

Extension Responds: Stress and Safety

Hazard Control and Human Nature

By Mark Purschwitz

The roots of injury prevention lie in understanding human nature. If we better understand how people think and act and if we take into account people's normal tendencies and propensities, we can be more successful at preventing injuries.

On the farm, at some time, every person will:

- Make a mistake
- Forget to do something
- Get distracted from the task at hand
- Be preoccupied with other thoughts
- Work while tired or sick
- Hurry
- Take a shortcut or risk

Create a safe environment

It is the responsibility of every farmer to create a safe environment so that they and their employees and family members, are less likely to have a serious or fatal injury when they make a mistake.

Of course, it is still critically important that people take all possible safety precautions. People must be properly trained and supervised. People must act responsibly. People should not purposefully do things that put themselves or others at great risk. People should be warned about hazards. However, no one is perfect, and no one can act with perfect safety all the time. We cannot simply tell people to "act safely" and think that is good enough. People need a safe environment.

Inspect everything for safety

Farmers create safe environments by identifying and controlling hazards. They do this by periodically inspecting the entire farm – from top to bottom -- for hazards. A thorough inspection will include the buildings, storage structures, stationary or permanently-installed equipment, field equipment, vehicles, and any other object or location on the farmstead that could harbor a hazard. To minimize the chances of overlooking important areas, the inspector should use a check list such as "Farm Hazard Inspection Checklist," (University of Wisconsin-Extension Bulletin A3619). However, it is important to remember that each farm operation or type of production can have its own unique hazards that will not be covered on a general checklist.

Fix identified hazards

After you have identified hazards, put them into priority order. Hazards like missing shields or exposed wiring could cause death or serious injury and they should be assigned top priority. A hazard that would result in a minor injury gets a lower priority. Farmers should then go through the list methodically. If possible, they should eliminate the hazard – either dispose of an old and unsafe piece of machinery or guard it with proper shields, for example. If the hazard cannot be eliminated entirely, create barriers and acquire and use the proper personal protective equipment and post warnings to remind people about the hazard and to give notice to farm visitors.

No one is perfect. All humans make mistakes, forget to do something, hurry, get distracted or preoccupied or tired. The loss of a life or a limb or a lifetime of pain and disability is a high price to pay for being less than perfect. Creating a safe environment for employees and family members, by controlling hazards, should be an integral part of managing a farm.

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