

TOOLBOX TALK #1

Mental Health 101



Mental health is just as important as physical health, and that's especially true in the construction industry. Construction workers face unique pressures that can make managing mental health more difficult. From high-stress job demands to long hours and physical exhaustion, these factors can take a toll on mental well-being. Add in the stigma of asking for support in a traditionally tough, male-dominated field, and it becomes clear why construction workers are at higher risk for mental health conditions than the general public. While many of us already have a basic understanding of mental health, it's important to remind ourselves that mental health is not just about avoiding illness but actively managing stress, emotions, and mental well-being, especially in the face of the tough demands of our work.

Why Are Construction Workers at Higher Risk?

The construction industry consistently ranks among the highest for mental health challenges and suicide rates. There are several reasons why this is the case:

- **High-stress environment:** Tight deadlines, long hours, and physically demanding work increase stress and anxiety.
- **Injury and physical strain:** Chronic pain and injuries on the job can lead to depression and substance abuse as workers seek ways to cope.
- **Job instability:** The cyclical nature of construction projects, along with potential layoffs and seasonal work, can contribute to financial and emotional stress.
- **Isolation:** Working in remote locations or away from family can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- **Stigma around mental health:** In a field where toughness and self-resilience are often valued, asking for help can be seen as a weakness, making it harder for workers to admit they need support.

Recognizing the Signs

- Sudden changes in mood or behavior.
- Increased irritability.
- Withdrawal from social activities or isolation.
- Decline in job performance or increased absenteeism.
- Comments about feeling hopeless, trapped, or overwhelmed.

GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Why do you think there is still a stigma around talking about mental health in the construction industry, and what can we do to make it easier to talk about it?
2. What strategies or techniques do you use to manage stress or anxiety at work?

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Effective Tools for Managing Stress and Mental Health on the Job

Managing your mental health on the job doesn't have to be complicated. There are simple strategies and tools you can use to help reduce stress and maintain well-being both at work and at home. Here are a few to keep in mind:

- **Breathing exercises for stress relief:** One of the easiest and most effective ways to reduce stress is through controlled breathing exercises. Taking a few moments to focus on your breathing can help calm your mind, reduce physical tension, and improve your focus. Here's a simple technique you can try anytime during your shift:
 - **4-7-8 Breathing Technique:**
 - Inhale slowly through your nose for 4 seconds.
 - Hold your breath for 7 seconds.
 - Exhale slowly through your mouth for 8 seconds.
 - Repeat this cycle 3-5 times.
- **Stay connected:** Social connection is a powerful tool for reducing stress and improving mental health. Talk to your coworkers, even if it's just for a few minutes during a break.
- **Physical activity:** In addition to the physical demands of the job, incorporating light exercise during breaks or before/after shifts can improve your mood and reduce stress. Even simple movements like stretching or a short walk can increase blood flow, reduce tension, and release endorphins - the body's natural stress relievers.
- **Set boundaries between work and home:** It's easy for the stress of the job to carry into your personal life, but setting clear boundaries between work and home is essential. When you're off the clock, make a conscious effort to focus on activities that bring you joy or relaxation, whether it's spending time with your family, pursuing hobbies, or simply resting.
- **Practice gratitude:** Taking a moment to focus on the positives, even in tough situations, can help shift your mindset. At the end of each day, think about three things you're grateful for. Practicing gratitude regularly can help counter negative thinking patterns and reduce stress.

Managing stress and maintaining mental health are ongoing processes. It's not about waiting until something goes wrong - it's about actively taking steps to protect your mental well-being every day.

988 Lifeline

TEAM 1-800-634-7710

Additional resources can be found at www.northcountrycarpenter.org/mental-health