



## FOCUS ARTICLE

# What is Chronic Unease? - A State of Mind to Manage Safety Risks

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The term may sound at first like an undesirable medical diagnosis, but in reality it describes an attitude linked to successful safety outcomes in high hazard industries. In fact, chronic unease has been cited as a characteristic of High Reliability Organizations (HROs), companies with a long-standing record of safe operations<sup>1</sup>. At its core, chronic unease is a mind-set that gives rise to an especially effective approach to safety and risk management.

## Essential Elements of Chronic Unease

Unease is a state of discomfort, and chronic unease describes a condition of unrelenting watchfulness, a persistent suspicion that all is not well, that something could go horribly wrong at any moment. The value of such an attitude in industries where the stakes are extremely high (e.g. offshore drilling, nuclear power) is clear. In a study sponsored by Royal Dutch Shell, researchers Dr. Fruhen and Prof. Flinn interviewed senior managers in the oil and gas industry and identified five characteristics or habits of mind underpinning chronic unease: safety imagination, vigilance, pessimism, tendency to worry and experience.

Those with a strong “safety imagination” demonstrated a talent for imagining the catastrophic consequences of risky situations, and their vigilance led them to closely monitor the environment, picking up on even weak indications that something was awry. Pessimism and worry were linked to a tendency to expect failure, eschew complacency, and consequently to be tenacious in pursuit of effective safeguards. Finally, experiencing first-hand incidents resulting in fatalities, injury or destruction sharpened managers’ sense of potential risk and made them wary even, or especially, when operations seemed to be functioning smoothly.

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<sup>1</sup> Chronic Unease: A State of Mind for Managing Safety, pub. by the Centre for Safety, the U. of Western Australia. Based on the research of Dr. Laura Fruhen and Prof. Rhona Flin, 2015

## How can Chronic Unease Bolster a Culture of Safety?

When an organisation effectively incorporates chronic unease, not only managers but anyone who works within that culture learns to foster a heightened sense of awareness. This means that so-called “weak” signals or minor breaches do not go unnoticed, but instead are understood as an indication that something needs attention. It also means that the channels of communication are open; individuals aren’t afraid to speak up, even if their concerns turn out to be unfounded. In such an environment, decisions are made after careful consideration and various angles and perspectives are taken into account - no jumping to conclusions.

This style of decision making entails access to data and information, and successful organisations actively seek to become more informed about risks and safety measures that can help them optimise their safety performance.<sup>2</sup> While some individuals naturally exhibit chronic unease as part of their personality and/or as a result of personal experience, the behaviours associated with it can be taught and learned when an organization commits to placing a premium on safety.

## Acknowledging the Downsides of Chronic Unease

Researchers Flin and Fruhen acknowledge that an excess of unease in individuals can morph into paralyzing anxiety. It’s important to note that chronic unease, as defined here, is inseparable from deliberative action; a state of mind preoccupied with potential failure is beneficial only insofar as it results in behaviours that reduce risk and prioritize safety. Those behaviours may at times slow down operations as data is collected and various courses of action are weighed. However, considering the scope of potential

damage - to human life, the environment, property - should an incident occur, the costs in terms of speed and short-term productivity are dwarfed by the enormous benefits of a culture of chronic unease.

## What Can You Do About Chronic Unease?

It is generally accepted that there are two principle ways in which you can influence or change a culture, you can change what people do, and you can change how people think. Changing what people do is generally referred to as the practices approach and involves systems, processes, procedures principles and their application. Changing how people think is generally referred to as a hearts and minds approach and refers to how leadership at all levels of the organisation motivates, inspires and influences the culture toward its stated goals.

At DEKRA Organisational Reliability we are supporting and motivating our clients to create within their organisations a “Culture of Care”. A **Culture of Care Diagnostic**<sup>®</sup> gathers evidence within both of these areas and allows us to identify where the cultural maturity of your organisation is, and what you need to do in order to mature the culture in a positive way.

The strategy can involve a programme containing activities as diverse as creating a company vision, **motivational workshops** for the workforce or leadership, training or education programmes, consultancy, mentoring or coaching. Our solutions are tailored to your needs allowing us to support your organisation on the journey toward a culture where safety is a value and therefore sustainable – in essence, a “Culture of Care”.

<sup>2</sup> Summarised from: “Chronic Unease: a Sign of a Good Safety Culture” by Ataga Ehi, pub. by The Society of Petroleum Engineers SPE Nigeria Annual International Conference and Exhibition, 5-7 August, Lagos, Nigeria, 2014

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Edward McCullough is Senior Vice President, Assessment & Solutions at DEKRA Organisational Reliability Ltd. He has been at the front lines of safety for over 30 years working in some of the most challenging industries in the world, bringing his insight and practical knowledge to improve safety for people and companies.

Edward McCullough has been with DEKRA since its inception, leading and managing activities in Europe, Australia, South East Asia, Africa, and the Americas. His work focuses on helping clients implement positive and sustainable improvements through the application of care. He believes that focusing on care as an input—through people, processes, and equipment—organisations can deliver safer and more reliable performance across all areas of industry.



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DEKRA Organisational Reliability is a behavioural change consultancy. Working in collaboration with our clients, our approach is to influence the safety culture with the aim of ‘making a difference for the better’. We deliver the skills, methods, and motivation to change leadership attitudes, behaviours and decision-making among employees. Measurable sustainable improvement of safety outcomes is our goal. We are a service unit of DEKRA SE, a global leader in safety since 1925 with over 39,000 employees in 50 countries.

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