WHAT THEY SEE IS WHAT YOU GET: EMOTION AND WORKPLACE SAFETY
DEEP UNDERGROUND, A TEAM METHODICALLY CHIPS AWAY AT THE HARDENED ROCK FACE. Their swinging movements are seemingly haphazard, yet synchronised toward the goal of extracting hidden slivers of precious ore. The hypnotic strikes of tools are occasionally broken by the sounds of cascading rock and lumbering machinery. However, one worker stands out from the rest. His work is intermittently broken by shouts of frustration and exclamation. Around him, the collective mood begins to change. The team starts to feel on edge, aggressive and unfocussed. Gradually the atmosphere of the work pit changes course like a river forced to navigate a series of protruding rocks. Nearby, a warning light flicks on and its piercing red hue blares out unnoticed. Safety has been comprised.

This scenario is a more common occurrence than we would like to think. Humans are inherently social beings, so over time we have developed a keen receptivity to the emotions, attitudes and behaviours of those around us. Now, as we know, people are born with a unique make-up or disposition—no two people are alike. We each have unique personalities, thinking patterns and ways of managing and expressing our emotions to others. Just as the miner struggled to manage his emotional state in the example above, each of us will differ in our ability to notice how we are feeling at any given moment and how we display those feelings in the workplace.

Numerous research studies support the idea that emotions can impact workplace health and safety. For example, emotion has been linked to problem-solving ability, motivation, distance perception, and perceived effort1. Also, our ability to manage and process emotion during times of stress can predict safety behaviours at work. Research has found that negative affect2 is related to compliance with safety rules and the quality of onsite safety communication3. Emotion is a substantive predictor of workplace safety.

Emotion spreads throughout groups like pollen borne on wind. This ‘emotional contagion’ often goes unnoticed, and operates via our innate tendency to mimic the emotions of other people4. Just observing a smile or frown activates the same physical processes that would be experienced if we were feeling that emotion ourselves. A recent study showed that cartoons were rated funnier if participants were first presented with a picture of a smiling face instead of a frown5. However, this effect disappeared when the experimenters prevented movement of the zygomatic major, which is a muscle that controls our ability to smile. So, the feelings of others first produce physical changes within observers, which are quickly followed by the matching emotional experience. Simply watching the non-verbal behaviours of others is enough to trigger a similar emotional experience, be it positive or negative.

In group settings, social rules influence thinking and behaviour. Organisations may establish such rules purposefully or they may simply evolve over time based on the characteristics of the people in the team6. For example, the service industry typically expects workers to display a positive outlook towards customers—acting ‘happy’ is simply part of the job, and a very powerful way of swaying customers’ purchasing decisions. Social rules may also develop based on the types of beliefs, attitudes and emotions held by particular team members. Alarmingly, research has shown that the behaviours of just one person can set these rules. In one study, 94 business undergraduates were observed as they took part in a group discussion7. Unknown to the participants, one person was actually a confederate tasked by the experimenters to purposefully display negative emotions in the group setting. Overall group performance and cooperation significantly decreased as a result of this negative influence. These effects have since been replicated in applied workplace settings8. Emotion is incredibly catching, and the symptoms of negative emotion may be more far-reaching than first thought, particularly with respect to safety.

With this evidence in mind, safety professionals, leaders and workers should be keenly aware of the adverse effects produced by negative emotions. These studies have shown that an individual’s mood is contagious, and have also confirmed that humans are hard-wired to mimic the feelings and actions of people around them. Basically, what they see is what you get—the emotions of a single person can contaminate an entire group, resulting in impaired performance and an increased risk of injury. If left unmanaged, negative emotions can be a workplace hazard, with visible effects on team safety. So, the next time you are having an ‘off’ day, consider the very real effects that can be transmitted to your colleagues, and put strategies in place to manage your emotional experience—the safety of your team is counting on it.
specialises in safety culture measurement and transformation. Experts in applied psychology and neuroscience, Sentis helps organisations to enhance and move beyond compliance to empower employees to work safely—not because they have to, but because they want to. Offering training, coaching and consulting, Sentis has helped more than 250 companies and 140,000 people think differently about safety since 2003.

REFERENCES