

UNDERSTANDING HEADSPACE AND ITS IMPACT ON SAFETY

Title: When headspace spreads risks

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One unsafe act does not always end with one mistake. Sometimes it creates a secondary stressor that places another person in a high-risk headspace. As illustrated in figure 1, an initial shortcut can trigger a chain of consequences that extend beyond the original actor: the negative outcome becomes a new source of frustration, urgency, and pressure for others, increasing the likelihood of further unsafe decisions. In this way, risk is not simply created once – it can proliferate through the stress and disruption left behind.

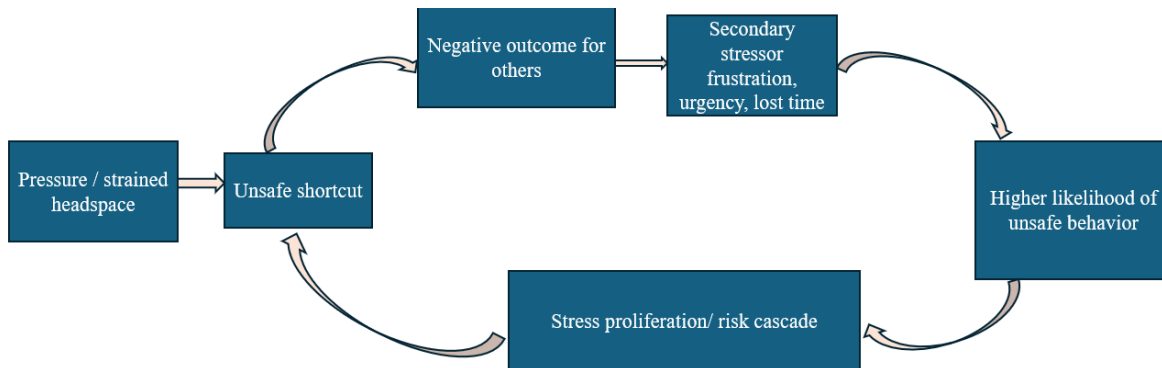


Figure 1: Stress proliferation process

The following story illustrates how one person's unsafe action created a consequence that became a new stressor for someone else, increasing the likelihood of further unsafe behavior.

Student A was working under a tight deadline. Her experiment was not progressing as planned, and as time ran out, her focus shifted from working carefully to simply finishing as quickly as possible. That headspace - marked by apprehension, urgency, and pressure - made safety feel like an obstacle rather than a safeguard. She prepared her samples and placed them in the oven. To fully cure them, she needed to increase the oven temperature to 90°C, even though the oven is normally kept at 60°C and raising it required prior safety clearance. Because she felt she had no time left, she skipped that step and turned the oven to 90°C anyway.

Student A met her deadline, but the unsafe shortcut created consequences for someone else. The next day, Student B opened the oven and found that his samples - work he had spent the entire week preparing - had been burned. He was understandably upset. Suddenly, he was not only dealing with lost work, but also with the pressure of redoing everything while falling behind on his own timeline.



Figure 2: Student B's burned sample

This is where the safety lesson becomes larger than one mistake. The damage to Student B's samples did not end with ruined materials; it also created a new high-risk headspace. Frustration, urgency, and anger can narrow attention and interfere with safe task performance, and research shows that when negative emotions spread in a high-pressure environment, the likelihood of accidents and injuries rises [1]. In other words, one unsafe act did not just create one bad outcome - it created the emotional conditions for another person to begin working unsafely too.

The most important lesson is that safety is not only about equipment, protocols, and technical knowledge. It is also about recognizing when headspace is becoming hazardous. If Student A had paused and acknowledged that deadline pressure was pushing her toward a shortcut, she could have asked for help, communicated the delay, or sought the required safety clearance. If the lab culture encouraged people to speak up early when they felt rushed, the second layer of risk may never have formed.

This example shows that unsafe behavior can be contagious - not because people copy the exact action, but because the consequences of one person's stress-driven shortcut can transfer pressure, frustration, and risk to the next person. Recognizing that chain early is a powerful way to prevent harm. A safer lab is not just one where rules are known; it is one where people are supported enough to follow them, even under pressure [2].

References

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