

Complacency.....it can happen!

“When anybody asks me how I can best describe my experience of nearly forty years at sea, I merely say: “Uneventful”. Of course there have been winter gales, storms, fog and the like, but in all my experience, I have never been in any accident of any sort worth speaking about. I have seen but one vessel in distress in all my years at sea...I never saw a wreck and never been wrecked, nor was I ever in any predicament that threatened to end in disaster of any sort.”

Captain E.J. Smith, 1907.

On 14 April, 1912 RMS Titanic sank. 1500 lives were lost, one of whom was the captain. Captain E.J Smith.!

No matter how vigilant we are, as time goes by with no problems occurring, we can become complacent and let our guard down. Unsafe events happen when we least expect it. So, to be safer, we need to maintain your vigilance, even when there is nothing apparently going wrong.

Complacency is a natural function of the brain, which is designed to automate repetitive behaviour. Complacency is not the result of apathy, carelessness, or a personality flaw. Automated behaviour happens without conscious or deliberate thought. Have you ever been driving and thinking about the solution to a problem, and suddenly find yourself at your destination with no recollection of part of the journey? The brain handles routine actions without conscious guidance. Repetitive tasks become automated to free up our attention for things that are new, unusual, or threatening. If it were not that way, we would be far more challenged by repetitive actions.

The brain also unconsciously scans the environment for signs of danger. We notice and respond to what is unique, unusual, or threatening. However, repeated exposure to situations, even if they are potentially dangerous, dulls our defence mechanism. People who are repeatedly exposed to dangerous or violent situations, such as police officers and fire fighters, become less concerned and cautious about them.

So, we can become complacent about our personal safety from repeated exposure to potentially threatening situations that do not actually occur. Psychologists call this “habituation”. But, habituation works against us when you are repeatedly exposed to the potential of predatory situations and nothing happens. We take shortcuts and with the absence of consequences, it causes us to become more lax about our personal safety, in other words we become complacent.

Ideally, our personal safety switch should continuously be in the “on” position. And, just because we feel safe, may not mean we are safe. “Feeling safe all the time” could be a problem..... if we drift into that complacent mode.