

TOOLBOX TALK #11

Alcohol and Substance Use



The construction industry demands a lot – long hours, heavy lifting, and often high-stress environments that can take a toll physically and mentally. With one of the highest suicide rates across professions, it is clear that mental health is a critical challenge for construction workers. Alcohol and substance use may seem like a way to cope with stress, but it often leads to worsening mental health and increased job safety risks. This toolbox talk will explore why it is important to address this topic, how to recognize signs, ways to look out for each other, and strategies to break the cycle.

Why Talk About Alcohol & Substance Use?

The construction field has one of the highest suicide rates among all professions, and alcohol and substance use are known factors that contribute to this statistic. For many, using these substances may seem like a way to relieve stress. But rather than alleviating mental strain, alcohol and drugs often worsen mental health by increasing feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation. Over time, substance use can severely impact decision-making, impulse control, and relationships, both on and off the job.

Recognizing the Signs

Spotting the signs of alcohol or substance misuse can be difficult, especially since people often go to great lengths to hide it. Some common indicators include:

- **Behavioral Changes:** Mood swings, increased irritability, or withdrawing from others.
- **Physical Signs:** Shaky hands, poor coordination, bloodshot eyes, or a noticeable change in physical appearance.
- **Job Performance:** Increased mistakes, absenteeism, or struggling to complete tasks that were once routine.
- **Mental State:** Anxiety, depression, or displaying hopelessness are often linked to alcohol and drug misuse.

Recognizing these symptoms is crucial. If you or someone else is showing signs of struggling with substance use, it's important to reach out and offer support.

GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Have you ever noticed someone struggling with substance use at work? How did you approach the situation, or how would you approach it now?
2. What are some activities or routines outside of work that help you unwind and manage stress in a healthy way?

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Ways Crews Can Look Out for Each Other

On the construction site, substance use increases the risk of accidents and injuries, not only for the individual but also for the entire team. Alcohol and drugs impair judgment, delay reaction times, and lead to mistakes that can be fatal in our line of work. Some studies even show that construction workers are more likely to misuse substances to handle the physical pain or stress of the job, but this short-term “solution” creates greater, long-term safety issues.

Strategies to Break the Cycle

If you’re experiencing increased use of alcohol or substances, or if you know someone who is, there are ways to work toward a healthier path. Here are some strategies:

1. **Talk to Someone You Trust:** This could be a coworker, supervisor, family member, or a professional counselor. Often, just opening up can reduce feelings of isolation and provide much-needed relief.
2. **Find Healthier Coping Mechanisms:** Physical activity, hobbies, or even simple relaxation exercises can be effective alternatives to cope with stress.
3. **Set Small Goals:** If you’ve been drinking more than you’d like, consider setting limits or taking it one day at a time. Celebrate small victories.
4. **Seek Professional Support:** Programs like the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can provide confidential support and connect you to resources for mental health and addiction counseling.
5. **Stay Busy After Hours:** Having activities to do after work can reduce the temptation to drink or use substances.

Looking Out for Each Other

Our industry is demanding, and it can feel like no one truly understands the stress we go through on the job. That’s why we need to be there for each other and create a culture of support. Look out for coworkers who might be struggling; sometimes, just asking “How are you really doing?” can open the door for someone to share. Offer a listening ear, show patience, and don’t hesitate to encourage them to get help if you’re concerned for their well-being.

In our line of work, it’s important to stay sharp and maintain a safe and supportive work environment. Substance use and mental health struggles can feel overwhelming, but know that help is available. By looking out for ourselves and each other, we can create a stronger, healthier workplace. If you’re feeling pressured or are struggling, remember that support is available, and no problem is too big to face with help. Let’s commit to keeping each other safe, not just on the job, but in life.

988 Lifeline

TEAM 1-800-634-7710

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