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Proactive behavioral health for construction and trades - by Debra Wein

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Wellness Workdays

No one can argue that 2020 and the coronavirus pandemic have created major stressors in our personal and professional lives and have caused many of us to experience greater levels of stress, anxiety, depression and fear. Even before COVID-19, one in five Americans suffered from a mental health condition and about 50% of people are diagnosed with a mental health illness or disorder within their lifetime.

World-wide, the construction industry has one of the worst records for employee mental health and suicides. According to a 2018 CDC report, the U.S. suicide rates are highest among men in the construction and extraction (mining) sectors. Men in both high skill, high risk positions, such as site managers, are 1.5 times more likely to die from suicide. Uneducated male employees are also at high risk for mental health issues and self-harm. The construction industry paints a grim picture for mental health and encompasses entry-level workers all the way up to management.

Now, with the pandemic, more recent data shows that 75% of workers have experienced burnout, and, of those people, 40% specifically cited the COVID-19 crisis as the cause. The male-dominated construction industry is an industry where misconceptions about the cause and treatment of mental and behavioral health may continue to thrive. Often, men are taught to be “strong and silent,” self-sufficient, and thus when issues arise, they often, continue to suffer in isolation and do not seek help. The truth is that mental illness is caused by a number of factors including biological factors, stressful or traumatic life events, and long-lasting health conditions such as heart disease or cancer, rather than gender or weakness or defects in character.

The failure to address behavioral health issues in the construction industry, along with high job demands and long work hours can lead to poor outcomes for employees and their employers. High levels of stress and anxiety lead to higher rates of chronic conditions, premature illness, and even death. Additional outcomes can include lower productivity, increased absenteeism, and poor staff retention rates.

Fortunately, several large and small employers in the construction industries and trades are taking considerable steps to remove the stigma associated with behavioral health issues. For example, Turner Construction has focused on these issues for years as part of their Active Caring Campaign. “Recognizing that substance use in the construction industry is 4 to 6 times the national average, we knew that we needed to be a part of the solution. As a result, we raised the conversation around safety to include the topic of substance use/misuse as well as mental health, suicide prevention and physical well-being. Our partners now provide individual coaching and counseling to not only help those in need but also to help those at risk,” said Bruce Ventura, VP at Turner Construction in Boston, MA.

The changes Turner Construction and other companies are making are designed to reshape employees’ attitudes about mental health while encouraging compassion and providing resources for those struggling with anxiety, depression, or other conditions. Businesses in the construction industry can do the same by educating their employees and adopting company policies to help educate, recognize and support people on their workforce with these conditions.

In addition to being the “right thing to do,” there is a strong business case to provide behavioral health awareness and support. Mental and behavioral health problems in the workplace have a direct negative impact on employers and businesses due to increased absenteeism and reduced presenteeism, productivity, and profits.

Another, smaller New England-based firm has been focused on wellness and has experienced the benefits of a personal approach. “As an industrial contracting company with crews working throughout New England, we are consistently looking to improve our employees’ access to well-being resources and self-care,” said Joseph Costello, VP, human resources, Bancroft Corp.

“To serve the physical, emotional and mental health needs of our team, we have provided each employee with access to meet one-to-one with a health coach and thus provide our crews a unique bridge to accessible, adaptive, and preventive health-related services both at home and while on the road.” As a result of the coaching program, there was a 67% decrease in risky behaviors, a 55% reduction in binge drinking, and a 50% reduction in alcohol abuse.

As an employer, managing a workforce has gotten tougher with COVID-19 and additional stressors associated with delayed construction, additional safety requirements, challenging schedules, and permitting as well as financial strains. Below are some guidelines to consider in order to safeguard the well-being of your employees and subs:

1. Implement strong safety and training protocols that include behavioral health

Getting injured physically not only hurts the body but can also contribute to additional mental and emotional stress. Among chronic pain sufferers, 85% also experience severe depression. Implementing strategies that protect against both physical and mental harm make for a safer work environment. As organizations often include training for workers on safe driving techniques, proper

loading and unloading, equipment maintenance, and how to use personal protective equipment such as hard hats, goggles, and masks, the additional focus should be on raising awareness of mental health concerns and providing resources.

2. Encourage an open culture

In order for employees to share their struggles without facing criticism, they need to feel they are in a safe environment. The Suicide Prevention Resource Center, along with several other safety organizations and employers published a Construction Industry Blueprint for managers and employers about how to talk to an employee who might be at risk for suicide. This guide includes scripts for starting open discussions, toolbox talks on the importance of mental health, and benchmarks to evaluate your well-being initiatives and make improvements where needed. A convenient alternative is having a resilience coaching program or employee assistance program (EAP) with on-site counselors and therapists.

3. Embrace the Conversation around Mental Health

Leaders and managers who regularly talk about mental health can change the tone and the culture of their organization. While this outreach may feel awkward and uncomfortable initially, perseverance will pay off, prompting workers to take advantage of therapy and other benefits (and perhaps openly come forward in time with their own struggles, resolves, and success stories).

4. Move from fixing to preventing

This involves re-envisioning how employees access the care, usually provided in a medical trailer. Instead of simply treating the worker, try to promote the health, safety, and wellness of each individual. Help each employee move from surviving his day-to-day to thriving- at work and at home. Bring on a health coach so that s/he can also serve as care manager, health advocate, and an extension of safety.

5. Educate your workforce

While certain behaviors may immediately point to an immediate risk for mental health concerns or even suicide, there are other factors or behaviors that can alert your team to ask more questions, listen, and offer your support. Teach your team to look out for these warning signs/behaviors*:

- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; Behaving recklessly

- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

*Adapted from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center

The larger vision of employee well-being at the jobsite

What can be done to enhance an individual's quality of life both on and off the job? Consider the following:

- Ensure the integration of wellness and safety efforts to promote a culture of health and well-being.
- Integrate well-being services with existing business objectives and focus areas.
- Maintain low-risk employees in low-risk categories as they age.
- Improve overall health, concentrating on high-risk behaviors and chronic disease.
- Help employees become better health care consumers and assist in finding local resources (unions, state, community etc).
- Offer consistent, free, onsite health coaching to bring the same concept of prevention to the jobsite. Rather than focusing on treating the injury, focus on treating the person and further preventing injuries.
- Consider presenteeism and absenteeism to enhance productivity and safety.
- Work to identify "root cause" of workplace accidents and injuries to promote a more focused and safer workplace.
- When a staff person, partner, or sub accesses a medical trailer at a jobsite, provide access to someone who is qualified and eager to help him/her:
 - Achieve wellness, not just avoid illness
 - Feel supported rather than simply "managed"
 - Experience care not just an encounter

- Learn to be safe at work and at home

- Understand his/her chronic condition, medication or illness and how to manage and overcome it, when possible

Bottom Line: An open conversation in any workplace, but particularly in a high-stress environment with high stakes, can promote a strong culture of safety and well-being.

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