

Danger Can Be a State of Mind

When it comes to job-site safety, your emotional well-being is as important as earplugs and safety goggles

BY LARRY HAUN

I remember working with a carpenter in the 1950s, building roofs on a tract of houses. He was going through rough times at home with his family. Every morning, his body was on the job at 7 a.m., but his mind didn't get there until about 10. During this three-hour period, he was basically, like the cars Ralph Nader warned us about, "unsafe at any speed." On two different occasions, he dropped a 2x rafter, nearly breaking my foot. To save my feet, I used to give him an early morning wake-up call by swinging a 2x around and rapping him on the shins—sort of a case of him or me. This story ended when he cut a huge gash in his forearm with a circular saw. It was in the days before 911, so I had to stop the blood flow, get him off the roof and take him to the emergency room. I never saw him after that, but I heard that he joined the fire department. I wished them well.

Anyone who works on a construction site ought to know that it's a potentially dangerous place to work. An injury on the job is not only embarrassing and painful, but it also can mean the temporary or permanent loss of income and even death. Bureau of Labor Statistics information shows that in 1996, more than ten out of every 100 carpenters were injured on the job; worse, nearly 600 construction workers lost their lives that year. Of course, some accidents do seem unavoidable, but most often, they happen because someone with a hard hat just wasn't paying attention.

What about mental safety?

Most of the articles I read on safety, including those from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), warn you to keep your workplace clean and to wear hard hats, knee pads, safety glasses, earplugs, dust masks and back braces. Keep tools in good repair, lift with your arms and legs and not with your back, don't drink or use drugs

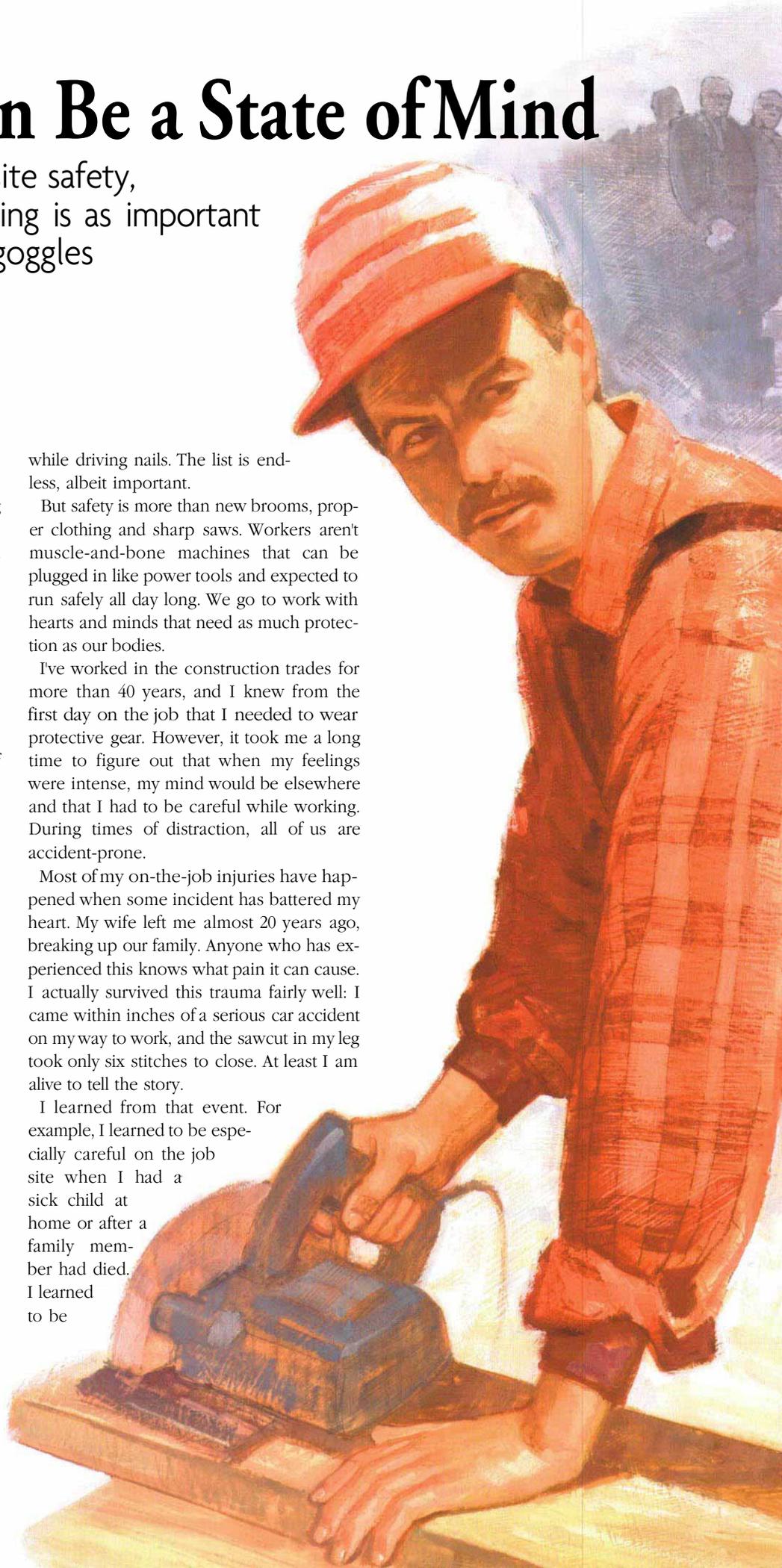
while driving nails. The list is endless, albeit important.

But safety is more than new brooms, proper clothing and sharp saws. Workers aren't muscle-and-bone machines that can be plugged in like power tools and expected to run safely all day long. We go to work with hearts and minds that need as much protection as our bodies.

I've worked in the construction trades for more than 40 years, and I knew from the first day on the job that I needed to wear protective gear. However, it took me a long time to figure out that when my feelings were intense, my mind would be elsewhere and that I had to be careful while working. During times of distraction, all of us are accident-prone.

Most of my on-the-job injuries have happened when some incident has battered my heart. My wife left me almost 20 years ago, breaking up our family. Anyone who has experienced this knows what pain it can cause. I actually survived this trauma fairly well: I came within inches of a serious car accident on my way to work, and the sawcut in my leg took only six stitches to close. At least I am alive to tell the story.

I learned from that event. For example, I learned to be especially careful on the job site when I had a sick child at home or after a family member had died. I learned to be





sure that my mind was on my work and not at home. I learned to be consciously present while working with power tools whenever I had intense feelings.

Talking about it helps

Tragedies and misfortunes are part of life. As carpenters, our lives involve power tools that require our full attention. If our minds are somewhere else, we take a chance with our own safety and that of our co-workers. It's also a good bet that the quality of our work is going to suffer, too.

When I visited China in 1975, I saw coal miners there receiving a daily body massage during work. They regarded the massage as something that helped them to do a better job. Their bodies and their minds were relaxed, and this condition made them less prone to accidents and injury. Hiring a masseuse may not be exactly what your boss had in mind for health benefits, but my point is that you can't safely ignore your emotional state of being.

It's important to admit that when you're feeling off-center, you really need to watch yourself. It's a good idea to confide in the crew leader or a co-worker and let them help you to last through the day—you don't have to tough it out. Tailgate safety meetings can be structured to talk about more than hard hats. It benefits everyone to talk about events in our lives that keep us from focusing on our work. As the saying goes, the body you keep from injuring may be your own. It may be hard to overcome the tendency to hold everything in, but letting it out maybe what saves you from injury.

As a last resort, you could take the day off. I know it's not always possible, and you certainly can't make a habit of it. But given the choice, what would you rather do: Miss a day's pay, or miss two weeks because you sliced up your hand? It also stands to reason that if you've talked to the boss and if he knows that you're under some emotional strain, he might be more understanding.

One thing that has worked well for me is to set aside a few minutes before work every day for a period of meditation. I use this quiet time to bring body and mind together, to check to see if anything in my life is hindering me from being aware on the job. It has taken some effort, but after all these years of pounding nails, I am still here with all my body parts. I am not yet a statistic. □

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