

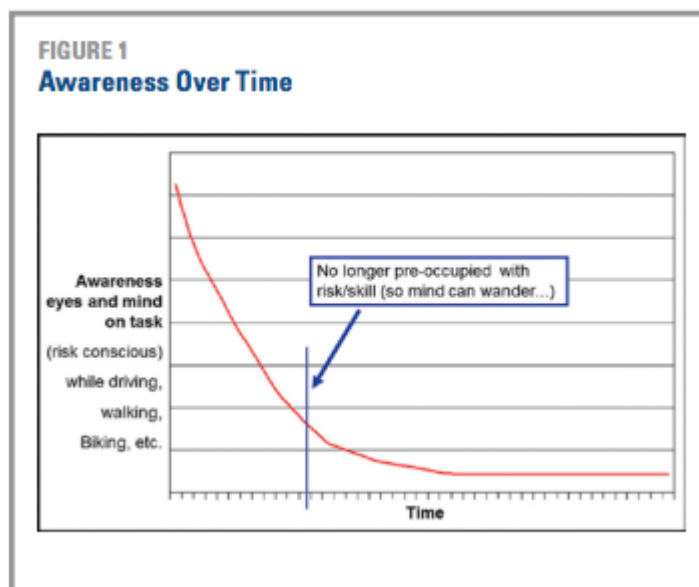
## Complacency The Silent Killer

Driving home recently, I saw a familiar scene starting to build on the side road next to the highway. It was the usual suspects: an ambulance, more than one police car, a fire truck, another on the way, sirens blaring, the street being closed off. In a few minutes I was home. The neighbors were asking if I knew what happened. "No, I don't," I said. "But whatever it was, it did not look good. Two ambulances, many police cars and fire trucks for something minor." "Was it on the highway?" "Are they going to close the highway down?" I answered both people at once. "No, it was on the side road where the bike trail exits.

It looked like they were going to close it down." My young girls were on their bikes. They asked if they could ride over and see what was going on. I said I didn't think that was a good idea. Whatever happened, one thing I was sure of: it wasn't going to be pretty. We eventually heard what happened: a transport truck hit a man on a mountain bike crossing the road, in broad daylight. The truck was not speeding. "How can you get hit by a transport?" one of my friends asked. "Must not have seen it," I offered. "Yeah, I know, but that's what I mean—how can you not see a transport truck?" "Not easy," I agreed. But in my head, I was thinking complacency. A person must be pretty complacent to not see a transport truck. The man must not have even looked. Even just a quick glance probably would have been enough. If he had just slowed down enough to get that quick look, he might still be alive. With violent crime, quite often yelling and screaming can be heard before the gunshots. In the movies, the music changes. But with complacency there is usually no warning; no one is worried about anything, and then suddenly, wham, someone is dead—every day, thousands of times a day, all over the world. Complacency contributes to more unintentional deaths than anything else, especially when combined with rushing, frustration or fatigue. How do people become so complacent that they do not look for transport trucks or that they fall asleep at the wheel? Why do people become so complacent that they do not even think about the risk anymore? For example, when was the last time you worried about your safety as you got behind the wheel? How do people become complacent enough that they will do something they know contributes to making a "mind not on task" error, such as texting while driving? Or complacent enough that they do not use a safety device such as a fall arrest harness that reduces risk if they make an error with balance, traction or grip? And finally, since it happens to all of us, what can we do to fight it?

### Complacency & Mind Not on Task

As noted, complacency causes many problems, but the worst is that it leads to mind not on task. Once the fear is no longer preoccupying, a person's mind can wander (Figure 1).



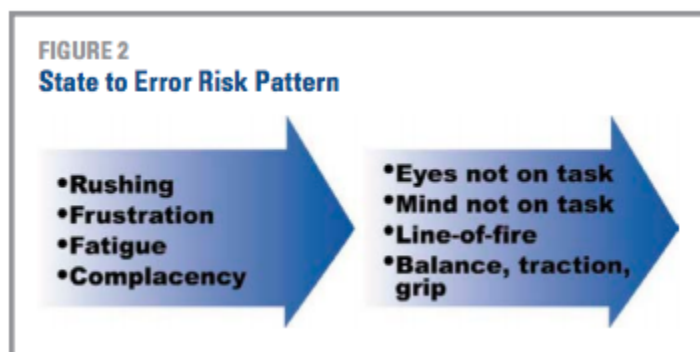
When thinking about something else, other than what one is doing at the moment, a person's star player—the most important asset, the mind—is sitting on the bench. Think about all of the times you have been hurt (not including sports). Can you think of once in your life when you were hurt while thinking about what you were doing and the associated risk at the exact moment you were hurt? If you are like most people, you cannot even think of one instance, let alone 10. Yet we have all been hurt thousands of times, having suffered cuts, burns, bruises and scrapes. Case in point: I asked the question to more than 1,200 linemen at a major electrical power station. Of 1,200 lifetimes, on and off the job, I was given two examples. The average age of the group was 45. That's two examples in 1,200 multiplied by 45 years. So, as noted, our mind is indeed our most important safety device. The catch is that to do many things, such as driving, without getting hurt, we do not always need to think about what we are doing, from a risk perspective. We can do many things on autopilot. So, the first thing people need to do is recognize or accept that their mind will wander if they have done the same thing many times before. Inevitably, it happens to everyone. It does not make you a bad person, just a dead one, or a disabled one or a lucky one. But the situation is not hopeless. Several techniques can be used to fight complacency, and techniques to compensate for complacency leading to mind not on task, and subsequently to line-of-fire or balance, traction or grip errors. These techniques do not require expensive equipment or yellow and black hash marks. But they do take a bit of personal effort. Finally, besides learning these techniques, people must also develop a deep level of respect for complacency and its consequences to prevent it from creeping into their decision making as well.

### Critical Error Reduction Techniques

Although everyone becomes complacent with things they have done repeatedly, the situation is not hopeless. If we are not thinking about what we are doing, our behavior will be what it normally is. It will only change if we make a conscious effort to change it. So, we need to get people (including ourselves) to work on their safety-related habits, such as moving one's eyes before moving one's hands, feet, body or vehicle; testing footing or grip before committing one's weight to it; looking at the second foot when stepping over a cord or something that could cause

a trip (it is usually the second foot that gets caught or hung up); looking twice when the sun is in our eyes to make sure we did not miss something; lightly touching an object to test its heat before grabbing it; and habitually looking for line-of-fire or what might be approaching at a blind intersection.

Of course, it takes effort to develop new habits or to change old ones, but the real bonus is that once habits are changed, a person will do them automatically. Then we will not need to worry as much about complacency leading to mind not on task, leading to other critical errors such as line-of-fire and a loss of balance, traction or grip. However, even though improving safety-related habits will help to compensate for one's mind going off task, it would also be beneficial if we had a way to help people pull the mind back into the present moment. Habits and reflexes alone do not give us the ability to anticipate a dangerous situation and take us completely out of harm's way. For that, we need our mind. However, if you watch other people for state to error risk patterns (see Figure 2), each time you see one, it will make you more aware of what you are doing.



If what you see is sensational enough, you will do more than think about it; you will actually react to it. For example, instead of just driving on autopilot look around a bit more. Notice the driver beside you trying to look at a piece of paper inside a file folder while talking to someone on the phone. Chances are you will either speed up or slow down or move over to another lane to get out of the way. If you did not look or you are not in the habit of looking, you would not necessarily take yourself out of the line-of-fire. So, working on safety-related habits helps to compensate for complacency leading to mind not on task, and looking at others for state to error risk patterns helps to pull our own minds back into the present moment and make us think about the risk of what we are doing at the moment.

### **Complacency & Decision Making**

While these two critical error reduction techniques will reduce injury-causing errors such as eyes not on task, moving into the line-of-fire and losing balance, traction or grip, we also need to help people realize the problems complacency can cause with decision making.

### *Relying on Memory*

One such problem is trusting something important, especially something that is important or critical from a safety perspective, to memory. The result can be as simple as forgetting to bring a life jacket for everyone in the boat, or something more complicated, such as forgetting a change to a well-established routine (driving to and from work). In some cases, the consequences are just wasted time or wasted money. In other cases, if there is enough

hazardous energy around, the consequences can be deadly. So, when you tell yourself, "I must remember this," or "I cannot forget to do that," recognize that right now is the last clear opportunity to take action to help your memory (e.g., note in plain sight, alarm on phone). But once again, complacency can get in the way. Since people do not always forget—or worse, hardly ever forget—it is easy for them to get complacent about doing something to aid their memory, especially if that act takes a bit of effort or seems silly (e.g., if you do not normally take the child to daycare, writing a note on the dashboard that reads, "Daughter in car seat.").

### *Failure to Recognize Change*

Another problem complacency causes is with recognizing change. We can all talk and drive at the same time. We all know it can be a distraction. Sometimes it is not too distracting (i.e., not too dangerous) and sometimes the conversation can be preoccupying (i.e., dangerous). In such situations, it is easy to become complacent and rationalize our actions when it is not dangerous because the risk is low. It only becomes a problem if the conversation becomes more involved. But this can be difficult to recognize because we are now thinking about what is preoccupying our attention (conversation), not on what we are doing (driving). So, even though we all know that driving while preoccupied is dangerous, complacency can lead us to do things that may easily become dangerous without always recognizing it.

### *Overconfidence*

Another fairly obvious problem complacency causes is overconfidence. Many safety devices, procedures or protocols are redundant if no one makes a mistake or nothing goes wrong. We all know that we do not need a life jacket unless we fall in the water. But if a person is a good swimmer, s/he might be less inclined to wear a life jacket; or if an experienced ironworker, less inclined to wear a fall arrest harness, especially if only 6 to 10 ft above ground. However, people can also get complacent about using checklists and permits. They can also become complacent about things such as telling a friend where they are going (e.g., hike in the woods) and when they plan to return. People can even get complacent about holding a handrail, even though most people have fallen while descending stairs before (some have even fallen going up).

### **Conclusion**

So, we need to teach people more than just the critical error reduction techniques they need to learn to fight complacency and to compensate for complacency leading to mind not on task; we also have to teach them to develop a deep respect for complacency and what it can also do to our decision making. As it turns out, the man killed on the mountain bike was not an Indian looking the wrong way, as was originally speculated. He was a ski instructor who had lived in the area for 30 years. More than 300 people came to his wake. Every day, thousands of times a day, complacency claims another victim.

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