

# SINCERELY STEFANIE

A compilation of *Sincerely Stefanie* columns by Stefanie Valentice

## The Path to Wellness is a Marathon, Not a Sprint

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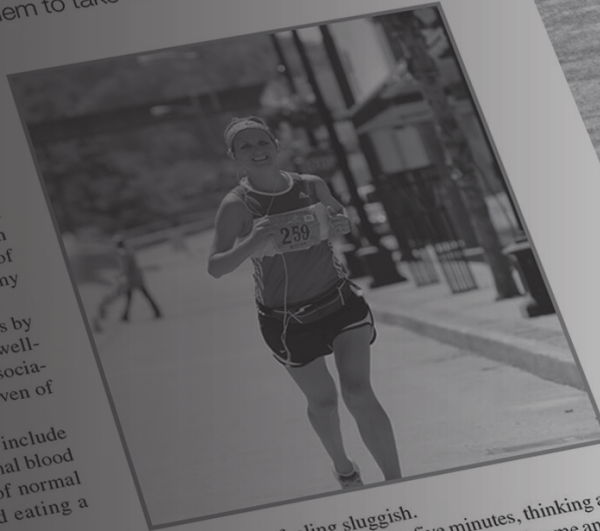
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Each employee will have a something that triggers them to take the first steps. Just like a marathon, an effective wellness program is about taking the first steps and building up to a set of goals each employee has in mind.

Everyone is motivated by something different, and it's about getting them to that triggering moment that will lead them on the path to a healthier lifestyle. Encouraging employees to stick to their goals and acknowledging how far they've come will help employees through a slump.

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EHS

*Stefanie*

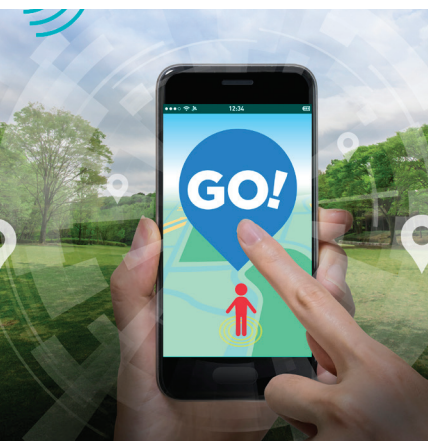
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Stefanie Valentice, *EHS Today* associate editor, is a 2017 ASBPE regional award-winning writer for her monthly column, *Sincerely Stefanie*. Valentice crafts columns for *EHS Today* readers based on her interactions with friends and family as well as her journey to staying fit physically and mentally. Whether she's covering health and wellness, mental health or safety, Valentice relates her personal experiences to *EHS Today's* audience.

# POKÉMON NO! PROTECTING YOUR WORKERS FROM DIGITAL ZOMBIES



Have you seen the digital zombies - in the park, in front of churches and stores, in the street? These aren't your normal, flesh-eating zombies. Rather, it's their thirst for rare imaginary creatures called Pokémon that causes them to stumble around town.

Pokémon Go, which launched on July 6 in the United States, potentially is the start of a new era in the mobile gaming revolution. In the game, players are able to use their phone's GPS to catch imaginary creatures in real-life locations such as parks, on streets or in their households.

The franchise was first popularized in the late 90s, and after many iterations of the game, has circled back to include users both young and old. According to recent data, the Pokémon Go app was downloaded by more than 7.5 million users in the first six days of its release, and more than 60 percent of those who downloaded the app are daily users, a number that quickly is outpacing social media apps such as Twitter.

On multiple visits to my local park shortly after the game was released, I took mental note of just how many people were playing Pokémon Go. Players easily are identified by the way they use their phones - eyes fixated on their screens with slight body movement as the person moves around to see if any Pokémon appear.

Normally, the park is empty, except

for the occasional dog walker, biker or runner. However, there were high school students, 30-something couples and families who aren't regular visitors walking around - not paying attention to the goldfinch or butterflies or greenery or relishing the time spent with their family during the nice summer weather - but rather staring at their phones. They were completely oblivious to their surroundings (hence the term "digital zombies").

Naturally, one of the first things that came to my mind as I was observing this phenomenon was the safety hazards associated with playing augmented reality games.

Because Pokémon Go is becoming so widely adopted, the app not only should cause safety concerns among parents, law enforcement officials and businesses, it also should cause concern within companies and subsequently, safety managers.

From an employee standpoint, playing mobile gaming apps such as Pokémon Go on the job could not only cause a significant loss in productivity but could also cause additional safety hazards when caution is not taken.

Further reinforcement of company guidelines regarding personal cell phone usage and even a total ban not only are critical to keeping productivity up, but safety hazards are reduced when an employee is being attentive and vigilant on the job rather than talking, texting or gaming on their personal phones. This is backed up by a 2009 National Safety Council survey of 469 members who had implemented total cell phone bans; only 1 percent reported a decrease in productivity.

Interactive games could make the job site more dangerous if employees are using GPS tracking to explore unfamiliar areas and are not paying attention to their surroundings or wearing the proper PPE. So, there need to be strict recommendations about where or if personal phone use on the job

site or in the work zone even is permitted, especially if employees use augmented reality apps during breaks.

However, two of the most concerning issues that come to the forefront with Pokémon Go don't involve employee usage but rather the general public and distracted driving as well as an increase in trespassing on job sites.

The National Safety Council estimates 23 percent of passenger vehicle crashes - 1.3 million crashes per year - can be attributed to cell phone talking and texting while driving. This number only is likely to increase with the rise in popularity of augmented reality games.

Fighting the digital zombie apocalypse is only possible with collaboration between employers, workers and safety managers.

The National Safety Council has made multiple recommendations to make work zones safer, including providing barricades, adequate lighting, warning signs and signals where workers on foot must work or travel through. In addition, educating workers on the concept of teamwork in safety and providing adequate high-visibility PPE is key as job sites becoming increasingly dangerous due to outside factors.

While motorists already are not paying attention to their surroundings because of cell phone usage, injuries associated with the rise in popularity of these games are becoming the norm whether in the car or on foot, especially if they choose to trespass in places such as construction sites. The NSC says distracted walking has contributed to more than 11,000 injuries in the last decade.

The issue in particular with Pokémon Go is with the locations players can catch and battle these imaginary monsters.

Churches, parks and baseball stadiums are common areas for players to congregate. Pokémon can appear in front yards, in buildings or on the

street. Police departments are warning the general public about the need to pay attention to where they are walking as well as the dangers of trespassing on private property, work zones and prohibited areas as players follow the game's GPS movements.

Additional warning signage, lighting and fencing might need to be used as users are tempted to access construction sites and work zones. Unfortunately, people can read but getting them to actually listen is the bigger problem.

In the end, it's clear that technology rapidly is evolving and crossing over into real-world situations with the introduction of augmented reality games such as Pokémon Go. Employers, safety managers and workers alike will have to continue to strategize new ways to prevent injuries from occurring with the increase in cell phone use. In addition, government bodies need to continue to enforce fines and sentences regarding distracted driving during motor vehicle operation as well as trespassing laws.

What also comes down to is a need for the general public to recognize not only the risks associated with cell phone usage and augmented reality apps but also what value they are getting from constantly staring down at their phones. As for these digital zombies, they need to get some brains.



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**SINCERELY STEFANIE**  
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# THE PATH TO WELLNESS IS A MARATHON, NOT A SPRINT

*In the long run, a healthy workplace is about finding what works for each individual employee and encouraging them to take the first steps.*

Most people wouldn't know this by looking, but I have high cholesterol. Very high. The first time I discovered this was five years ago during an employee-sponsored wellness event.

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The seven factors including in AHA's metrics include not smoking, being physically active, having normal blood pressure, having normal blood glucose, being of normal weight, having normal cholesterol levels and eating a healthy diet.

To put it into the workplace perspective, the report states cardiovascular issues result in \$120 billion in lost productivity annually, which makes an effective health and wellness program especially crucial to an employer.

What event or incident is going to trigger someone to want to improve from a health standpoint? Is it gym access, a weight-loss program or nutrition education? It differs on an individual basis. For me, it was a drive to get healthy while I'm young enough to prevent health problems later on in life.

I tried eating healthy and exercising with minimal satisfaction. Fast forward to my first 5K race in 2013. This time something clicked. Embarrassed with my performance, I set a goal to beat my record the following year.

The running community, the



challenge and, most importantly, the health benefits of running were enough to make me motivated to succeed. I joined a local running club, began tracking my progress and took pride as seconds came off the clock.

It all culminated this past June when I ran one of Weather Channel's 15 Toughest Marathons: the Hatfield McCoy Marathon. After four months of training, trial and error and countless miles on my feet, I knew I could do it.

I struggled throughout the event in 90-degree heat, something for which I did not prepare. In fact, I almost quit halfway through. At that point, the heat and humidity had fully set-in and I was feeling sluggish.

I stood at mile 13 for close to five minutes, thinking about how much work I had put into it, how far I had come and how much I had accomplished since that first 5K. I knew I could finish. I pushed on, and, when I crossed the finish line, I smiled.

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has in mind.

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# GETTING TO THE ROOT CAUSE OF DEPRESSION

*Rising suicide rates in the United States demonstrate the need for companies to implement mental health programs and initiatives.*

The words suicide and depression are singular. The person feels that way or commits the act for various different reasons, but in reality, the effects of those actions or feelings are plural. Everyone close to that individual is affected, from family members to friends to co-workers.

From 1999 through 2014, the age-adjusted suicide rate in the United States increased 24 percent, and the majority of the increase occurred from 2006 to the present, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

The best managers and leaders hire based on whether that person is going to fit into the culture. Why? Because we often spend more time with our co-workers than our families. In fact, a person spends an average of 60 percent of their waking hours in the workplace, which means we get pretty close whether or not we choose to.

Therefore, there is a serious need for companies and leaders to evaluate what is happening — not only from a safety standpoint but also

from a mental health standpoint — making sure close relationships with workers are forged so that individuals suffering from depression or other issues get the help they need before it's too late.

It is imperative that we make the time to know our co-workers so they go home every night knowing someone cares. When I talk about getting to the root cause, it means trying to find out why an employee is feeling a certain way, being comfortable enough to talk to them and for them to trust that you'll keep it confidential before that hopelessness gets hold of them and they feel like there are no more options.

At this year's Safety Leadership Conference in Pittsburgh, executives addressed the audience about characteristics or attributes safety professionals must have. Among those mentioned were empathy, being genuine and having compassion. These key attributes could help employees to be safe on the job, and they also could be the pathway to an effective mental

health program in the workplace.

If the simple fact that caring for a fellow co-worker or employee isn't enough, the numbers prove it.

Depression costs more than \$51 billion in absenteeism from work and lost productivity and \$26 billion in direct treatment costs on an annual basis, according to nonprofit Mental Health America.

In addition, polls show fewer than half of employees who have access to a mental wellness program at work utilize it. Studies indicate mental health issues stay under the radar because the employee is afraid of jeopardizing his or her chances for promotion or because of the perceived stigma attached with mental illness.

The topic of mental illness only is going to become progressively more important to an EHS professional as our nation's healthcare system evolves and people affected by depression or other mental health disorders are left in the dark when it comes to treatment.

State funding for mental illness dropped more than \$1.8 billion between 2009 and 2011, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. This emphasizes the need for companies and leaders to maintain relationships with each worker, to be fully invested in every employee and to show they genuinely care for their welfare.

The Partnership for Workplace Mental Health lists ways to strengthen or implement workplace mental health programs including:

- Conducting an employee awareness program about depression, anxiety and substance abuse.
- Educating managers about mental disorders.
- Establishing an easily accessible behavioral health system.
- Offering mental health screening.
- Integrating healthcare services to improve outcomes and reduce costs.
- Leveraging purchasing power to



obtain quality healthcare services through joining a business coalition.

- Collaborating with other employers or stakeholders.
- Creating initiatives with mental health clinicians in your community.

A recent Harvard Medical Study showed that in the long-term, employers benefit when mental health care initiatives are implemented, not only from a workforce perspective but fiscally as well.

So, next time you're at a job site, really listen to co-workers. Has anything changed? How are they feeling? Most importantly, show them you care. That reassurance could make their life worth living.

Depression could affect workplace morale and productivity.

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America lists common symptoms on their website.

**They are:**

- Persistent sad, anxious or "empty" mood.
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism.
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities, including sex.
- Decreased energy, fatigue, feeling "slowed down."
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions.
- Insomnia, early-morning awakening or oversleeping.
- Low appetite and weight loss or overeating and weight gain.
- Thoughts of death or suicide, suicide attempts.
- Restlessness, irritability.
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and pain for which no other cause can be diagnosed.



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# DON'T RUN WITH SCISSORS



*You know what they say when you assume...*

**B**efore I started writing about safety, I didn't give it much thought. I wasn't reckless or careless. I guess I just was never aware.

I knew about OSHA, but I never knew there were people whose main role it was to make sure I go home safe every day. I've worked for small companies and always assumed safety fell to the HR manager.

I assumed the HR manager worked with insurance to make notes in the employee handbook, and we just signed it to say we wouldn't do anything stupid on the job and follow OSHA regulations. I was naïve to think more didn't go into keeping employees safe.

Maybe it comes from having a false sense of security, or maybe the people I came into contact with throughout my life were able to protect me and make sure I knew what the meaning of the phrase "running with scissors."

Whatever the reason, you know what they say about people who assume...and I admit I'm guilty.

The expression "running with scissors" originates from a 1950s/1960s public safety film marketed to children about hidden dangers and how to address them, according to sources.

Now that I am encountering people and companies who make the wrong calls, and I see the OSHA reports about the grave consequences they face such as employee injury or death, I am more conscious about

what I do in my everyday life to make sure I take care of myself and others.

In August, I purchased a 170cc scooter to ride around town, perform errands and enjoy longer destination rides on the weekends. Under Ohio law, that meant I needed a motorcycle endorsement.

Most people would take the standard test and be done with it, but I wanted to be safe. I researched the statistics; motorcycles are 27 times more likely to be in an accident than a car and only 62 percent of fatally-injured motorcycle drivers wore helmets.

I bought the appropriate gear (gloves, boots, helmet with face shield, etc...) and signed up for a class from the Motorcycle Safety Foundation.

Two techniques stuck out to me during the class: Search, Evaluate, Execute (SEE) and Slow, Look, Press and Roll. These two are very similar with their message, but both are able to be implemented into everyday situations in order to stay safe. I not only became a proficient novice rider, I took that knowledge and implemented it at home, at the grocery store, while running and in my everyday life.

I now search my surroundings before I walk into a room, park or establishment. I evaluate the situation — Is it safe? What can be done to make it safe for me and others? If it is not, who can I tell or what can I do? Once I determine what I should do, I execute on the decision.

For my personal safety and the safety of others, my next step to being safe was becoming CPR-certified.

Since I began running in local parks on single-track, secluded trails, I admit that I have developed an innate fear of not being prepared if something happens to me or another runner (I only run with groups on these trails). When my employer announced that a CPR/first aid course was going to be offered, I jumped at the chance.

The instructor began the course by asking our group of 10 whether our office had an emergency plan

should a medical emergency occur. His question was met with that dangerous phrase "I don't know." Does everyone know where the first aid kit is located in our office and what is in it? "I don't know." Does the office have an AED? "I don't know."

He then stressed why it's so important for someone to respond: more than 90 percent of cardiac arrests outside the hospital result in death, and only 32 percent of those who experience cardiac arrest get help from a bystander, according to the American Heart Association.

This is when I came to the realization that I have been running with scissors. I don't want to be that bystander who doesn't know CPR. I don't want to be that person who can't lend a helping hand in an emergency situation. I don't want to be that person who doesn't know.

Taking these training courses has made me accept personal responsibility for my safety and others. I no longer assume that I am safe. I no longer am complacent or naïve. I know that if I search, evaluate and execute every situation, I might be able to find those hidden dangers and address them.

In the end, I just don't want to be caught running with scissors.

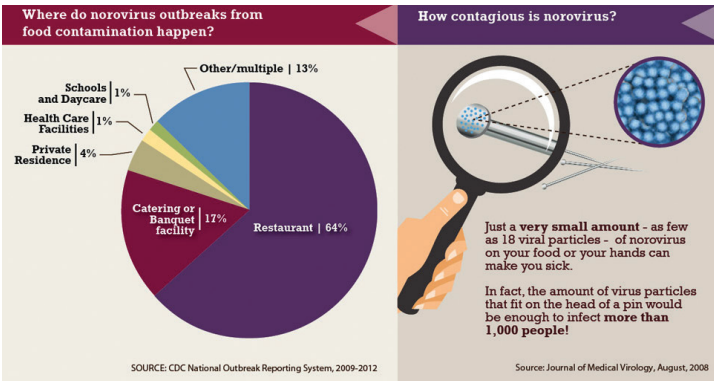


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# EMPLOYEES SHOULD STAY HOME WHEN SICK

*Even when you think you aren't contagious, you might still be.*



I had an eventful holiday season. I went to three different houses, visited my family and watched as many of them came down with the stomach flu.

The issue began with my niece two days before Christmas Eve. Usually bubbly and charismatic, she was confined to her bed. Sparing the details, my mother took care of her, cleaning up the mess and making sure she had plenty of fluids.

Fast forward to Christmas Eve and Christmas. My mother stayed at home, having contracted the same thing my niece had. In the days that followed, my husband, stepdad, father, brother-in-law, nephew and stepsister seemingly all came down with the exact same strand, experiencing similar symptoms and signs.

All of the aforementioned family members had been in contact with my niece at some point either on Christmas Eve or Christmas day.

Luckily, I was able to avoid it and spent time vigorously disinfecting my house.

The stomach flu, also known as the norovirus or acute gastroenteritis, is an ornery little virus that contributes to 19 to 21 million illnesses, 56,000 to 71,000 hospitalizations and 570 to 800 deaths in the United States each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Unlike your traditional flu, the norovirus causes stomach inflammation, and annual shots only protect against the respiratory variety.

It also is incredibly easy to contract. Research shows the virus can live on certain surfaces for weeks. Some ways to contract the stomach flu include:

- Eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated.
- Touching surfaces or objects and then putting your hand or fingers in your mouth.
- Direct contact with a person who is infected.

While many of these recommendations stem from households with children, these same things translate to the workplace as well.

A National Health Interview Survey found the flu contributes to 200 million days of lost productivity and 75 million days of missed work. While this doesn't break out respiratory forms from the norovirus, one thing is for certain: if you are showing any symptoms, you should stay home from work.

Based on CDC data from 2010, more than one in four employees worked while ill with H1N1 during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, resulting in the estimated infection of 7 million co-workers with H1N1.

With more than 80 percent of infections spread through hand contact and the easy transmission of the norovirus (See Infographic), the recipe for an outbreak at work is as easy as pie.

Lisa Delaney, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health associate director, emergency preparedness and response, provided insight about communicable diseases and pandemics to attendees at the National Safety Congress and Expo in October 2016.

She said there are three areas on which employers should focus on: protecting employee health, keeping the business in operation and assuring function of the surrounding community.

Aside from encouraging vaccina-

tion, employers can help prevent flu or communicable disease transmission if they:

- Send sick employees home.
- Emphasize respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene.
- Perform routine environmental cleaning.
- Increase social distancing or rotate hours during peak flu season to reduce transmission.

In addition, if you are no longer experiencing symptoms, you still might be contagious. Annie Pryor, author of *StoptheStomachFlu.com* and Ph.D in biochemistry, writes on her website that a person who has the stomach flu still can be contagious for at least three days after their symptoms have stopped.

Whether or not my niece was "Patient Zero" in my family cannot be proven despite the timing of the family outbreak. My mother commented that everyone at her workplace was sick as well.

Still, the fact remains that staying at home when you're experiencing symptoms – whether it's cold, the flu or some other illness – is the best course of action. Not only could you prolong your recovery by not getting proper rest, you also could cause lost work days across the company and productivity could suffer as a result.

So, do everyone a favor and stay home.



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**SINCERELY STEFANIE**  
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# STRESS AND HEART HEALTH

*Creating a positive safety culture in the way you communicate with employees could be beneficial when it comes to reducing stress and improving cardiovascular health.*

I'm sure we all can pinpoint what makes us stressed, whether it's our job, money, a relationship or a combination of internal and external factors.

Just in time for American Heart Month, researchers have released a study linking higher activity in the stress center of our brains, the amygdala, to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

In the study, 293 patients received PET/CT scans and were then tracked for an average of 3.7 years to see if they developed cardiovascular disease. During this period, 22 patients had events including heart attack, angina, heart failure, stroke and peripheral arterial disease. Researchers found that those with higher amygdala activity had a greater risk of heart disease and developed problems sooner than those with lower activity, proving that stress and heart health are linked.

Stress not only can cause various health problems, but it also could lead to a safety shortcut when an employee is feeling rushed, leading to a near-miss or injury. Stress reduction, cardiovascular health and workplace productivity also go hand-in-hand.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Foundation, the nonprofit arm of the government-run CDC, estimates that by 2030 annual direct medical costs associated with cardiovascular diseases will rise to more than \$818 billion, and lost productivity costs could exceed \$275 billion.

So, what can EHS professionals do to help both themselves and employees reduce stress?

The American Heart Association lists four ways individuals can manage stress, but these four techniques also can be translated to the workplace through how a company manages its relationship and communication with its employees:

## 1. POSITIVE TALK

Being positive when communicating with workers can increase

employee morale and subsequently could help them control stress. Instead of pointing out what they did wrong when it comes to safety, identifying what they are doing right is just as important.



## 2. EMERGENCY STRESS STOPPERS

Stressful situations are encountered every day not only on the clock but also on the road and in public places. The AHA has identified what it calls emergency stress stoppers, or ways to manage certain problems or issues. Once again, how you communicate and handle a situation is key to managing stress for both you and your workers.

- Count to 10 before you speak.
- Take three to five deep breaths.
- Walk away from the stressful situation, and say you'll handle it later.
- Go for a safety walk.
- Be accountable. Don't be afraid to say "I'm sorry" if you make a mistake.
- Set your watch five to 10 minutes ahead to avoid the stress of being late.
- Break down big problems into smaller parts.
- Stop and think instead of jumping into action.

## 3. FIND YOUR PASSION

When stress makes you feel bad, do something that makes you feel good, the AHA says. Finding a hobby or passion is a natural way to keep calm, and encouraging your employees to do the same could turn out to be beneficial.

## 4. RELAXATION

Working long hours is commonplace in the United States. So, making sure employees (and you) take breaks is crucial to managing stress. The AHA says to relieve stress, relaxation should calm the tension in your mind and body. This doesn't mean working through your lunch or running errands during your limited free time. Exercises promoting relaxation such as yoga, tai chi and meditation could be offered through a corporate wellness program and lead to a happier workforce.

Stress-conscious EHS professionals and companies might be the key to a healthier and more productive workforce. According to the CDC, one in three adults, or 86 million people, have some form of cardiovascular disease that is preventable through lifestyle changes or medical condition management.

So, when pressure is bearing down and a deadline is approaching, stopping to think about positive communication methods and employee well-being could prove beneficial. In the end, sometimes it's better to just have a heart.



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**SINCERELY STEFANIE**  
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# DON'T BE CAPTAIN HINDSIGHT

*When EHS professionals have to step up and play the part of safety superhero, one power they shouldn't have to use is hindsight.*

One of my favorite TV shows is "South Park." While it's raunchy and constantly borders on crossing the line, it's great social commentary in some cases.

One particular episode I've seen about a dozen times features a superhero named Captain Hindsight. This fictional character sticks in my mind because the message or symbolism of him rings

*should have built it with a more reinforced structure, so a helicopter could have landed on it.*

**Fireman:** Yes, of course.

**Captain Hindsight:** And then you see that building to the left?

**Fire Captain:** Yes.

**Captain Hindsight:** *They shouldn't have built that there. Because now you can't park any fire trucks where you really need to. [stands up tall] Well, looks like my job here is done. Goodbye everyone! [takes off]*

**Fireman:** Thank you, Captain Hindsight!

He has a penchant for pointing out the obvious and stating what should have, could have or would have been done to prevent the incident.

"Do you have any idea what a curse it is to have perfect 20/20 hindsight?" Captain Hindsight says. "As soon as something bad happens, I immediately know how it could have been avoided. I can't take it anymore!"

As EHS professionals, hindsight is not a superpower, not something at which to laugh and it's most certainly something we don't want to use at any point. Just like Captain Hindsight, after an accident occurs, an investigation will show the root cause, leading you to say how it should have, could have or would have been prevented.

What does it mean when a company or EHS professional needs to use hindsight? It means there was an oversight in the safety process that should have been identified before the incident happened, and the consequences could be far-reaching.

This is why it is imperative to monitor job sites and evolve your safety plans and procedures—whether you're shifting locations, adding new equipment or hiring additional workers.

Simply waiting until something happens to say, "we should have had training on this," or "we could have avoided this if we did something this way," makes your company sound like it doesn't nurture a positive

safety culture and doesn't care about its employees.

In "South Park," characters applaud Captain Hindsight after he spews a string of scenarios in which the situation would not have occurred. He responds with "It's not a blessing, it's a curse." While it's comical in the show, it's no laughing matter when you relate this to workplace health and safety. It's not useful to see hazards or risks after an accident already has happened.

We all have hindsight. It's easy to point out what should have, could have or would have been had we not taken those extra steps to ensure worker safety. This is why company leaders and EHS professionals need to play the part of safety superheroes and take responsibility for worker wellbeing.

Even though, in some cases, it's hard to substantiate to workers the need or value of safety training or the reasons why some job tasks are performed a certain way, failure to do so could lead to an accident and, eventually, having to use hindsight. And that's no way to save the day.



true when it comes to regretting a situation and having to deal with consequences that could have been avoided with some prior analysis or foresight.

Captain Hindsight's escapades date back to 2010 and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The "South Park" fan wiki describes him best as "a superhero who 'helps' people in need by appearing at the scene to lecture them about what they did wrong to get into a certain accident and what methods they could have used to avoid it, instead of actually rescuing them."

It's humorous when he offers his two cents, almost immediately after something has gone awry, such as in one scene, a building fire.

**Fireman:** *There's people trapped in that burning building, Captain Hindsight. And the fire is so massive we can't get to them.*

**Captain Hindsight:** *Hmmm... You see those windows on the right side? They should have built fire escapes on those windows for the higher floors, then people could have gotten down. And then on the roof: they*



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# A CATALYST FOR DISASTER

*Ending independent agencies such as the Chemical Safety Board could result in history repeating itself. Safety leaders need to come together and be the voice for workers.*

*"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning." — Albert Einstein*

Safety professionals sometimes cannot agree on the exact sequence of circumstances which led to a particular accident, but studying why it happened inevitably helps us come to a better understanding.

It's imperative to know the root cause, if it was handled correctly and what we can do to prevent it from happening in the future. That's what makes federal agencies such as the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and Chemical Safety Board (CSB) so crucial. Yet, the FY2018 budget proposal says otherwise.

The CSB, which is independently run, has been investigating major disasters such as the Deepwater Horizon spill and West Fertilizer explosion since 1998.

The agency's budget can be compared to the revenue of a small business: \$12 million. And that's pennies in the pool of federal discretionary spending.

Let's take a look at discretionary spending, or the money Congress decides to allocate to various programs and initiatives each year. Take a look at the pie chart in Figure 1.

Military spending was at \$598.49 billion of the total \$1.1 trillion mandated by Congress.

The total Department of Defense funding is more than \$200 billion more than our country's \$350 billion deficit. This poses some questions such as:

- Why is spending in this area so high?
- Why do we need to spend more?
- Why the Chemical Safety Board?

When compared not only to military but to all other areas of spend-

ing, \$12 million is a drop in the bucket, especially when you consider the personal net worth of many of our Congress members.

CSB's Chairperson Vanessa Allen Sutherland released the following statement after the proposed cut was announced:

*The U.S. Chemical Safety Board (CSB) is disappointed to see the president's budget proposal to eliminate the agency. The CSB is an independent agency whose sole mission is to investigate accidents in the chemical industry and to make recommendations to prevent future accidents and improve safety.*

*For over 20 years, the CSB has conducted hundreds of investigations of high consequence chemical incidents, such as the Deepwater Horizon and West Fertilizer disasters. Our investigations and recommendations have had an enormous effect on improving public safety. Our recommendations have resulted in banned natural gas blows in Connecticut, an improved fire code in New York City and increased public safety at oil and gas sites across the state of Mississippi. The CSB has been able to accomplish all of this with a small and limited budget.*

The American public is safer today as a result of work of the dedicated and professional staff of the CSB. As this process moves forward, we hope that the important mission of this agency will be preserved.

I didn't write this to argue about how we should spend federal money, but rather to make you question how we are and why.

Facts are facts. We know we've come a long way since the Industrial Revolution when it comes to workplace safety and rights, but we also know we have a way to go. Cutting

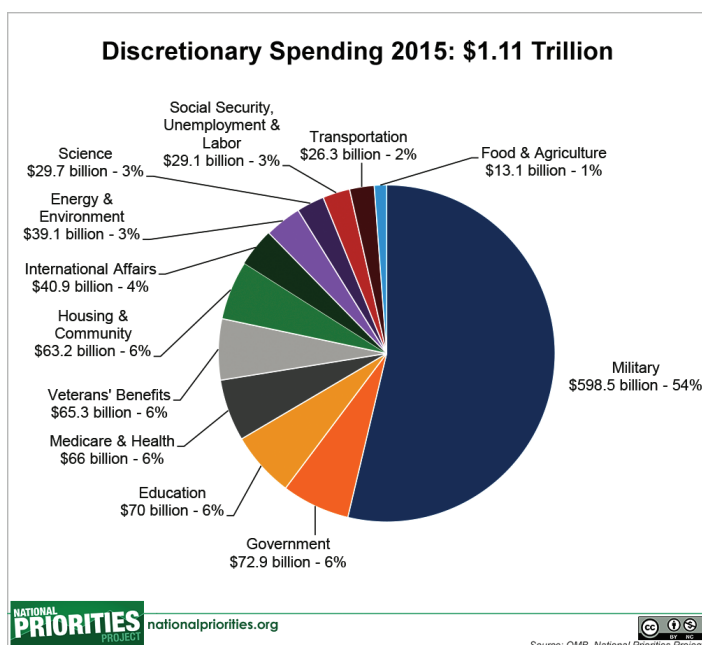
independent, non-regulatory agencies only will set us back and potentially do nothing to prevent the same incidents from occurring over and over again – or history from repeating itself.

And if there's anything thing we can agree upon, it's that these agencies are critical to maintaining a safe work environment for millions of Americans.

If our nation's leaders think that \$12 million is going to make or break the bank, then our mission – our duty as concerned citizens and safety leaders – is to question why they think that way.

*"The tyranny of a prince in an oligarchy is not so dangerous to the public welfare as the apathy of a citizen in a democracy."*

— Charles de Montesquieu



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# PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY SANDWICHES

*When it comes to resolving worker conflicts, poor decisions or productivity issues, proper nutrition could play a role.*



During a brunch in April, I discussed safety with a close friend who happens to own his own business.

He built his company from the ground up, and in an effort to provide opportunities to those in need, he employs some workers who would not be able to gain employment elsewhere. With this comes a set of challenges. For the most part, his workers' experiences vastly are different from those who had a grounded upbringing and who didn't have to worry about their next meal.

Their decisions, my friend told me, are based on what they learned based on a need to survive. So, on a typical workday, their thought process and the reasons these workers do certain things may be a poor choice while initially making sense to them.

One particular incident my friend described stuck out, not just because of what happened, but because of how he handled it.

A worker came into his office one day, complaining that a fellow colleague was threatening to take his lunch. My friend told the worker, "I'm going to do something about it. Wait 30 days, and if you don't see a change, please let me know."

My friend began to recognize this as a widespread issue. Employees had been arriving to work late complaining they were hungry. Because they were so focused on their hunger, they were inattentive at work and unable to recognize safety hazards. In addition, productivity wasn't as high as he knew it could be.

Rather than disciplining the instigator, my friend set the work to solve the larger issue at hand; Why were these workers hungry, and what could be done about it?

The problem, he discovered, was one of a socioeconomic nature. The wage he was paying his workers was being spent on things they thought they needed more at the expense of their own health and wellbeing.

For my friend, the solution was

simple. He called a meeting for his workers, explaining to them that he was implementing a new incentive. Now, he told them, he would provide granola bars and other snack items for breakfast and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch.

Fast forward 30 days. In a follow-up meeting with the complainant, my friend asked if anything had changed. He asked the worker if the work environment seemed better. The worker responded with a resounding yes. Not only was he never asked again for his lunch, his fellow co-workers seemed happier with this new perk.

Overall morale at the company improved because workers became more focused, alert and on task. Workers recognized management cares about them and are respectful to one another.

Because of these two things, productivity increased and the number of workplace accidents decreased.

When it comes to the human factor, identifying why employees make certain decisions and finding unconventional ways to correct them not only could improve your bottom line, they could help reduce the number of accidents as you begin to understand the thought processes behind those choices.

For my friend, a health and wellness initiative directly contributed to an increase in positive decision making and productivity. He identified a lurking issue that many others would miss and, by correcting it in an unconventional matter, he was able to cause a chain reaction that produced measurable results for his bottom line.

A 2016 *Huffington Post* article by David Vollmer, CEO of Isolator Fitness and Young Entrepreneur Council member, examined how hunger affects the worker and indicates that proper nutrition is second only to adequate sleep.

Through the implementation of meal-prep strategies, workers not only are less likely to experience a crash later in the day and have

greater concentration for job tasks, positive workplace relationships will be fostered, Vollmer says.

The article listed the following ways companies can promote healthy eating in the workplace:

- Hosting potlucks – having employees share healthy recipes once or twice per month.
- Encourage meal planning – teaching employees about the benefits of planning out their next meal.
- Setting a lunch period – giving employees a break and chance to refuel and socialize.
- Leading by example – eating nutritious meals and living a healthy lifestyle to show how it can help workers.
- Using real figures – demonstrating financial benefits from company healthcare providers.

Managers and supervisors need to take the time to understand the underlying causes of poor decision making and conflicts because who knows when something as simple as a peanut butter and jelly sandwich could be the key to a safer, happier and more productive workplace.



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# 10 DAYS LATER

*Being your brother's keeper only isn't about practicing safe work habits. It means being there for them during personal struggles as well.*

It was a cold day in January 2014 – the kind where your lungs burn as soon as you breathe the air. At the time, I was working close to home. Our friend Big Mike, a tall, hulky, teddy bear with an infectious laugh that rose from the depths of his stomach, asked to take a shower at our house.

Big Mike was one of our closest friends. So, we didn't think twice about the request. He stopped by around noon, when I was home for lunch, and took care of what he needed to do.

When he was ready to leave, he did something he never did before. He kissed me on the cheek and said, "Goodbye, I'll see you in 10 days."

Ten days later, my husband and I were attending his funeral.

Suicide hits you like a ton of bricks, especially when it happens to someone close to you. Your mind rewinds like a VCR tape and you play-back every moment you had with that person trying to figure out what signs were there.

Mike always had been the guy with the outgoing, grab-life-by-the-horns personality. Nothing seemingly ever bothered him, and whatever was thrown at him, he took it in stride. However, like everyone else, he had his personal demons.

Just a year earlier, my husband and I had been spending three to four days a week with Mike. It wasn't a surprise to see him walk through the door at dinnertime. We always saved a seat for him.

When we weren't with him, we were texting about our upcoming plans. But slowly, over that year, something changed. Big Mike increasingly became distant. We just chalked it up to being busy with our jobs and family – my husband and I were enjoying our first year of marriage. We spent less time with Big Mike, but, at that time, it wasn't something that seemed concerning.

Big Mike attended our first year of marriage anniversary party in late

September 2013. He was quiet, reserved and made an offhand comment to me about how he would never be married.

Again, something we didn't think twice about. Mike always was candid with us, or so we thought.

Just before Christmas, we saw a movie together. At one point, he was adamant about getting a group picture together with my husband and another of his close friends at the cigar shop.

We thought we knew about his personal struggles, but we didn't think we would wake up one cold, January morning to find a post from his brother announcing that Big Mike had died. After all, we spent so much time together. Big Mike and my husband spoke about going to Niagara Falls for their 30th birthdays, even though the milestone events were more than a year away. I had promised to give my dog Napoleon a crazy haircut if Mike earned As for the business classes he was taking.

Mental illness plagues the workplace and the home, and the numbers prove it. Mental Health America estimates that depression, when left untreated, costs \$51 billion in absenteeism from work and lost productivity and \$26 billion in direct treatment costs.

In a 2012 Forbes.com article, author Noch Noch Li identifies the following signs of depression or mental illness in the workplace:

- Increasing frequency of sick days
- Loss of motivation
- Changes in social behavior in the workplace
- Incomplete duties or tasks
- Fatigue, tiredness, excessive yawning
- Increasing number of absent days for other reasons

The reality is that many people who have thoughts about harming or killing themselves never seek help or try to hide it. For Big Mike, we knew



**4 out of 10** people have received mental health treatment



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that he had internal struggles, but, for reasons that we will never know, he wasn't fully open about it with us this time, and the best thing we could do was be there when he needed us whether it was providing a place to shower or a seat at the table.

In the safety profession, if the "you are your brother's keeper" adage rings true, then communicating, and getting to know your employees enough to recognize changes in behavior, educating them about the symptoms and encouraging someone to seek help should be a no-brainer. After all, many of us spend more time on a daily basis with our coworkers than we do with our families. So, being there when a worker is struggling internally is one of the best things you can do.



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