Fading Away: Construction Leaders Speak Out About Mental Health

Darcy Gruttadaro, Center for Workplace Mental Health,
Cal Beyer, CSDZ

Organizations depend on a healthy workforce to stay competitive in their industry and mental health is no exception. It wasn't long ago when a person s psychological well-being wasn't discussed at the office, but now, more than ever, managers in the construction sector are taking on a leadership role when it comes to addressing the overall well-being of their employees. Our well-being depends on where we fall along a mental health continuum that extends from feeling mentally healthy and well on one end to experiencing distress with a diagnosed mental health condition on the other. For most people, their mental health continuously shifts and evolves along that continuum depending on many factors. *Behavioral health* is the term most often used to describe both mental health and substance use conditions.

Mental health impacts how people think, feel, and act so it's easy to see how it affects work performance, productivity, retention, health, quality, and safety. For employers, the opportunity to improve workplace mental health exists at organizational and individual levels.
Mental health conditions are common, impacting one in five, or close to 47 million U.S. adults.[1] About 20 million adults also experience a substance use disorder.[2] And while treatment works, less than half of people who need help actually get it.[3]

The need to address mental and behavioral health in the workplace has never been greater; the pandemic is causing a surge in mental health and substance use conditions, and we expect to see a rise in suicides and overdoses. Employers have the resources to help at both the company and co-worker level.

So, what keeps people from seeking help when it's needed? The answer is often stigma.[4] Myths and stereotypes related to mental health conditions continue to persist causing people to worry that they will be perceived as having a character flaw or are weak, so they try to get over it on their own and without help. These barriers are slowly coming down, but more must be done to accelerate change. Now is the time to engage in workplace mental health initiatives, not only to support the workforce, but also because it is costly not to.

THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT COSTS OF MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

There are significant direct and indirect costs associated with poor employee health, whether it is a mental health or other physical health condition.[5] Figure 1 shows the full cost of poor health, including direct and indirect costs, with indirect costs representing a far greater cost to employers.

When it comes to mental health, depression costs the U.S. economy $210 billion annually. This consists of direct healthcare costs, like medical care and pharmacy, and indirect costs in lost productivity[6]. Productivity loss includes absenteeism (people missing work), and presenteeism (people being present but not engaged in work).

Also important to note is the cost to employers to treat other chronic health conditions, like cancer, diabetes, and heart disease is two to three times higher when a person has a co-morbid mental health and substance use condition.[7] The Catch-22 is that people with chronic health conditions are at higher risk for depression, and those with depression are at higher risk for chronic health conditions.[8] These cost figures make a clear business case for effectively addressing mental health in the workplace.

BEST PRACTICES IN ADDRESSING WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

There are three broad areas for construction companies to consider in implementing workplace mental health initiatives.

> **One: Raise awareness and *share information and resources with employees***
> - Early warning signs and prevalence rates of common mental health conditions, like depression, anxiety, and substance use conditions.[9]
> - The importance of getting help early to produce the best outcomes and keep life on track.
> - How to connect with the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and mental health and substance use services, and how to support and refer a co-worker for help.
> - Create a special section of your organization's Intranet for information on mental health and substance use conditions that includes fact sheets, short video clips, blogs, announcements, and more.

- Post mental health information on bulletin boards, in rest rooms, in employee newsletters, and in high visibility locations.
- Include information about mental health in communications sent out to employees on health and well-being.
- Share stories from leaders to reinforce that mental health and substance use conditions impact people at all levels of the organization and that it is ok to talk about it.
- Bring in speakers to share information about the lived experience of mental health conditions to reduce stigma and dispel myths. Have leaders introduce the speakers and share a personal connection to mental health and/or substance use conditions.

Two: Create a mentally healthy culture - *employees feel psychologically safe seeking help*
- Ensure that leadership's commitment to mental health is visible and reinforce it often.
- Use all lines of communication to reinforce the importance of mental health.
- Offer manager and/or supervisor training on how to best support employees who may be experiencing a mental health and/or substance use condition.

Three: Improve access to services & supports - *employees & families seek and accept help*
- Make sure employees know how to access EAP and health plan services and supports.
- Remind people often about the services and supports available.
- Survey employees, anonymously, to inquire about their ability to access mental health care.
- Look at the organization's aggregated EAP and health plan data to see whether employees are seeking care when it's needed.

TESTIMONIALS FROM CURT MEMBERS ABOUT MENTAL WELL-BEING AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROGRAMS IN THEIR ORGANIZATIONS

Finishing Contractors Association: Mental Illness and Suicide Prevention
The Finishing Contractors Association (FCA) is an association member of the Construction Users Roundtable (CURT). FCA's entry in this topic was when the first president of the association, Bob Swanson, gave a clarion call to his peers that mental illness and suicide are an industry imperative. Swanson retired in 2015 after a 45-year career in the construction industry and is also past president of Swanson & Youngdale, Inc., a nationally recognized painting contractor.

Bob Swanson's new mission is to impact the construction industry by conducting a dialogue about mental illness and suicide prevention. Swanson is a suicide loss survivor; his oldest son Michael died by suicide in 2009. Over the past five years, Swanson has assisted both the

International Union of Painter's and Allied Trades (IUPAT) and the FCA in developing awareness and educational tools regarding worker mental health and suicide prevention. Swanson and Cal Beyer, vice president of workforce risk and worker wellbeing for CSDZ, have partnered over the past four years. They started by writing an article for *Construction Business Owner* in April 2016, titled *A New Imperative for Worker Safety: Linking Mental Health and Suicide Prevention with a Culture of Safety*.

Next Beyer appointed Swanson to the Construction Subcommittee of the Workplace Task Force of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention. Now Swanson speaks regularly to construction industry employers, industry associations, and labor organizations on the subject of suicide and mental health. In addition, he writes a monthly blog, *You Are Not Alone*, for the FCA, which represents over 7,000 contractor members in the United States and Canada.

Finishing First (formerly known as the Painters and Allied Trades Labor Management Cooperation Initiative): Mental Health, Substance Use Disorders, and Suicide Prevention

Finishing First is an association member of CURT; it is the labor/management association between the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) and signatory employers. IUPAT represents over 130,000 active and retired members in the finishing trades in the United States and Canada. Finishing First provides a wide range of services to contractors, associations, and IUPAT District Councils throughout North America.

With support from FCA s Bob Swanson, Finishing First set out to expand its focus on mental illness, substance use disorders, and suicide prevention. The leadership of the IUPAT decided a more formal set of resources and education opportunities needed to be offered to the membership and industry partners. Contractors and union leaders came together to form a plan that eventually became the IUPAT Helping Hand Program in 2017. IUPAT distributed Helping Hand Toolkits through the District Councils to help members and contractors alike.

Finishing First also addresses mental health and substance use disorder issues through the "Changing the Culture of Construction" training program. Anton Ruesing, Executive Director of Finishing First, states, "This training is designed to inform and empower the construction industry to encourage our workforce to choose proactivity when it comes to behavioral health issues and addictions. Our goal is to educate individuals to promote a healthy, safe, and substance-free working environment."

Ruesing emphasizes the importance of joint labor/management cooperation addressing behavioral health issues, noting, "We are in this together to face these challenges and remove the stigma of coming forward and asking for help. This will be best confronted by working together as a team for solutions."

Ruesing explained further, noting, "Labor and management must work together to change the culture of construction on these issues. No one side can do it alone and we are very grateful for partnership for this cause. No doubt we ll make a difference together."
Ruesing shared how well-received the resources and training have been, explain, "It is remarkable to see just how many lives of our members and contractors have been touched by these issues, either personally or a loved one."

To illustrate this point, Ruesing shared how far the culture has changed among Finishing First members. "Three to five years ago most people in our organization would keep quiet and try to deal with these types of issues on their own. While we recognized there was a problem, no one would talk about it because of the stigma involved. I think most of us looked at it as a weakness, a character flaw, or something that would just resolve itself in time. Today, we are a lot better at recognizing these issues, more comfortable discussing them, more compassionate, and more understanding that these illnesses and diseases won t go away on their own and require treatment."

Ruesing concludes with a personal testimonial of the power of this initiative: "Three years ago, I would never have asked someone if they have thoughts of death by suicide or had a substance use disorder. I would never have been able to admit that some of my own family members needed help. I would never have had the courage to ask them if I could help, and I may not have them in my life today, if I didn't."

Interstates (Sioux Center, Iowa): Whole Employee Culture and Wellbeing

Interstates is a contractor member of CURT based in Sioux Center, Iowa. They are a specialty contractor focused on integrated electrical system design and construction specializing in process automation and instrumentation controls. Interstates is a merit shop company of 1,100 employees with approximately 650 working in the field at various project locations.

The company has been thoughtfully implementing a "whole employee culture" for the past several years. CEO Scott Peterson described how this cultural transformation grew out of the core value of family, noting, "We want every employee to feel like they belong and are a part of the Interstates Family." He describes their goal of creating a culture – rather than a program – of well-being. This meant that several leaders, including field leaders, worked together to develop the tools and resources.

Danielle Crough, Vice President of People and Culture, says the team worked to provide support and well-being tools to make a difference in the employees lives when they want or need it. "The whole employee culture includes these wellbeing principles: social connections with our team

and community (including community involvement); safety; career development; and financial, emotional, and physical wellbeing."

According to Crough, "Interstates believes if someone feels like they belong and those elements are balanced, they will be able to focus and make a difference with our clients and serve their teammates."

During the pandemic, Interstates relied on their Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to provide well-being tools and services to help with depression, stress, and suicide awareness. This included six free and confidential counseling sessions per family member provided by video, phone, or in person. The EAP also had resources such as webinars, support programs via mobile app, and articles to team members to reinforce awareness of stress, coping methods, and how to balance work/life from home. Crough adds that, "A financial well-being series was also available for individuals to receive practical advice on how to develop, set, and apply a budget."

The Interstates leadership team received positive feedback from employees, which highlights the impact the whole employee culture is having on the workforce. For example, one employee shared that, "After listening to the talk about mental wellness and suicide, the passing of my sister 20+ years ago makes more sense." Peterson adds that this is a reminder that, "We probably have more leaders and employees who still have questions that may never be answered because a loved one passed away as a result of suicide."

For Interstates, the whole employee culture is foundational to having strong leaders at all levels of the organization. By ensuring that team members are healthy in all aspects of their life, they will be better employees, leaders, and community members.

Peterson adds, "We want our people to have great relationships inside and outside the company. We want them to have a positive impact on their teams, clients, organizations, and communities. Healthy, focused, engaged employees are the key: the key for their families, the Interstates Family, and our clients. We want to invest in our people. They deserve it and it is the right thing to do."

CONCLUSION:

The prevalence of mental and behavioral health conditions in the workplace is growing. These conditions impact those in the construction industry during their prime working years. Industry leaders are well-positioned to make a positive difference in their lives by breaking the silence and showing strong support for mental health and substance use conditions.

This leadership is needed now, more than ever.

Darcy Gruttadaro is the Director of the Center for Workplace Mental Health where she leads strategy in providing employers with high impact tools to effectively support the mental health and well-being of employees and their families. You can reach her at dgruttadaro@psych.org.

Cal Beyer, CWP, is Vice President of Workforce Risk and Worker Wellbeing for CSDZ, a Holmes Murphy company. Cal was instrumental in the launch of the Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention. You can reach **him** *at cbeyer@CSDZ.com or (651) 307-7883.*

Resources

Center for Workplace Mental Health Workplace Assessment
www.workplacementalhealthassessment.com

Center for Workplace Mental Health Case Studies
http://workplacementalhealth.org/Case-Studies

Depression Cost Calculator
www.workplacementalhealth.org/depressioncalculator

Right Direction for Me
https://www.rightdirectionforme.com

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