

3 crucial precautions to prevent slips, trips and falls

Written by Shawn M. Galloway
Tuesday, 12 October 2010 10:16



As the father of two young children, the idea that they could be injured seriously scares me. Through my extensive experience applying safety tactics in major industrial environments, I have learned the virtues of applying them at home.

In my experience, efforts to prevent injuries are typically targeted towards workplace exposures. However, if an individual is provided with safety information that is portable, they can translate their efforts to other areas of life; not just at work. In most countries, more injuries occur at home and in the community than at work. According to the Canada Safety Council, 90 per cent of the injuries that keep employees away from work occur outside the workplace. National Safety Council states that “Americans are safer at work than they are at home – 11 times safer.” If a business’s employees are severely injured away from work, they will be just as absent the following day, as if the injury occurred at work. This may also be the case if the employee’s family is injured.

In Canada and America, unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death for people aged 1 to 44. One of the top causes of accidental death in and around the home is slips, trips and falls. Many organizations report that this category of incidents is prevalent in their work locations as well. To some of us, this information is not surprising and we continue our best efforts in attempting to prevent these injuries.

What is surprising is that when individuals are asked what precautions they can take to prevent these types of injuries, their responses are usually far from ideal. Most people respond that they try their best to work towards no injuries, but they lack an understanding of the crucial precautions necessary to ensure this result.

Behaviourally-defined prevention strategies

Throughout North America, we recognize the number one cause of unintentional death is motor vehicle accidents. Once our children reach driving age, do we simply place them behind the wheel, wish them luck and ask them to drive safe? Of course not! We provide behaviourally-defined strategies to assist them in their ability to be safe; strategies such as: buckle your seatbelt, maintain a two-second space when traveling behind another driver, keep your hands at 10 and 2, signal for three seconds prior to changing lanes, keep the phone turned off while operating the vehicle, etc. These are all explained in the positive; they detail specific examples of observable behaviour. We can’t tell new drivers what not to do; we must provide precautionary strategies that can be proactively taken.

Similarly, we must do the same to prevent slip-, trip- and fall-related injuries at home since they are often the greatest cause of accidents. If we are successful in helping our family members internalize such strategies, we create a reinforcement model that helps more than the employee; it helps their entire family.

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Climbing the new stairs

Just prior to my family moving into a new home, my oldest daughter had begun to walk up and down the stairs unassisted. In the house we were leaving, the stairs were covered with carpet. The new house had wooden stairs. To see my daughter climb the wooden stairs brought me a great sense of fear. Immediately, I began to help my family develop a habit that, I hope, will last with each of them throughout their life.

Each time she ascended or descended the stairs, I would positively reinforce her use of the handrails. Three weeks later, she saw me climbing the stairs and reinforced my use of the handrails. My daughter began to remind and reinforce me. As my younger daughter began learning to climb the stairs, her sister is offering the same words of encouragement.

Similar to safety cultures in an occupational environment, home safety norms can also provide significant impact. When precautionary strategies are reinforced by co-workers, friends and family, significant steps are made towards the elimination of widespread risk. However, it is not passionate attempts alone that will facilitate success. As W. Edwards Deming said, "It is not enough to do your best. You must know what to do, and then do your best."

Eliminating risk exposure

There are three crucial precautions that are helpful in eliminating risk exposure to slips, trips and falls. Their strategies are applicable regardless of the environment. These simple strategies should be shared with family members. While doing so, consider discussing other possible ideas as well.

Eyes on Path/Task

Simple Strategies

- Scan area for tripping hazards prior to moving in any direction.
- Never put any body parts where you have not first visually scanned.
- When walking, keep your eyes focused on the direction of your travel. (i.e. looking behind before backing up)
- Maintain focus on surroundings, body position and equipment when performing a task.

Footing

Simple Strategies

- Stay on designated walkways.
- Maintain at least one hand on the handrails when using stairs (3-point contact).
- When climbing up/down ladders, use 3-point contact and keep body facing toward ladder.
- Maintain 3-point contact when getting on or off raised surfaces or any equipment.
- Ask yourself, "Is what I'm standing/walking on the safest possible?" Continuously look for materials, equipment, loose gravel or ice in your path.

Maintain Good Housekeeping

Simple Strategies

- Ensure all tools and equipment are organized in your work area.
- Identify & communicate potential hazards to others approaching your area.

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- Keep area clean and free of litter.
- Put all tools, equipment and supplies where they belong.
- Keep cords and hoses rolled up and not loose on the floor.
- Make sure that equipment stored on shelves is flat and nothing is under it.

Investing time to help employees influence and establish desirable behaviours at home has a far-reaching impact. When individuals become safety coaches for their own friends and family, a safety mindset is created and reinforces their habits. This increases the likelihood that these crucial precautions become common practice at work.

Enabling people to identify and internalize strategies that keep them safe wherever they are is one of the most altruistic things that safety professionals can do. After all, isn't this the true goal of safety?

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