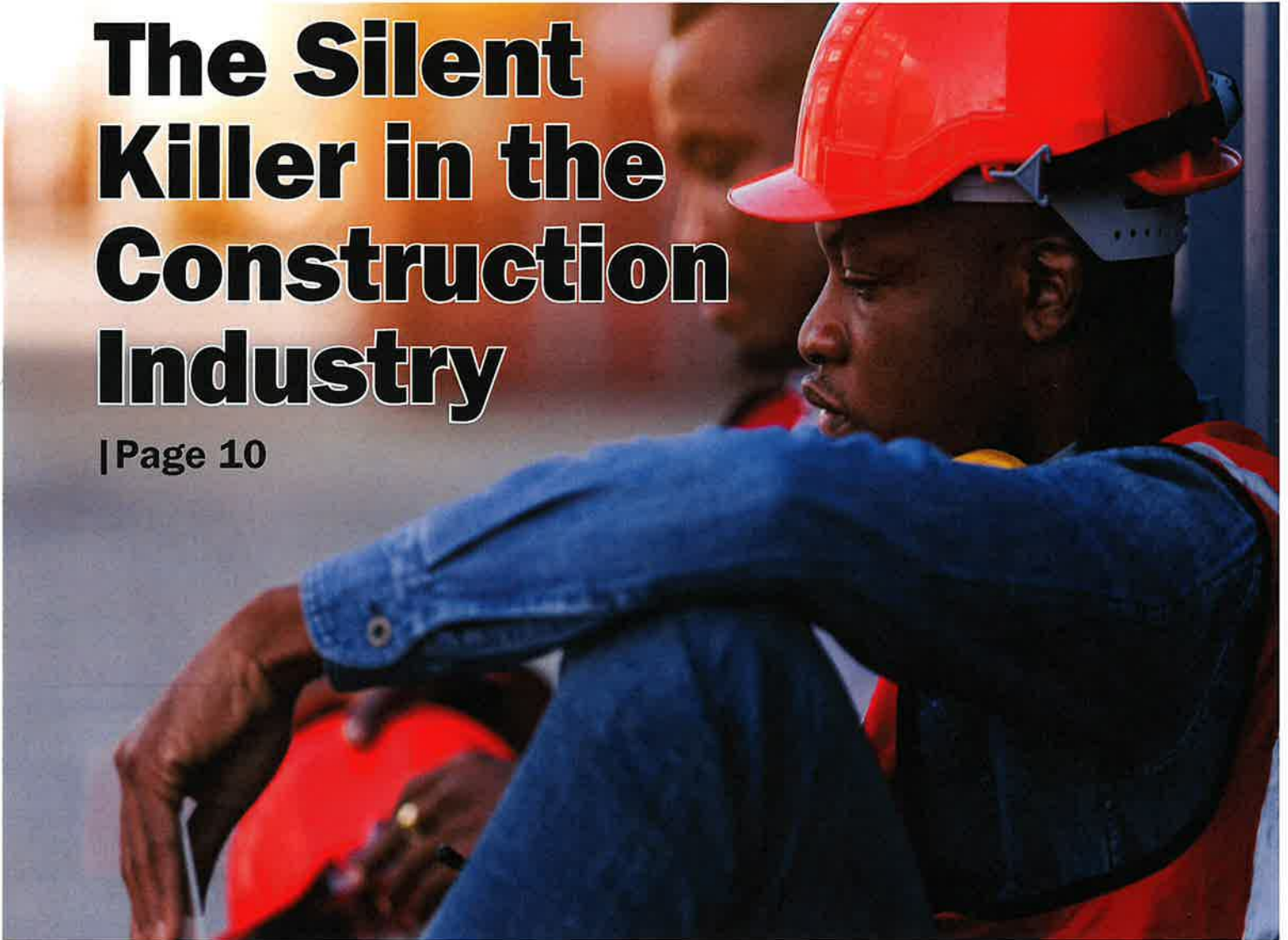


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The Silent Killer in the Construction Industry

| By Brian Bauer, MA, LPC, CEAP, SAP



The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (OSHA) and construction organizations work to maintain safe job sites by reducing injuries and deaths. Much focus has been on the “Fatal Four” injury categories (falls, being struck by objects, electrocutions, and being caught in or between), but something else quite dangerous is being overlooked. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports the suicide rate for construction workers as the second highest of all industries (farming, fishing, and forestry were ahead). A silent killer looms and rages, taking even more construction workers’ lives than these four categories. Should the Fatal Four be the Fatal Five?

The construction industry has been around since the beginning of time, designing and building structures for shelter and places of safety, along with establishing roads, bridges, tunnels, and more. The work of construction gives us places to live, provides us with venues to conduct business and offers avenues for us to travel through the pathways of life. Additionally, it connects us with other civilizations to advance our commerce and growth.

Recently, my wife and I traveled through Israel, and one of the sites we visited was Masada, which was built on top of a mesa near the Dead Sea. This amazing mesa is over 1,424 feet high and has a rhomboid-shaped mountaintop that is 18 acres across. Herod the Great built palaces and fortifications around 37-4 BCE that remain standing today. Masada is a genuine construction marvel concerning how necessary materials made it to the top of the mesa and how so much of the construction survived the test of over 2,000 years in time. There are many other construction wonders of the world, including; the Great Wall of China, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Channel Tunnel, the Hoover Dam, Burj Khalifa, and the list goes on.

The construction industry is a dangerous and challenging business, and working in this field often comes at a high cost for those who do it. The work is prone to tear down workers' bodies over time, on-the-job injuries are the norm, and unfortunately, some lose their lives on the job site. A heavy emotional toll exists in the profession from these accidents and deaths. As an EA professional providing services to several construction companies, I have had my share of Critical Incident Stress Debriefings (CISDs) for onsite injuries and fatalities.

OSHA has made tremendous strides, increasing job safety for workers in all industries. In 1970 OSHA reported about 38 worker deaths per day; in 2019, the number was down to 15 per day. Worker's injuries and illnesses charted at 10.9 per 100 in 1972, whereas in 2019, the number was 2.8 per 100. OSHA has given incredible oversight, accountability, and advances to our workplaces, saving lives.

Regarding work-related fatalities, about 20% of these deaths happen in construction. According to OSHA, in 2019, 5,333 workers died on the job, 1,061 of whom were in the construction industry. The US Department of Labor reported that in 2020 there were 4,764 fatalities, which computes to someone dying every 111 minutes from a work-related injury. A total of 1,008 of these deaths occurred in the construction industry. While these numbers ebb and flow from year to year and significant progress has been made, there is still a considerable problem to address.

OSHA has led the way in making the workplace safer for all employees, and we applaud them for their mission and work. One of the ways they have created impact for the construction industry is through education and awareness around the leading causes of fatalities. These are called the Fatal Four and include falls, being struck by objects, electrocutions and being caught in or between objects or machinery. About 60% of on-the-job deaths are caused by one of the Fatal Four:

- Falls 36%
- Struck By Objects 10%
- Electrocutions 9%, and
- Caught In/Between 2%

These numbers are staggering. And yet, another deadly killer is taking even more lives in the construction field. Currently, an average of about 600 people a year die by one of the Fatal Four defined above; however, in one year, over 5,890 people died in the construction/extraction industry by suicide. Yes, suicide. The suicide rate in the United States is 12.93 per 100,000; in the construction industry, the suicide rate is 53.3 per 100,000. Suicide is over 3.5 times higher in the construction field versus the general population. Here are some statistics cited by the CDC in 2020:

The construction industry is a dangerous and challenging business, and working in this field often comes at a high cost for those who do it.



- 45,979 Americans died by suicide
- Suicide is the 12th leading cause of death
- On average, 126 suicides occur daily, one suicide every 11-12 minutes
- Men die by suicide 3.9 times more than females; white males account for 70% of suicides
- Over 1.2 million Americans attempted suicide; there were approximately 25 suicide attempts for every suicide, and females were 1.8 times more likely to attempt suicide

Sobering numbers and statistics...attached to real people who feel their only option is ending their lives. And the effects of death by suicide reach far beyond the individual. In the aftermath, a tsunami of the disaster remains in the lives of loved ones, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and countless others. The ripple impact is devastating.

Why?

Why are so many people dying by suicide in the construction industry? Why would this group have a 3.5 times higher rate of suicide? Further research is needed, but here are some possibilities to consider.

The wear and tear that construction workers experience on their bodies are immense. The long-term impact of physically and mentally taxing work takes its toll in many ways, such as back pain, stress injuries and hearing loss, and toxic exposure to chemicals and other contaminants. Ongoing stresses of the job, like shift work, traveling to work away from family for long cycles, and seasonal work with accompanying financial issues, all escalate the challenges to the mental health of the worker, increasing the risk of suicide.

Mere gender demographics offer another reason for this alarming trend, with over 90% of those working in construction being male. As stated above, males die by suicide 3.9 times more often than females. The CDC reports that men make up about 49% of the population, with nearly 80% of suicides among males.

The prevalence of males within the construction industry lends to the masculine bravado attitudes and culture often associated with construction workers. They are typically seen as tough guys doing challenging jobs who “don’t need help.” Priding themselves on self-reliance, they seek to help others yet fail to reach out for help themselves. Construction workers are usually wired to be risk-takers and limit pushers. They do this by removing the words NO, or I CAN’T DO THAT from their vocabularies. When they find themselves in overwhelming or difficult situations or feel trapped in a corner, it can push them to think suicide is the only way out.

Another major issue the construction industry faces is alcohol and drug misuse and addiction. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA):

- Around 15% of construction workers in the US have a substance abuse disorder, compared to 8.6% of the general population
- 12% have an alcohol use disorder compared to 7.5% nationally
- 16.5% of construction workers report heavy alcohol consumption within the past month, nearly twice the average of all full-time workers
- 11.6% of construction workers reported illicit drug use within the past month
- 14.3% of construction workers were diagnosed with a substance use disorder in the past year, more than 1.5 times the average of full-time workers
- 2.3% have a marijuana use disorder

This industry has not been immune to the opioid epidemic either. With injuries and broken bodies, construction workers are frequently prescribed a narcotic pain medication. Regarding prescription drug use within the industry, 20% of total spending on prescription drugs was for opioids, higher than any other industry.

- About 1.3% of construction workers have an opioid use disorder, almost two times the national average (National Safety Council)





Many HR departments are going out into the field and participating in onsite visits seeking to build relationships. They are prioritizing a process of checking in on how construction workers are doing.

- Construction workers are seven times more likely to die of an opioid overdose than other industries, which is the highest proportion of heroin-related overdose deaths

Suicide and substance use disorders go hand in hand. According to SAMSHA, around 22% of deaths by suicide involved intoxication with a blood alcohol level (BAC) above the legal limit, and 30-40% of suicide attempts had acute alcohol intoxication. Death by suicide is connected to being under the influence of drugs:

- 20% opiates
- 10.2% marijuana
- 4.6% cocaine
- 3.4% amphetamines

Our construction workers are in dangerous jobs, and the dangers go beyond the Fatal Four. Matters of mental health and substance misuse need to be addressed to impact the high risk of suicide.

What can we do?

Numerous construction companies and organizations are working tirelessly to enhance education and access related to mental health care. Barriers exist, many questions linger, and potential pathways to greater health and safety are on the horizon. EA professionals can propose and initiate forward-looking ways to work with clients and companies. We should continue our efforts to break down misconceptions about mental health and couple this with easier access to services.

One way to do this is to lead by example. For the last two years, I have witnessed the power of leading by example when attending and participating in stand down meetings, which are common in the construction industry. A stand down is a meeting where discussions focus on safety in the workplace. During the first year, I listened as the Safety Director, a big, tough dude, shared his story. He had a coworker die on the job and told how it impacted him mentally and emotionally. He described his process of closing himself off to others, causing harm to relationships within his family, and drinking more. This cycle continued until he finally reached out to get help. He described how he sat down with a counselor and focused on working his way back to mental and emotional health.

The second year another of their construction workers shared his story. His young son admitted that a family member had been touching him inappropriately and described the fierce anger and rage he felt and experienced. The worker struggled profoundly with the feeling that he had let his child down and had not protected him. This eventually led him into a pit of depression, struggling to get to work, resulting in him almost walking away from his job. His coworkers and company surrounded him with support as they gave him time for his family to continue their long and personal quest to find health and wellness.

These men give us examples of extreme vulnerability while sharing intimate details about their pain. They did this with the hope that others could learn to be honest about their struggles and actively pursue and take necessary steps to get support and help for themselves and their families.

Many HR departments are going out into the field and participating in onsite visits seeking to build relationships. They are prioritizing a process of checking in on how construction workers are doing. They are going past surface conversations to understand how things really are. HR departments are openly sharing information about mental wellness and seeking to ensure that employees have EAP contact information.

Investing the time and prioritizing the opportunity to highlight these topics during Construction Safety Week in May and coordinating a stand down during Construction Suicide Prevention Week in September may be ideas to get you started. Participating in Alcohol Awareness Month in April and National Depression and Mental Health Screening Months in October provides additional opportunities to support those who labor in construction. Providing training for managers and supervisors and equipping them with awareness about key indicators of suicide risk and substance misuse and suggestions as to how they could help guide a struggling worker is another avenue to pursue.

The Big Question and the Big Ask

As previously stated, OSHA has achieved much progress in making US workplaces safer over the years. They have saved lives and held people accountable for safety. The Fatal Four has been tremendous in helping educate and spread the word about the deadliness of falls, being struck by objects, electrocutions, and being caught in or between. But I ask you to ponder this, is the Fatal Four enough? Does knowledge of The Fatal Four sufficiently cover the serious issues at hand? Why are suicide and addiction (or maybe the overarching topic of Mental Health) left out of the current equation? This doesn't fit when statistics show that thousands of construction workers are losing their lives to suicide. So, is it the Fatal Four or *the Fatal Five*?

- Falls
- Struck By Objects
- Electrocutions
- Caught In/Between
- Mental Health: Suicide and Substance Use

It is paramount for us to broaden this category as we continue to break down existing barriers, educate others, provide easier access to services, and move forward so we can make an effort to save more lives, along with impacting and equipping all to live well!

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