



Short Safety Subject

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Haste Can Be Hazardous

Many times within discussions following an injury incident one hears "He just hurried too much" or "She was in a hurry and got careless." In both of these statements, a single cause, being in a hurry, is identified. The implication is that if that single cause were eliminated, the "accident" would not have happened. Unfortunately, as is the case with many things in life, the situation is generally more complicated. When actual incident scenarios are reviewed, it invariably comes to light that several factors played a role in "causing" the accident. Being in a hurry or feeling rushed may be a major contributor by compounding the effect of other factors involved.

Certainly the fact that the individual was in a hurry or feeling rushed played a part. We all have our own experiences with haste. Items are forgotten, gates are not locked, and water is left on, among many other nuisance results. In injury incidents, the effect of hurrying or rushing may be much more profound. Two important factors that play a role in many injury incidents are risk perception and decision-making. The stress brought on by being in a hurry can affect both of these factors.

Risk perception can be thought of as a person's judgment on the probability of injury occurring from a particular act or behavior. Many people judge jumping off a bridge while tied to a large rubber band to be very risky. They believe that the probability of getting hurt is very high. This thought is consistent with what has been learned of people's perception of risk. Individuals usually assign higher risks to unfamiliar activities. The reverse is also true. Individuals assign lower risks to familiar activities. In addition, people are generally not very accurate judges of risk anyway, overestimating some situations and underestimating others. These tendencies are not in the farmer's favor. A farmer who uses a piece of equipment for a length of time is prone to thinking that the situation is less dangerous now than it was when he first started using it. While the farmer has more experience with the equipment, that experience does nothing to lessen the intrinsic danger of the machine. In addition, the machine may not be very well maintained, which would actually make the machine more dangerous to use. Thus, the farmer's perception of risk is lower, while the actual situation is more dangerous. When lack of time to get the job done puts stress on the farmer, this inaccurate perception of the risk involved can have serious consequences.

Decision-making can refer to the strategies and processes that individuals use to arrive at the decisions they make. While these strategies and processes can vary greatly, the impact of stressful situations on these strategies is fairly constant. In a stressful situation,

individuals tend to reach a decision before all available alternatives have been considered. Those alternatives that are considered are scanned in a nonsystematic, disorganized fashion. Finally, not enough time is given to the pros and cons of each alternative that is considered. The farmer using the piece of equipment referred to above experiences unexpected difficulties. The field is nearly finished, and it is about to rain. The farmer decides to finish the field with the equipment not operating properly. When the farmer is asked later about the incident, he admits the alternatives of quitting altogether or going to get someone to help were not thought about or considered. When questioned further, the farmer admits that little thought was given to anything except finishing the job, and he was in a hurry to do so.

In the above examples, the farmer may or may not have suffered any long-term consequences. However, many very similar situations result in temporary or permanent disability. The farmer's inaccurate perception of risk about a particular situation can lead to behaviors that are much more dangerous than originally considered. "Being in a hurry" can intensify the result of that behavior. The farmer's usual decision-making process can be disrupted by "being in a hurry" and lead to overlooking alternatives that are much less risky than the alternative chosen. Many of these overlooked alternatives indeed may not "get the job done" at that immediate time. The delay brought about by using one of these alternatives may, however, be much shorter than the delay brought about by injury.

Many will say that risk is a part of life, particularly the life of a farmer, and that times of making haste are inevitable. Both statements are true. It is necessary, however, to have some understanding of how risk perception and decision-making under stress can influence our thoughts and our behaviors. Knowing that many farm situations are actually more dangerous than we perceive them because we are familiar with those situations is useful. This knowledge allows us to rethink what we may do if something unexpected happens. If the farmer reminds himself periodically that situations are usually more dangerous than perceived, then that thought is more likely to be available when the stressful situation occurs. This thought can impact the alternatives considered.

Likewise, knowing that stressful situations disrupt the usual thought processes and the manner that the disruption occurs allows planning in advance. Most farmers have plans for what is to be done in case of bad weather or the order in which fields must be attended. Having a similar scheme on what to do when machinery malfunctions or the unexpected arises is not very different. The tendencies of older machinery or the unknowns of new machinery can be thought about ahead of time. A commitment can be made to always shut off the machine before making repairs or adjustments, to always notify someone when difficulties arise, and/or to always take five minutes before doing anything. Having a list of "safe" alternatives available to review can go a long way in counteracting the effects of stressful situations on the decisions we make.