

COVID-19: ONE MORE REASON TO TAKE MENTAL HEALTH SERIOUSLY

By Bruce Morton

Even in the best of times, mental well-being is a major concern in the construction industry. Many studies suggest that people who work in construction experience higher levels of mental health issues. In fact, CDC reports that this industry has one of the highest rates of suicide of any occupation (Peterson et al., 2018).

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, construction workers now face added pressures: the risk of themselves or loved ones becoming infected by COVID-19, real or potential job losses, school closures and other problems. The question is, how will they handle this extra pressure at work and at home? Will it directly affect their relationships with coworkers, family and friends? As contractors, can we help those who may be affected?

Many of us who work in this industry have experience of how important it is to support and understand mental health. Action surrounding this component of well-being is a critical piece to fostering a safe and healthy workforce and to helping contractors manage overall risk while containing workers' compensation costs. Fortunately, the industry has recognized this problem and is working on solutions (Carson J. Spencer Foundation et al., 2015). So, what can contractors do to manage the pressures stemming from the pandemic?

Support Employees' Overall Health

Creating a safer workplace helps reduce the likelihood of injuries, which are known to contribute to mental health issues. In a study by Institute for Work and Health (IWH, 2016), this correlation was directly measured. Within a 12-month period following an on-the-job injury, seven out of 10 injured workers reported frequent bouts of depression. Many construction workers suffer from compounding ailments resulting from injuries experienced on the job, including ongoing pain, psychosocial consequences of being unable to work and

Vantage Point

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abuse of pain management medications. A safer workplace also means fully implementing COVID-19 safety practices that are meant to keep employees not only healthy but also mentally at ease. These measures include improved sanitation, social distancing, leave for employees who may have COVID-19, and, when necessary, reducing or suspending construction activity.

Talk to Employees About Mental Health; Encourage Them to Talk About It Too

My son has severe mental health troubles. For a long time, my wife and I did not talk to others about it. This took a physical and emotional toll on our family. We found that once we talked to other parents and people who were in a similar situation, we were helped tremendously. I recently talked to a colleague about my son, and he pulled me aside to tell me about his son. I was able to provide this colleague some information that, I hope, will help his family in the long run. Such talks are rare in the workplace. National Alliance on Mental Illness (2019) states that although one in five Americans lives with mental illness, only 43% seek support.

This means very few of our employees who need mental health support are getting it through the workplace. Unfortunately, the typical construction site is not a place where people talk about their feelings or personal struggles. Regular communication from management about mental well-being should be part of standard safety messages.

It is also important to offer a culture in which employees feel comfortable discussing how they are doing. Employers can do simple things such as promote #IWillListen. Started in 2013, this campaign is designed to help break the stigma of mental health issues and allow employees to find trustworthy advocates for support.

Take Effective Actions

It is essential to give all managers the training they need to identify mental health problems and play a constructive role. Resources such as the ICU Program, a workplace campaign from Center for Workplace Mental Health designed to foster a workplace culture that supports emotional health, provide guidelines for establishing a stigma-free work site. Similarly, training on mental health first aid can improve managers' understanding of mental health and helps employees make use of appropriate resources.

Implementing programs like this will support those in construction and other industries to learn how to prevent problems from escalating while providing a supportive workplace. Additionally, it is important not only to identify people who are at risk, but also to assess your organization's mental health benefits to make sure they are relevant and accessible. During these times of shutdowns and furloughs, it is important to itemize workplace sick pay, leave policies and

healthcare coverage, but these are also key assessments to make to continue to be supportive of employee mental health.

Conclusion

The stigma around mental illness is real, and we need to make an effort to lessen it. As I stated, it was difficult to talk to others about my son's mental health struggles. By talking about them, we were led to many great people who later helped us as a family at home, school and work. I encourage people to talk to each other, their employees and their medical health providers for the mental well-being of themselves, their family and their workplace. A safer workplace, good communication, effective training and supportive benefits are recognized in the industry as compassionate best practices for promoting a healthier and more productive workforce. We will not solve this problem overnight, but we can take steps now that will make a real difference. **PSJ**

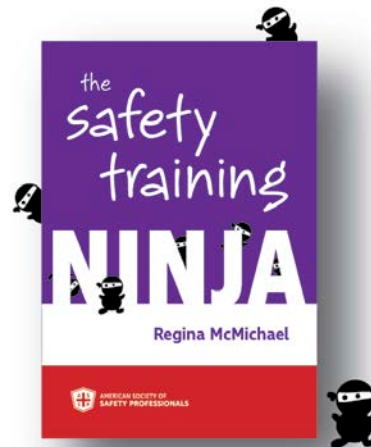
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