TOOLBOXTALK

TASK FIXATION



It happens when we become so focused on completing a task that we stop recognizing important changes and hazards around us. It is called Task Fixation and is a threat to situational awareness. The. Task fixation can seriously injure or kill you or someone working around you. danger is not that you stopped paying attention. You may be concentrating harder than ever, but too much of your attention is focused on one thing.

WHEN THE TASK TAKES OVER YOUR ATTENTION

Task fixation can happen during any work that demands concentration. You may be focused on removing concrete, making a repair, positioning material, operating a MEWP, or solving a problem that is preventing you from finishing. While your attention stays on that task, your body position changes, equipment moves, material loosens, a coworker enters the area, or another condition develops. You may even see the change without fully recognizing what it now means. This is why task fixation can affect experienced workers. Knowing the hazard does not guarantee that you will recognize it when most of your attention is somewhere else.

COMPLACENCY CAN KEEP YOU LOCKED ON THE TASK

Experience can also make it easier to dismiss a hazard when you finally notice it. You have reached that far before. You have worked around that obstruction before. Nothing happened last time. Correcting the problem may also mean more work: repositioning the lift, climbing down, getting another tool, changing the setup, or asking for help.

Now task fixation and complacency are working together. Your attention is telling you to finish, your experience is telling you that you can probably get away with the risk, and reducing the risk requires more effort. That is exactly when you need to stop.

BREAK THE FIXATION

Periodically take your attention completely away from the task. Look up, down, behind you, and around the entire work area. NIOSH specifically recommends looking and listening for new, unusual, or unexpected changes as a way to maintain situational awareness. Ask yourself what has changed since you started. Look at your body position, equipment, surrounding material, coworkers, access, and conditions. If the original safe method no longer works, do not work around the problem simply to keep the task moving. Reposition, reset, get what you need, or ask for help before continuing.

DO

- Look away from the task and scan the entire work area.
- Reassess when equipment, access, or conditions change.
- Stop when the original safe method no longer works.
- Interrupt a coworker who appears dangerously fixated.

DON'T

- Assume concentration means you are aware of everything around you.
- Let previous success make a new risk acceptable.
- Accept more risk because correcting the problem requires more effort.
- Stay locked on finishing when conditions are telling you to stop.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why can task fixation cause injury to you or someone else?
   a) Attention narrows; hazards go unnoticed
2. How can complacency make task fixation more dangerous?
   a) Previous success normalizes risk
3. What should you do to deliberately break task fixation?
   a) Stop; look and listen around

References: NIOSH FACE Reports F2020-11 and F2020-01.

Talk Given By:	Date:
Company Name:	Location:
Printed Name	Signature

Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act, employers are responsible for providing a safe and healthy workplace and workers have rights. OSHA can help answer questions or concerns from employers and workers. OSHA's On-site Consultation Program offers free and confidential advice to small and medium-sized businesses, with priority given to high-hazard worksites. For more information, contact your regional or area OSHA office, call 1-800-321-OSHA (6742), or visit www.osha.gov.

Through the OSHA and SWR Institute Alliance, the SWR Institute developed this toolbox talk for informational purposes only. It does not necessarily reflect the official views of OSHA or the U.S. Department of Labor.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE
Copyright ©2026 by the Sealant, Waterproofing & Restoration Institute. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

Sealant, Waterproofing & Restoration Institute • 400 Admiral Boulevard, Kansas City, MO 64106 | www.swrionline.org 092026AP