

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

WHY COMPANY LEADERS MUST ADDRESS MENTAL
HEALTH, SUBSTANCE MISUSE AND SUICIDE PREVENTION
NOW

BY CAL BEYER

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Note from the Executive Director:

Given the recent increase in suicide among construction workers, I reached out to an industry collaborator at the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). He shared with me some actions NAHB was taking, and he referred me to Cal Beyer, a national advocate for mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention in the construction industry. After a call with Cal and a SPFA board member, we agreed he should present to the entire board, and they agreed to invite him to present at the SprayFoam 2022 Convention and Expo in San Antonio. This article is an introduction to the information Cal will be presenting to help you address the safety of your workers and our families.

In today's rapidly changing economy, mental health is top of mind for business leaders from various companies in all industries. This includes construction companies. It has not always been that way. Historically, mental health was a taboo topic in the workplace and even more so on jobsites.

Stigma was the barrier that kept people from acknowledging that they were not OK. Seeking help was seen as a sign of weakness rather than as a sign of strength. Stigma remains a barrier that keeps people from either offering or seeking help. Stigma is a fear of the unknown combined with a fear of judgement from others or fear of consequences – both real and perceived.



Mental Health Matters

Even today, we may be more comfortable talking about mental health, however, it remains mischaracterized. *When we say or hear the words mental health, it seems we're saying or hearing mental illness.* Unfortunately, what we believe we know about mental health and addiction is shaped by false stereo- types and myths.

Mental health refers to wellbeing. We all have mental health, and it exists on a continuum ranging from unhealthy to healthy. The reality is that approximately one in five adults in the United States have a diagnosable mental health condition – as do one in six children. A person can have a diagnosable mental illness and be mentally well. Likewise, a person can be mental unhealthy without a mental illness diagnosis.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (www.nami.org), there is an 11-year delay from the onset of mental illness symptoms to proper diagnosis and starting of treatment. Society needs to treat mental health like we do medical health. Can you imagine if we waited 11 years to treat a broken leg or a toothache?

Pre-Pandemic: A Perfect Storm Was Brewing in Construction

Prior to the pandemic, the construction workforce was challenged by mental health, substance misuse and suicide risk. There is evidence that points to high levels of stress, anxiety and depression among the construction workforce. The pressures of construction are immense, including demanding work conditions with long hours, frequent overtime, pressing deadlines, long commutes, and travel that separates workers from families and other supports.

The industry did not always take issue with substance misuse. Even with owner and general contractor requirements for drug and alcohol policies and testing protocols, the general feeling was what workers did on their own time wasn't the company's business – or at least not until it became the company's business with chronic tardiness, absenteeism, or a safety incident or quality issue.

The construction industry had the second highest rate of heavy/binge drinking according to the US Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): one in six workers reported consuming more than five drinks in a single setting multiple times each month. In the US population, at least 10% of the population have reported being in recovery or facing addiction. In construction, the number is almost 15% based on studies by governmental agencies.

A high percentage of these addictions involve opioid pain medications for the treatment of injuries sustained on and off the job. Studies show that construction workers are more likely to be pre- scribed opioids at a higher percentage and for a longer time than workers in other industries.

The number of overdose deaths in the US has doubled in the past five years reaching over 93,000 in 2020, in which 28 states reported increases of 30% or more overdoses than the prior year. Recognizing the warning signs and not waiting to act is an imperative.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that the construction industry is among the industries with the highest rate of suicide at 3.5 times the rate for the general population. More workers in construction die by suicide than by all occupational fatalities. In 2019, 1,061 workers died from workplace fatalities, but it has been estimated that over 5,000 workers died by suicide. This number does not include construction retirees.

Rising Risk During the Pandemic

The pandemic has worsened the existing pressures and demands upon companies throughout the construction industry. Increased concern about physical health risk from COVID was merely the tip of the iceberg. Many families are experiencing grief from the death of loved ones, or from the loss of jobs, or missing our old routines.

Financial pressures have hit home, too, with rising cost of living due to rising prices and more families bringing in family members.

The recovery associated with re-opening the economy increased pressures on supply chains, commodity prices and labor availability. These pressures have increased operating costs, delayed project starts, disrupted project sequencing, and tightened schedules. Rising overtime poses serious risk to worker fatigue, potentially impacting worker safety, quality and productivity.

Actions for Company Leaders

1. Take the STAND-Up Pledge for the Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention (www.prevent-construction-suicide.com) to show your support.
2. Check with your company's benefits advisor to see if you have an Employee Assistance Program to provide support services to workers and dependents, including counseling for relation- ship, financial, legal or mental health concerns.
3. Share free, confidential, and 24/7 and 365 days per year services for mental health, substance misuse and suicide prevention:

Additional Resources:

Blair, Scott, and Buckley, Bruce. (July 28, 2021). Safety Advocates See Strength in Numbers to Combat Suicide and Substance Misuse. *Engineering News-Record*. www.enr.com/articles/52163-safety-advocates-see-strength-in-numbers-to-combat-suicide-and-substance-misuse

National Safety Council (NSC). Begin Addressing Opioids in Your Organization www.nsc.org/pages/prescription-drug-employer-kit

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. He serves on the Executive Committee for the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention and the Expert Advisory Group for the Center for Workplace Mental Health. Contact Beyer at cbeyer@CSDZ.com or 651-307-7883.



