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Becoming Comfortable With Dangerous Situations

After many years of collecting accounts of trench cave-ins and worker deaths, it's easy to get the idea that the term, "trench safety," is an oxymoron. People continue to die in unshored trenches in spite of all the safety equipment and all the OSHA regulations aimed at saving lives.

Sometimes workers get into trenches after shoring was removed—possibly to retrieve a tool or reposition a pipe or cable.

It is fairly common for OSHA investigators to find trench boxes setting unused at accident sites where someone had been killed in a trench cave-in. That's usually a case where the wrong-size box had been delivered to the site, and the crew decided to proceed with their work without waiting for a box of the correct size.

Or, the box was the correct size, but the equipment needed to hoist it into the trench was not available.

In most trench deaths, however, there was no trench box or shoring within miles of the accident site. There was no plan to use shoring. There was just pipe or cable to install, and a

schedule to meet. In the words of the famous redneck comedian, Larry the Cable Guy, you just "git 'er done!"

I read something recently that said that people get used to working in dangerous situations. When you work in those situations day after day, you get comfortable. It's like getting behind the wheel of a car. That's a situation that kills thousands of people annually, yet very few people are afraid to drive.

I would still argue that getting down into an unshored trench is more dangerous than driving down a highway, but people who do both probably cope in much the same way. They get comfortable with the situation. That happens when you drive many thousands of miles and are never in an accident. It also happens when you work in trenches day after day and never see a major cave-in.

I can remember laying sewer tile in a 10-foot-deep trench on a summer day many years ago. When one wall started cracking, the backhoe operator I was working with swung the bucket against that wall. He told me to go ahead and finish up, then step into the bucket and he'd lift me out. As I was getting a bucket ride out of the trench, the wall caved in below me, nicely covering the pipe I'd just laid.

I was just a kid on my first job, and I had no reason not being comfortable with that way of dealing with unstable trench walls. I saw it work.

Up to that time, I didn't have any motivation to give trench cave-ins much thought. That job paid well, and it had come along just when I was facing a summer of unemployment. I was mainly motivated to keep those paychecks coming. The thought of a trench cave-in taking me out of the picture never crossed my mind.

An ultimate tragedy of being comfortable with the danger involved in trench work happened in a small Iowa town about fifteen years ago. A father and son team were on a job. The father was operating a backhoe and the son was working down in the trench. Apparently neither felt any needed to shore the

trench. They were doing work they had been doing for years, and they were comfortable with it. Being comfortable probably made them feel safe.

What then occurred was a father's worst nightmare. He saw his son crushed to death in a trench cave-in as he helplessly looked on from his seat on the backhoe. That had to be horrifying beyond imagination.

These types of accidents keep happening in spite of all the efforts to prevent them. Not that OSHA should just give up on enforcement. There are people who might be comfortable driving 100 mph, and would do it if not for enforcement. You can't stop them all, but speeding tickets seem to keep it to a minimum. There would undoubtedly be more trench accidents if OSHA wasn't on the job.

There is probably no way to completely overcome the comfort generated by uneventful days and months of trench work. The plumber who puts in septic systems routinely digs deep trenches. Most are less than thirty feet long, and the pipe and tanks are installed in a matter of minutes. The trench isn't open for more than half an hour, and it would take longer than that to install shoring or a trench box.

I know several plumbers who operate this way. They are comfortable with what they do. They don't seem to fully recognize the danger of trench cave-ins, because they've never seen it happen (or so they claim).

They acknowledge it can happen, but they don't know how common it is for people to die in trench cave-ins. That, along with my early trench experience, leads me to believe that raising awareness can reduce comfort levels.

That is the objective the accident reports compiled in this issue of the magazine. **UF**