Best-Practices Guide for Mental-Health Intervention in Construction

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Abstract

Construction workers are being lost to suicide more frequently than on-the-job-injury or accident. Construction employers need resources on how to address this issue, as it is complex and involves personal matters, but the outcome has ripple effects on all in the industry.

This project focuses on collecting data from construction personnel on mental-health interventions that have been implemented in construction or would be inspiring to the survey respondents to seek mental-health support. The survey garnered 119 complete responses and the preliminary results of that data collection is presented as a best-practice guide for construction employers to implement with their existing Health and Safety programs. The data was collected by an anonymous survey with 31 questions related to their demographics, past experiences with mental-health interventions and insights on what interventions might be motivating to them personally. It was found that five interventions were most inspiring: talking about the importance of mental health, promotion of Employee Assistance Programs and Insurance offerings, a written program related to mental-health resources, taking a mental-health assessment at work, and having mental-health posters and flyers on the job.

Alternatively, there were five interventions selected highest on the Likert scale of most effective: distribute mental-health support information (Employee Assistance Program, insurance coverages, websites), offer training in mental health, promote mental health with a stand-down or guest speaker, provide de-escalation or intervention resources to help you if you are confronted with someone in crisis, and provide mental-health assessment resources. The study findings and best-practices guide provide practical, actionable options to construction employers to insert mental health into their existing health and safety programs. These eight best-practice guides are designed to be used individually or in concert to enhance worker mental health, decrease stigma and save lives.

Best Practice

Mental-Health Intervention for Construction

1

Offer training in mental health, mental-health First Aid, Living Works, or company/community-based training

Why are construction workers at risk?

Stigma has prevented awareness about mental health needs and also created barriers to empathy and willingness to discuss mental health challenges.

What you can do:

Offering employees training in mental-health awareness, the need for suicide prevention, and intervention strategies is a good starting place for integrating mental health into your company's existing safety and health programs. Training in these important subjects also helps employees understand the complexity of mental-health issues, their role in suicide prevention and stigma reduction, as well as takes away some of the fear associated with the potentially uncomfortable subject matter.

Resources

- **Mental-Health First Aid**
- https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/population-focused-modules/workplace/
- **Living Works**
- https://www.livingworks.net/trainings
- **Prevent Construction Suicide**
- https://www.preventconstructionsuicide.com/resources

Best Practice

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2

Promotion of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and insurance offerings for mental health

Why are construction workers at risk?

Anything that can be done to remove barriers to support for people in emotional distress is a great way to help. Construction employers often have Employee Assistance Programs but, often, workers are not aware of what support they might have available through the EAP. The same can be said of insurance coverage; if you don't know if you have mental health coverage, or what those benefits might include, it may be intimidating to seek help.

What you can do:

As an employer it is fairly simple to create a poster or document that shares with the team what EAP and insurance benefits include and how to get help. A simple outline that shows contact information on the EAP, what to expect on an initial call, and what services the EAP can offer (counseling, referrals to counseling, web resources, and/ or support groups). Another simple outline of benefits from the insurance provider on mental-health support, how much the co-pays are, how many visits you are entitled to and a link or phone number to find in-network providers.

Sample poster language:

It's OK to ask for support!

Our EAP is FREE, CONFIDENTIAL, and can be accessed 24/7.

When you call 1-800-XXX-XXXX, you will be connected with an EAP coordinator that can help you, your spouse, and dependents with accessing counseling services (personal, marital and family), legal support, substance abuse support, and child/ elder care resources.

You can also access all these resources online at the EAP website: www.XXXXXXXXX.com

Whatever the problem, they can help!

Or insurance coverage offers up to 24 visits per year to a licensed counselor or therapist, with a $10 copay per visit. You can look up providers at www.XXXXXXXXX.com

We understand that these are challenging times. You may be finding the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic impacting your mental health and well-being. Taking care of both your physical and mental health is imperative. If you or a loved one think you may need extra support—which many of us do right now, please connect with available resources. Getting help when you need it is a sign of strength. Please remember, you are not alone, we are all in this together.

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3

Promote mental health with a stand-down or guest speaker

Why are construction workers at risk?

As suicide rates climb for the construction industry (Peterson, Sussell, Li, Schumaker, & Yeoman, 2020), and collectively the world reels from the impacts of a global pandemic (King & Lamontagne, COVID-19 and suicide risk in the construction sector: preparing for a perfect storm, 2021), the time is now to discover new and existing interventions to protect construction-worker mental well-being and promote access to these resources on a more consistent and strategic basis (Beyer & Spoor, The Construction Users Roundtable (CURT VOICE), 2021).

What you can do:

To help normalize the conversations of mental health in construction, it can help to treat it like other safety and health topics, such as fall protection, trenching safety, or outdoor heat, for which the industry already observes stand down days or weeks. A stand down can be as simple as holding a toolbox talk meeting or as complex as shutting down a whole jobsite for part f a day for training or a guest speaker. Ideally, you want to prepare your workforce for this event and let everyone know the subject matter and expectations on their participation and professionalism.

Resources:

- **Sample stand-down from 2021**
  - https://gbca.com/hard-hat-chat/stand-down-to-raise-awareness-about-substance-abuse-and-mental-health-issues-in-construction/
- **US Air Force stand-down event details from 2019**
  - https://www.sprc.org/news/us-air-force-has-ordered-one-day-stand-down-address-growing-suicide-problem
- **Speakers Bureau for mental health**
  - http://mhaw.org/services/request-a-speaker/

Best Practice

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4

Provide de-escalation or intervention resources for workers to respond to someone in crisis

Why are construction workers at risk?

Being confronted with someone in distress can be intimidating and overwhelming. Responders may not know what to say or do and can often be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. Also, the warning signs may not always be so easily identified.

What you can do:

One way to prepare workers for a situation such as this would be to teach the L.E.A.R.N. method of suicide prevention from the University of Washington's Forefront for Suicide Prevention -- or share the video from PreventConstructionSuicide.com called *Warning Signs and What to Do*.

Resources:

- **L.E.A.R.N. suicide-prevention resources**
  - https://intheforefront.org/learn-saves-lives/
- **PreventConstructionSuicide.com video**
  - https://vimeo.com/smallgiantsvideo/review/462751387/f75b93dc71?sort=lastUserActionEventDate&direction=desc

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5

Provide mental-health assessment resources

Why are construction workers at risk?

An Australian study showed that suicide is often the result of a perfect storm of a few combined factors and that certain factors are common precedents to death by suicide, so if a person is faced with one or several of these factors, they need immediate support. Nine factors presented a common theme leading up to the deaths: existing mental illness, work stress, workplace injury or chronic illness, lack of social support, financial problems, legal problems, relationship issues, child-custody concerns, and substance abuse (Milner, Maheen, Currier, & LaMontagne, 2017).

What you can do:

- Helping workers assess their mental health to identify possible areas where support would be helpful is an effective way to help accomplish upstream intervention to avoid a mental-health crisis and prevent construction suicide.

Resources

Promoting this website for at-home or private on-the-job mental health assessment, built specifically for construction workers, will connect workers to a free, confidential assessment and resources for taking personal action for mental health.

- https://screening.mentalhealthscreening.org/ciasp

Another resource, tailored specifically to middle-aged men, uses a comedic approach and can be helpful for those who feel uncomfortable discussing their mental health or vulnerabilities.

- https://mantherapy.org/head-inspection/question

Best Practice

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6

Talking about the importance of mental health in meetings, Toolbox Talks or through company communications

Why are construction workers at risk?

In 2018, Washington state lost six construction workers to on-the-job injury and in that same time frame 125 construction personnel were lost to suicide. We are losing construction workers more frequently to suicide than to workplace hazards.

What you can do:

As an employer, you don't want to take ownership of people's mental health or problems, but there are definite ways you can help. The number-one most effective mental-health intervention tool for employers, as identified by a recent Central Washington University study, is to reduce stigma by talking about the importance of mental health. It is important to lead conversations that place equal value on mental and physical health and safety. Stigma is a major barrier for people who may be struggling, so normalizing conversations about mental health and investing in your mental health are great ways to support people who may be struggling. This may not come naturally, so you can use tools like Toolbox Talks and even your company social media, newsletters, or even team messages to reinforce a culture of care.

Resources

Toolbox Talks:

- https://preventconstructionsuicide.starchapter.com/Toolbox_Talks
- https://www.nahb.org/-/media/NAHB/advocacy/docs/industry-issues/safety/toolbox-talk-mental-health.pdf
- http://safebuildalliance.com/images/docs/Mental%20Health/Tool-Box-Talk-3.pdf
- https://www.buildingmentalhealth.net/tool-box-talk.html

Article on how to lead conversations and a workplace culture of care:

- https://constructionexec.com/article/the-importance-of-storytelling-in-messaging-suicide-prevention-in-the-workplace

Example of social-media post:

- https://www.facebook.com/HenselPhelpsCommunications/posts/3244846698956362

Best Practice

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7

A written program related to mental health and resources

Why are construction workers at risk?

Suicide trends in the construction industry are made that much more challenging because the culture, which focuses on physical safety on the job, does not always support *psychological* safety. The stereotypical construction jobsite has a culture that rewards machismo, physical strength and a habit of stifling emotion and a lack of empathy.

What you can do:

You can access free workplace-assessment tools that will guide you through analysis of your existing mental-health efforts and suggested additional practices. These assessments will also assist in the compilation of a written workplace program.

Resources

- https://workplacementalhealth.org/employer-resources/organizational-assessment
- https://preventconstructionsuicide.com/Integration_Resources

The written program is meant to serve as a tool to communicate to employees the value you place on them and the resources you have available to help them.

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8

Having mental-health posters and flyers available on the jobsite

Why are construction workers at risk?

The construction industry has not turned a blind eye to this crisis, however finding an intervention that is effective, comfortable for the workplace culture and does not require management to become ad hoc counselors is challenging. Posters can be a cost-effective and non-confrontational way to convey mental health and suicide-prevention messaging.

What you can do:

A subtle way to promote your commitment to worker mental health, and encourage investment in themselves, is to use posters and flyers on the jobsite.

Another helpful hint is to post them in the portable toilets onsite or in private places so that workers do not have to feel uncomfortable or vulnerable while looking at the resources in public settings.

Resources

Posters:

- https://preventconstructionsuicide.com/Posters
- https://workplacementalhealth.org/employer-resources/infographic-five-myths-and-facts-about-depression
- https://workplacementalhealth.org/employer-resources/infographic-depression
- https://www.rightdirectionforme.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Right_Direction-Poster2.0_v3.pdf
- https://www.cpwr.com/wp-content/uploads/suicide_prevention_infographic_1-start_a_conversation.pdf
- https://www.cpwr.com/wp-content/uploads/suicide_prevention_infographic_2-reach_out.pdf

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