



THE HIDDEN HAZARDS OF COMPLACENCY

TOOLBOX TALK SERIES – INJURY PREVENTION

November 2025

Video Introduction

Today's safety topic begins with a short training video from **Weeklysafety**:

Title: *"Safety Meeting on Complacency"*

Watch here: <https://youtu.be/IRRI7CcJEU?si=QTBfP874-MlEXKz>

This video highlights recognizing complacency and preventing accidents due to complacency.

Purpose

Complacency is one of the most dangerous conditions in any workplace — and it's invisible. It doesn't show up as a missing guard, a slick floor, or a broken ladder. It shows up as **routine**.

When we perform familiar tasks day after day, our brains stop actively assessing risk. We become comfortable, overconfident, and less alert. The work still feels safe — but our awareness has drifted.

This talk explores how complacency forms, how it affects safety and decision-making, and what we can do to keep our awareness sharp — especially as the year winds down and routines set in.

What is Complacency?

Complacency is the **state of satisfaction that makes us unaware of potential danger**.

It's when we think:

"Nothing bad has ever happened — so nothing will."

It's a natural human response to repetition. When we do something hundreds of times without an issue, the brain begins to conserve energy by automating those tasks — a kind of "autopilot mode." While this helps efficiency, it reduces vigilance.



Common Signs of Complacency

- Skipping pre-task safety checks (“I already know what I’m doing.”)
 - Performing tasks without PPE because it feels unnecessary.
 - Ignoring small hazards like loose cords, icy spots, or cluttered walkways.
 - Failing to communicate hazards to coworkers.
 - Dismissing safety procedures as “too slow” or “not needed.”
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Examples in Town Operations

Public Works / Highway

- An operator skips checking a plow’s hydraulic lines before heading out — it bursts mid-shift.
- A driver assumes a familiar intersection is clear — a near miss occurs in low visibility.

Parks Department

- A worker trims branches without a hard hat because “nothing ever falls.”
- Mower blades aren’t fully stopped before cleaning out debris.

Facilities & Buildings

- An employee bypasses lockout/tagout for a “quick fix.”
- A ladder isn’t properly secured because “it’s just one light bulb.”

Safety & Security

- Officers respond to routine alarm calls or building checks with less caution because “it’s probably just another false alarm.”
- An officer conducting a routine patrol overlooks small hazards or unusual activity because “nothing ever happens here at this time,” potentially missing early signs of an incident.

Each of these behaviors comes from experience — but it’s the *wrong kind* of experience. Familiarity builds confidence, but confidence without caution becomes complacency.



Why It's So Dangerous

Complacency:

- **Decreases hazard awareness:** You stop scanning for risks.
- **Normalizes shortcuts:** You start believing “it’s fine” to skip steps.
- **Reduces communication:** You assume everyone else knows what you know.
- **Delays reactions:** When something does go wrong, you’re less prepared to respond.

It’s not laziness — it’s a *psychological drift* that affects even the best employees.

How to Recognize Complacency in Yourself

Ask these questions during your workday:

- Do I ever skip steps because I’ve “done it a thousand times”?
- Am I paying full attention, or am I just getting through the task?
- Do I look for hazards — or assume there aren’t any?
- Have I stopped noticing unsafe conditions in familiar areas?

If you answered yes to any of these, complacency might be creeping in.

How to Combat Complacency

1. Take a Mental Pause

Before any task, especially routine ones, stop for 10 seconds.

- What could go wrong?
- What’s changed since the last time I did this?
- Do I have the right PPE and tools?

A short pause can reset awareness and prevent mistakes.

2. Encourage Peer Accountability

Create a culture where it’s okay — and expected — to call out unsafe behavior.

- A coworker who says “Hey, don’t forget your gloves” isn’t nitpicking — they’re protecting you.



- Supervisors should model this openness by accepting feedback as well.

3. Rotate or Vary Tasks

Change work assignments or routines periodically to keep the mind alert.
Repetition dulls the senses — variation keeps awareness fresh.

4. Review Incidents and Near Misses

Every near miss is a “free lesson.” Discuss what went wrong, what was missed, and how complacency may have played a role.

5. Reinforce Daily Checklists

Written or digital checklists are powerful anti-complacency tools — they require deliberate action instead of assumption.

Key Takeaway

Complacency is quiet, sneaky, and universal. It affects everyone — the longer you’ve been doing your job, the more likely you are to slip into it.

But awareness can stop it cold.

Every time you pause to think, double-check your surroundings, or ask “what’s changed?” — you’re actively fighting complacency and preventing accidents.

Experience should create safer habits — not shortcuts.

Stay alert. Slow down. Speak up. **Safety is a mindset — not a checklist.**

