Prioritizing Mental Health Awareness in the Construction Industry

Molly Pryde
California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo
San Luis Obispo, California

The construction industry is known as one of the most demanding industries for employees, both physically and mentally. Due to various factors associated with the working conditions and lifestyles of construction workers, the likelihood of mental health challenges amongst this demographic is quite high. Furthermore, industry culture surrounding masculinity poses a barrier to properly addressing the issue. Because of the dynamic and fast-paced work environment, assessing potential risks to protect workers is an integral part of each day on the job site. As a key component in company success and individual well-being, safety has become ingrained in construction culture. However, some safety concerns are lesser addressed, and this includes mental health. This paper is going to discuss the issue of mental illness for construction workers, its origins, and how the industry can approach it. The proposed solution is two-fold: first, companies can increase knowledge about mental health through educational resources; next, they can restructure industry culture by normalizing the topic of mental health from the top-down within their organizations. Alongside this study, a prototype ToolBox Talk was created to demonstrate how companies can implement this solution by educating their people and bringing awareness to mental health within the industry.

Key Words: Mental Health, Suicide Prevention, Safety, Toolbox Talk, Industry Culture

Introduction/Background – The Problem

According to the Center for Disease Control, the construction and extraction industries have a rate of 53.3 suicides per 100,000 workers – a rate that is the second highest out of any other industry. In fact, this number of construction workers who die by suicide is 5 times the number of construction workers who die from all other job-related causes annually (“Suicide Increasing”).

These numbers point towards a situation needing further investigation. Thus, the question remains: why is the construction industry seeing such a large spike in suicides and mental health issues? The nature and scope of this specific occupation make maintaining good mental health a challenge for many. According to the same study conducted by the CDC, the construction industry is characterized by a few common risk factors that are directly related to feelings of helplessness, ultimately challenging mental stability. These include: a competitive, high pressure work environment, a high prevalence of substance and alcohol use, end of term layoffs, a large separation from family, and financial stress.

High Pressure Work Environment

A project team’s success is determined by adherence to the schedule and budget. As a result, the labor force feels immense pressure to complete tasks both on time and without defects. When activities are running behind schedule, laborers often have to work extra hours which can be demanding both physically and mentally. Furthermore, the conditions on a job site are temporary and uncertain. This makes laborer’s tasks challenging, as they can often be impeded by unforeseen problems. Finally, due
to the nature of the work, construction is inherently dangerous. Each day, workers are exposed to hazardous conditions that put their lives at risk. Overall, the combination of all of these factors creates a very stressful work environment that can negatively impact mental well-being.

Substance Abuse
Substance abuse is common among the construction worker demographic because opioids are often prescribed for many workplace injuries (Koguchi). Around 15% of construction workers in the United States have a substance abuse disorder, compared to only 8.6% of the general adult population (Kaliszewski). This presence of addiction is strongly associated with depression and suicidal thoughts, furthering the extent of the industry’s mental illness epidemic. A worker already dealing with any kind of emotional turmoil may also become addicted to a substance. The result could be a harmful cycle of either situation aggravating the other.

End of Term Layoffs
Layoffs are quite common within the industry. In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 2015 that the number of quits in the construction industry is less than half the number of layoffs (“More Layoffs”). This extremely low quit-to-layoff ratio indicates a serious pattern of workers being relieved from jobs and is due to the nature of construction projects. As a project is completed, workers are routinely laid off and then must look to be rehired for another. In addition to the industry’s uncertain pattern of employment, coronavirus has further intensified job instability. According to a report from Procore published by the Associated General Contractors (AGC), the construction industry lost 975,000 jobs in April of 2020 as a result of the decreased demand for new projects (“Construction Industry Loses”). Consequently, this caused the unemployment rate for construction workers to skyrocket from 4.7 percent to 16.6 percent in just one year. Layered on top of the already large number of layoffs within the industry, the pandemic has noticeably caused even more unfortunate circumstances for many.

Separation from Family
As previously mentioned, construction laborers are known to work extremely long hours. In fact, their work weeks are often six days long, rather than the average five-day week for other occupations (Cao). Construction workers thus have less time to spend with their loved ones. Additionally, many workers live a large geographic distance away from their places of work, meaning they must spend much of their time commuting. Many cannot afford to live in the markets in which they work, and as a result, they must live in other, more affordable locations. In California, this situation is especially problematic. In fact, construction workers in the San Francisco Bay Area spend an average of 2 hours and 30 minutes to 5 hours and 20 minutes travelling to and from work (Husing). This time spent alone and away from family can take a serious toll on worker’s emotional health.

Financial Stress
Many construction workers also suffer from financial stress stemming from their hourly pay basis. They only get paid if they work, which creates a mindset of not being able to take time off, even if it would be imperative for their well-being. The high turnover rates of many projects also contribute to unsteady work patterns that may further induce financial instability.

Another study published in the Associated Society of Civil Engineers provides reasoning for the large presence of mental illness within the industry. This systematic review found that 97% of identified stressors for poor mental health in the construction industry are based on psychosocial conditions. In total, 32 risk factors including hours worked per day, nature of work, occupational hazards, fatigue,
and substance abuse can all harm the mental well-being of workers. On the other hand, a list of protective factors was also generated as the reversal of each risk factor. These include reduced job demand, family-friendly job opportunities, positive coping strategies, and better welfare. When deployed, protective factors decrease the impact of risk factors. Mental health interventions and promotions such as teaching stress management, giving encouragement, building teamwork, and strengthening colleague relationships are all ways that protective factors can be enhanced to combat mental illness in the industry. Unlike the risk factors, however, protective factors were found to be scarce in the industry (Chan). This study demonstrates that mental health problem for construction workers stem from the nature of the industry. It also demonstrates that actions can be taken to change the negative conditions experienced by workers.

Another significant aspect of this subject matter to consider is exactly who the affected individuals are. Although recent trends have shown a dramatic increase in the number of women in construction, the industry is still predominantly comprised of men. In fact, the standard demographic of a construction worker is a young to middle-aged adult male. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for men ages 25-34 in the United States, overlapping the same demographic of a construction worker (“Suicide”). The Bureau of Labor Statistics age breakdown from the current population survey in 2020 found that a large portion of all construction workers (about ¼) fits exactly in this age bracket (“Employed”). This demonstrates that the construction laborer population is already at a high risk of living with a mental condition.

Because mental health concerns revolve mostly around men in the industry, one must examine this which role gender plays. Men and women behave differently in many situations, including the discussion of emotional well-being. The way in which a male may respond to mental health concerns can be a large determinant in the severity of each mental illness case. Traditionally, the construction industry is marked by a deeply rooted “tough guy” culture that determines how males address their emotional concerns in the workplace. This ideology has become a major contributing factor to the alarming statistics beginning to appear.

According to a study titled “Males and Mental Health Stigma” published in the American Journal of Men’s Health, culture is defined as a person’s beliefs, values, and norms, within a given group (Chatmon). Culture ultimately dictates how people perceive the topic of mental illness and determines whether or not it is considered taboo. In the construction industry, the predominant culture is founded upon masculinity. The ideas of toughness, strength, and independence are entrenched in the workplace and are potential causes for the underuse of professional help. Because construction culture has made mental health taboo, the topic can go almost entirely undiscussed.

To look further at industry culture, one must understand the concept of toxic masculinity. When cultural pressures come into play, they can lead to restriction of behaviors that demonstrate emotion, such as crying or fear. Unsurprisingly, men in male-dominated occupations tend to more strongly adhere to these masculine gender norms. Male workers hold each other accountable for performing tasks in “masculine” ways, which emphasizes the need for strength and roughness, rather than vulnerability and expression (Ellyon). By clinging to these strict standards, men are often subject to worsened depression, substance abuse, increase in psychological stress, and discouragement in seeking help. Such consequences of harmful culture are made evident in suicide statistics for men versus women. In general, males die by suicide at a rate that is four times higher than that of females. This is due to the fact that the male demographic is less likely to seek help than women and often turn towards dangerous behaviors instead. Although broad in scope, the respective suicide rates for opposite genders are applicable to a narrower group like that of the construction work force.
Stigma is yet another potential reason for the presence of mental illness among construction workers and can be independent of gender. Universally, there exists a societal disapproval for people living with a mental illness, which ultimately poses a barrier to seeking help. Within the industry, the situation is no different. Workers may feel discouraged to address their mental health as a result. Although stigma is a new topic within construction, studies have been conducted in other industries having similar characteristics and demographics. One study of predominantly male military personnel discovered a significant inverse association between stigma towards individuals getting treatment for mental health and considering treatment for one’s own mental health problems. In summary, military men did not disapprove of others seeking help for mental illness, but strangely felt disapproval towards themselves doing the same (Ellyon). This shows that male individuals feel uncomfortable addressing mental health due to the opinions of other males, rather than their own. Furthermore, a surveyed participant from this study described the culture of the construction industry as having a “toxic masculinity” problem. Many other participants also concluded that deviating from this stereotypical masculine behavior would be seen as “feminine”. This demonstrates that stigma, while often a barrier for all people, can also be dependent on gender in certain situations. As shown in this study, the mostly male construction industry deals with the misperception that mental health is solely a women’s issue.

Project Purpose and Process - Proposed Solution

The purpose of researching this topic was to analyze the problem and find a way in which industry members can take action. It was important to fully understand the problem as a whole, and then look to the advice of mental health professionals. This process resulted in a proposed solution composed of two steps. The first of which is increasing industry members’ knowledge about mental illness, specifically the affected demographic of field workers. This involves educating people on the causes of mental illness, warning signs, and available resources. Another aspect of this first step is raising awareness. By enforcing such education and presenting workers with relevant information on a daily level, the industry can further shed light on the issue. The second step in finding a solution involves the reassessment of industry culture. In recent years, mental illness has become much more prevalent in not just the industry, but in society. In order to adapt to this change in times, the industry can begin addressing mental health by making it an integral part of the workplace.

Increasing Knowledge and Raising Awareness

One way in which workers can be made aware of the issue is through the use of a mental health-focused ToolBox Talk. These short, yet descriptive safety messages are used to highlight hazards, teach best practices, and emphasize safety requirements for employees prior to them beginning work. In today’s construction world, mental illness is just as big as any safety concern and is deserving of its own safety talk. As part of this study, a prototype ToolBox talk (see attached) was generated as an example of how companies can both increase knowledge and raise awareness. The goal of this flyer is to simply begin mental health discussions on the job site. It first includes some of the main statistics that illustrate the industry’s problem. It then outlines some useful information for workers such as the main indicators for someone struggling with a mental illness, as well as steps for how they can best assist themselves or a coworker in a tough situation. The phrase “Wreck the Stigma” was also developed and added on the Toolbox Talk. It is a quick, easy saying that can remind workers of their duty to break down the stigma surrounding mental health.

On the job site level, determining these warning signs of poor mental health and teaching workers to recognize them is a great way to increase knowledge. Dr. John Pompey, a licensed clinical
psychologist and CAT’s manager of its Behavioral Health programs, identifies three main categories of warning signs on the job site for someone living with a mental illness. The first category is called “Saying”. It encompasses the direct messages that people send to others to indicate that they are struggling. This may include a person expressing thoughts of suicide, or just mentioning that they are feeling depressed, anxious, lonely, etc. The second category is “Doing”. These are the behavioral signs that suggest a change in a person’s attitude and well-being. Increased absenteeism, unexplained productivity decline, social detachment, reckless behaviors, and disregard for safety are all indirect messages that individuals may send. Finally, the third category pertains to what is going on in the individual’s life outside of work. A person may be going through a divorce, dealing with a family issue, or struggling financially. All of these circumstances and more can take a serious toll on an individual’s well-being and can translate over to the job site. Any knowledge one may have about these circumstances in another’s life is an indicator that the individual may need help. (“WEBINAR”). However, because many of these signs can be discreet and can go unnoticed, there is a need for strong communication on the job site. It is crucial that workers check in with one another on a regular basis because one simply cannot know what is going on in each other’s lives unless they have vulnerable conversations. While this may seem unusual to do in the workplace, especially on a construction site, it is an important shift that must take place. This leads into the next step: re-assessing industry culture.

Re-assessing Industry Culture

Over the years, the industry has worked to create a profound culture of safety. Companies continuously encourage their employees to both think and act safely while discouraging taking any risks that may put one’s life in danger. Industry tradespeople are intensively trained to acknowledge the inherent dangers of their work. They are then given the tools to prevent any consequences. This culture of physical safety works from the top-down in a company, all with the goal of keeping the workforce safe. Perhaps this example could be applied to the industry’s upcoming mental health initiative. If mental health were to be equated to physical health, organizations could create cultures that prioritize the emotional well-being of their workers. On a job site, workers are never supposed to hesitate in telling a supervisor or coworker about a physical injury. A mental illness or symptom should be treated no different. However, stigma is the barrier that stands in the way and must be broken down. Dr. Pompey explains that the industry can do so by focusing on creating comfortable job site environments where people feel open to talk about their struggles. By normalizing vulnerability and having these types of conversations, companies can eradicate stigma. In addition, they can ensure that they are providing the necessary tools to all employees. This includes the educational resources previously mentioned but should also encompass things like seminars and workshops on topics such as stress management, free or subsidized clinical screenings, and various employee trainings (“Mental Health”).

According to the CDC, the workplace is the optimal setting to formulate a culture of mental health awareness. This is due to the fact that there are already communication structures in place, along with programs and policies that come from one central team. In addition, employers can use data to track progress and measure the effects (“Mental Health”). In fact, this ability could be more heavily utilized by companies so that the industry overall has more comprehensive data on mental health. They will then be able to better address the issue in the future. However, there are some case studies of companies that have successfully shifted their focus towards mental health awareness and suicide prevention within their existing structures. RK Construction, a Denver-based mechanical contracting, manufacturing, and service company, faced a serious incident that led them to completely change their culture. In 2014, a worker leaving the job site unexpectedly gave away his personal collection of tools to his coworkers. Later that day, that man took his own life. He was found shortly after by his
coworkers who realized the significance of his actions when it was already too late. After the tragic incident, Jon Kinning, co-owner of the company, began meeting with other industry leaders and psychology professionals to reevaluate RK’s culture. Since then, RK has begun implementing an entirely new framework of suicide prevention that includes 24-hour access to counseling services, leave benefits, and crisis training for employees. They also facilitate discussion on mental health through 2-3 toolbox talks per week (Noguchi). RK Construction is just one example of how supervisors and leaders in an organization can have a powerful influence on overall employee health and safety. Like many other aspects of company culture, mental health advocacy begins at the leadership level and trickles down.

In addition to individual contractors, there are several larger organizations that have begun public health campaigns. The Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention (CIASP) has helped raise awareness about the risk of suicide within the industry by providing resources for other organizations. Their website thoroughly discusses methods of prevention, intervention, and postvention so that members of the industry can build protective factors into their organizations, recognize and address risk factors, and effectively deal with crises if they are to occur (“CIASP”). This is another successful example of a group that has begun to re-assess industry culture. Their easily accessible tools allow the leadership of other companies to educate and prepare their workers. As a result, they are helping normalize the topic of mental health.

Conclusion

Recent data clearly points towards a mental health epidemic within the construction industry. The goal of this project was to not only identify this issue, but to discover why it has emerged and how it can be changed. It was found that various factors associated with the working conditions and lifestyles of construction workers have created an increasing likelihood of mental health challenges. While these struggles may be rooted in at-home circumstances or other non-job site situations, mental illness is something workers bring on site with them each and every day. As a result, mental illness is a safety risk in itself and should be treated as one. The industry needs to equate mental health with physical health, and this begins with company leadership breeding cultures that prioritize mental health awareness.

While a potential limitation of this study was that the topic of mental illness in construction is relatively unknown and undiscussed, the industry should not wait for the situation to worsen in order to see the greater need for research. Organizations should begin to look internally to see how mental illness impacts their own workforce. As discussed in this paper, many individuals, especially males, feel uncomfortable dealing with mental illness or simply do not know how to. For this reason, an industry movement needs to begin regardless of whether or not an organization experiences a triggering incident. Would a jobsite crew wait to talk about the hazards of working near an open excavation after a fatal “caught-in” incident? The answer is absolutely not. They would assess the potential hazard, have open conversation, and ask questions to prevent it from happening. Similarly, workers need to speak about the hazards of mental illness on a regular basis.

If every company were to first be introspective and remodel their cultures, they could potentially eliminate tragedies across the entire industry. In the end, project success is directly tied to worker well-being. In order to achieve the best project outcomes, workers need to feel safe, encouraged, and connected. Making mental health a critical aspect of safety will not only improve work environments but will protect the most valuable part of the industry: the people.
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TOOLBOX TALK
MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS & SUICIDE PREVENTION
Building a safer industry, one person at a time

53.3 out of 100,000 workers die by suicide annually. Men die from suicide at a rate that is 4 times the rate of women. Mental wellness should always be the number 1 priority on and off the job site.

Construction is hard, both physically and mentally. Maintaining good mental health can be a challenge due to the following factors:

- High physical and mental demand
- Long hours
- Uncertain job security due to layoffs
- Physical displacement from family and friends
- Higher rates of substance abuse
- Stigma around mental health
- Culture of masculinity

But just because it’s hard, does not mean you need to tough it out. Recognizing that the job is hard and knowing you are not alone is the first step. It’s important to treat mental health and physical health equally and to make it part of your safety habits each day, on and off the job site.

Wreck the Stigma

How you can help wreck the mental health stigma:

- Pay close attention to the well-being of yourself and others
- Look out for warnings signs and encourage others to seek help if needed
- Start conversations and ask vulnerable questions
- Be conscious of your language
- Know your resources and connect with them

WARNING SIGNS

On Site
- Change in personality
- Increased absenteeism
- Engagement in risky or reckless behaviors
- Uncharacteristic gifting of personal items to others
- Decreased productivity
- Directly mentioning feelings of depression, anxiety, isolation, etc.

Off Site
- Dealing with challenges in their personal life
  - Family issues
  - Financial struggles
  - Substance abuse

National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-8255
Crisis Text Line
Text HOME to 741741 to speak to a trained counselor