negatively affect the health and safety of workplaces?

Self-Defeating Behavior (SDB) is when we say we want something but then proceed to make sure it doesn't happen. These behaviors keep us from achieving our goals.

Stress is the core element in SDBs. An SDB can start with an incident in our life that we perceive to be negative or stressful. We don't want to feel pain so we react in a way to block or avoid the pain. Then, something else happens that triggers a similar reaction, which sets in motion a pattern of behavior that becomes an SDB. For example, you have had a bad day so you decide that you deserve a drink, even though you have already decided to reduce your drinking. SDBs can range from unhealthy lifestyle behaviors such as substance abuse, smoking, not exercising, or overeating to unrealistic expectations, self-critical thinking, excessive worry, anger, defensiveness, procrastination, disorganization, or perfectionism.

Bea Berry, president, CEO, and founder of Wellness 2000, Inc., says the influence of the digital age – and the distraction that frequently comes with it – is an emerging issue in workplace safety and health.

There is a direct correlation between worker stress and workplace accidents. Stressed workers are more apt to be thinking about their personal problems, like financial debt or a relationship issue, than focusing on the task at hand. Distraction leads to human error, which leads to accident and injury. SDBs tire us out, make us feel sick, and reduce our reaction time, all of which impairs our judgment and increases the risk of injury.

Company: Wellness 2000 Inc.

President and CEO: Bea Berry (bberry@wellness2000.com)

Workforce: 20 employees with offices in Medford; Portland; Vancouver, Wash.; and Boise, Idaho; national network of hundreds of temporary employees for contract support

Clients: 50 core clients with more than 250 locations in the U.S.

Services: Wellness 2000 helps companies develop a comprehensive, professional wellness program to help maintain a safe, healthy, and productive workforce. Services include comprehensive health and wellness screenings, employee assistance programs, training and educational programs, and vaccination services.



What can we do to overcome such negative behaviors?

Awareness is the key!

First, recognize the negative behavior and understand that it began as a coping behavior. But now, you find it has become more hurtful than helpful – preventing you from experiencing a happy, fulfilling life, and from reaching personal goals.

Once identified, begin to make changes to disrupt the behavior and replace it with other more positive and helpful responses. This takes commitment and is a long-term, ongoing process. Always remember that you are worth the effort!

Here are some steps to get started:

- **Identify the negative habit you want to change** and claim responsibility for your thoughts and actions. Write a detailed description including the actual behavior, what the circumstances and/or triggers are that start the SDB, how it impacts your work/life, and what specific things you do or say to avoid doing the healthy behavior.
- **Break the habit.** Identify and list alternative ways to react and behave. Plan and practice your new responses to challenging situations.
- **Make the change. Use the following “thought-stopping” techniques:**
 - Keep your eyes open and be aware when you start doing your SDB.
 - Stop. Do not react. Freeze.
 - Take a step back – think about your goals.
 - Don’t do your SDB!
- **Reward yourself for stopping the SDB.** Do something pleasant and healthy for yourself.
- **Surround yourself with the right people.** Share your plans with your support system and ask them to help you. Change is more likely to happen if there is accountability.
- **Get back on track when you lose your way.** There will be setbacks. That’s OK. Just recommit to making the changes and move forward.



In-person discussions with an expert on physical or emotional issues can help resolve situations and lead to positive, long-term changes in behavior.



Electronic communications are a large part of our lives today, but it's important that we learn to control them and not let them control us. Lack of focus is a safety issue.”

What is the most important thing you've learned over the years about making wellness an important part of an overall workplace safety and health program?

Full engagement and visible participation of the leadership and management is key to success. Promotion of health and safety only works in a culture where top managers place a high priority on employee health and well-being as part of the company's core mission. The next step is to gain support of supervisors and leaders throughout the organization. With the organization providing full support and commitment to wellness, the employees will see the importance of the program and they will participate.

What do you see as an emerging issue or especially important challenge when it comes to creating and maintaining safe and healthy workplaces?

The influence of the digital age on our lives. Our phones and various electronic devices provide powerful tools and present major challenges to both work and lifestyles. The ability to stay in constant contact with co-workers, friends, and family is a great advantage, but can also be a constant distraction keeping us from focusing on an activity or task at hand. Granted, some calls, messages, and alerts are necessary, but many are not. Electronic communications are a large part of our lives today, but it's important that we learn to control them and not let them control us. Lack of focus is a safety issue. The need to answer a cellphone alert or use an app creates a disruption and leads to errors and accidents. We must not only be careful, we must be vigilant in managing distractions in the workplace. Safety first! ■



Some wellness programs can include in-depth fitness evaluations.



A worksite wellness program may include biometric screenings, which provide information about employees' health risks. The screenings include information about height, weight, body mass index, and blood pressure.