TOOLBOX TALK #11

Veterans Mental Health

November is a time to honor our nation's Veterans and to recognize the unique challenges many face after serving. In our industry, we work alongside veterans every day. They are our crew members, friends, mentors, and leaders. But behind the strong exterior, some may carry unseen challenges that affect their mental health both on and off the job. Construction already ranks among the top industries affected by mental health struggles and suicide. When you combine that with the additional pressures veterans often experience - transitioning from military to civilian life, managing PTSD, or coping with chronic pain - the risk grows even higher. We will be focusing on awareness and resources so every one of us can feel more confident recognizing the signs and helping our fellow veterans in need.

Did you know?

- ***Over 5.2 million veterans live with a mental health condition*** such as PTSD or depression.
- ***Veterans are 1.5 times more likely to die by suicide*** than the general population.

Common Risk Factors for Veterans in the Trades

Veterans bring discipline, teamwork, and resilience to our industry - but they also face unique and complex stressors that can make mental health challenges more likely.

- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** (PTSD): Exposures to trauma during military service can cause flashbacks, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and difficulty concentrating - all of which can affect day-to-day life and work performance.
- **Transition Challenges**: Going from military service to civilian life can be a major adjustment - losing the structure, camaraderie, and clear mission of military life can lead to isolation, confusion, or loss of identity.
- **Chronic Pain and Physical Injury**: Many veterans experience long-term pain or disabilities that can contribute to depression or anxiety, especially when combined with the physical demands of construction work.
- **Relationship Strain**: The transition to family or civilian life can cause tension at home, particularly if emotional or communication struggles are present.
- **Sleep Issues**: Veterans with PTSD or other conditions often struggle with insomnia or nightmares, which can sometimes lead to alcohol or drug use for a way to cope, increasing the risk of addiction and worsening mental health.
- **Isolation and Loss of Camaraderie**: The sense of unity and solidarity of military life can be hard to replace. In construction, working long hours or traveling for jobs can make veterans feel disconnected from support systems.
- **Stigma and Silence**: Many veterans are training to "push through" or "deal with it," making it harder to open up about struggles or ask for help.

GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. What resources do we have available through the Carpenters Union, job site, or local community that could help a veteran in need?
2. If you could share one message with a veteran coworker today, what would it be?

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Recognizing the Signs

Mental health challenges do not always look the same, but they often show up in subtle ways that can be noticed. Common signs among veterans may include:

- **Heightened startle response** or being easily agitated by loud noises or sudden movements.
- **Hypervigilance or anxiety** - always on "guard," or difficulty relaxing.
- **Withdrawal** from coworkers or crew activities they once enjoyed.
- **Sleep difficulties** - showing up tired, distracted, or disengaged.
- **Talking about guilt or feeling like a burden** related to past experiences or current challenges.
- **Emotional numbness** - appearing detached or disinterested.
- **Expressions of feeling trapped, hopeless, or purposeless**.

If you ever notice these signs, do not assume it is just stress or a bad day. It is always better to ask and check in because your conversation might be the lifeline that helps someone open up or seek help.

V.A. SAVE Training

The VA provides a free, brief online or in-person course that will help you act with care and compassion if you come across a Veteran who is in crisis or having thoughts of suicide. The acronym S.A.V.E. helps you remember the important steps involved in suicide prevention: SPOT the signs, ASK the critical question, VALIDATE the Veteran's experience, and ENCOURAGE and support next steps. Scan the QR code to learn more about the free, voluntary VA S.A.V.E. training.

After completing this course, you will be able to:

- Develop a general understanding of the problem of suicide in the United States
- Identify a Veteran who might be at risk for suicide
- Discuss what to do if you identify a Veteran at risk

Our veterans have already shown incredible courage, commitment, and sacrifice through their service. Let's honor that by not only watching out for one another—both on and off the job site—but by challenging ourselves this month to better understand mental health and take action to support those around us. Because in this union, no one fights alone.

This month, challenge yourself to:

- Complete the free, voluntary VA S.A.V.E. training.
- Check in on a veteran coworker, family member, or friend—sometimes a simple conversation makes all the difference.
- Save these numbers in your phone: 988 (Press 1 for Veteran support) and TEAM: 1-800-634-7710

988 Lifeline **TEAM 1-800-634-7710**

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