



COVID-19 and Construction

Behavioral Health in our Present & Future Workforce

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, mental health remains a very important safety and health topic. The following article is a behavioral health update from our partner, MindWise Innovations.

In our Winter 2020 *Leader* magazine article, we discussed the role of early identification and workplace resources for addressing behavioral health problems, as well as the need to reduce stigma regarding mental health and substance misuse through informed dialogue. We recognized that a psychologically safe work environment creates the foundation to hold uncomfortable, yet impactful conversations about behavioral health. Mental illness and substance misuse are treatable. As individuals

face the impact of a global pandemic recognizing behavioral health struggles and providing resources are effective actions that can be taken on an individual and systemic level. Since March, health and financial problems due to the pandemic have resulted in increased levels of stress and uncertainty for individuals and families. For some, the U.S. national unrest has intensified concerns about one's wellbeing and presents unique challenges.

Impact of COVID-19 and Quarantine

According to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation survey, 45 percent of American adults report that their mental health has been negatively impacted by worry and stress due to coronavirus. U.S. Census Bureau statistics reveal that the impact of the pandemic is felt more significantly by some age groups: 42 percent of 18-29 year olds reported anxiety, while 36 percent reported depression. Among those aged 30-39, 34 percent reported anxiety and 28 percent depression. Further the national unrest in the United States has contributed additional concerns

across age, ethnic and racial groups (U.S. Census Bureau).

MindWise Research

In the last six months, MindWise conducted surveys and polls assessing the impact of COVID-19 on businesses. In one instance 45 percent of businesses endorsed that, "employee mental health is an extremely important part of their culture," with 20 percent saying they're starting to see a need to offer more education and resources. Regarding the impact of the pandemic, 30 percent of employers are concerned that returning to work and re-opening plans during COVID-19 will increase employee anxiety. Fifty-five percent are concerned not only about employee anxiety, but also racial equality and diversity, and job/financial insecurity.

Behavioral Health, Mental Health, Mental Illness— What's the Difference?

Mental health is defined by the World Health Organization as a state of wellbeing in which people realize their own potential, can cope with the normative stresses of life, derive satisfaction



from relationships, and work productively. The ability to manage in the face of adversity and loss while growing resilience is all part of mental health.

Mental illness is different than mental health. Mental illness includes a range of conditions for which there are standard criteria used to diagnose them, such as depression, anxiety and substance use disorders. A mental illness significantly affects how a person feels, thinks, behaves and interacts with other people. Mental illnesses are diagnosed by mental health professionals and when recognized early can be effectively treated. Contrary to stereotypes, individuals with mental illness are able to lead productive and happy lives when committed to treatment as needed. According to National Institute of Mental Health, as of 2017, nearly one in five U.S. adults live with a mental illness.

Behavioral health is an umbrella term that includes both mental health and substance misuse with the recognition that both often co-exist and impact one another.

How to Make Sense of the Increased Report of Anxiety and Depression?

In the face of an ongoing health pandemic, natural disasters, and national unrest—depression and anxiety are normative reactions. It is important to distinguish between normative emotional, psychological and physiological responses to stressors and underlying mental health struggles or mental illness. It is also true that the current environment stressors can

worsen underlying conditions. When concerns about one's mental health surfaces, it can be useful to look at the timeline. When did the struggles begin and how long have the symptoms lasted? What has changed, and how bad does it feel? The difference between reactive experiences to prolonged stress and knowing pre-existing behavioral health problems can be confusing and are best approached by consulting with a mental health professional.

Why Future Workforce?

The CDC has consistently ranked construction and manufacturing as industries with the highest rates of death by suicide, with four times the incidence compared to the general population. Industry related factors such as transient work opportunities, physical demands, financial stress and a culture of stoicism contribute to high rates of substance misuse. Mental health struggles show up in the workplace through absenteeism, presenteeism, accidents and poor morale which affects both individuals and team morale. From a safety standpoint, behavioral factors such as poor concentration, anxiety, burnout, and substance use increase the chance of onsite accidents.

During a series of focus groups for a leading construction company, MindWise heard from men and women who had worked in construction from one year to over 20 years and found the conversations to be remarkable candid. In fact, seasoned workers acknowledged that the need to address mental health and substance misuse in the workplace was overdue.

Action Steps for Organizations

- ✓ Recognize the need to start a dialogue about behavioral health
- ✓ Provide awareness materials and specialized trainings
- ✓ Promote early identification and provide access to resources
- ✓ Engage at a national level
 - Take American Association of Suicidology (AAS) workplace suicide prevention pledge.
[WorkplaceSuicidePrevention.com](https://www.aas-suicideprevention.com)
 - Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention (CIASP) provides a variety of resources for small construction companies.
[preventconstruction suicide.com](https://www.preventconstruction suicide.com)

Bedrock for a Healthier Workforce

Leadership's commitment to addressing behavioral health needs, and prioritizing it as a human and financial imperative, are vital to bringing about lasting change. Determine what behavioral health resources are available within your organization. Companies often provide wellness services which typically address physical health, but not often mental health. Learn about how depression results in unscheduled absenteeism, how anxiety can show up as presenteeism, and ways in which unrecognized behavioral health struggles can decrease productivity and team performance. The problem is not that individuals struggle with their behavioral health; the true problem is that mental health and substance use in the workplace have been ignored. For the good of the current and future workforce, remember that behavioral health struggles are treatable and suicide prevention can save lives. What is the first step that your organization will take?



Younger group members appeared more comfortable discussing these issues, likely due to generational differences in the ways mental health has been openly discussed in schools and amongst peers. Given the stress inherent in construction and related fields it is important to maximize the younger workforce's readiness to address behavioral health.

Real Needs

The labor needs within construction require that we find ways to support young professionals' ability to thrive in the industry. Eighty percent of construction companies surveyed reported difficulties filling jobs. (Associated General Contractors of America & Autodesk survey, 2020). Additionally, a recent survey found that nearly half (44 percent) of responding firms indicated that labor shortages caused them to lengthen completion time for projects already underway. (Autodesk, 2020). Attracting a younger workforce to the construction industry is a major challenge. Mentorship, free training and paths to advancement are key incentives adjunct to payroll. Given the mental health and substance misuse risks associated with the pressured, physically demanding, and transient nature of construction, supporting behavioral health needs of young professionals is vital to long-term health, safety, productivity and career longevity.

Building a Healthy Pipeline

Addressing the need to attract young workers to the construction industry, a recent article in Redbox noted, "Outreach to high schools and technical colleges can help stimulate the development of trades programs that could channel more workers towards construction work when they enter the job market."

In addition to providing vocational style programs to enhance readiness for construction and related fields, providing behavioral health and suicide prevention training in trade schools and apprenticeships serves to:

1. Recognize signs of mental health and substance misuse struggles in oneself and others
2. Understand how mental health problems can show up and disrupt relationships and the ability to function
3. Prepare young professionals for the transition from schools/apprenticeships to the work environment, and
4. Learn effective strategies to manage stress and anxiety to build competency and self-efficacy. Feeling pride in one's professional work is key to healthy self-esteem, motivation and productive engagement with team members.

How COVID-19 has Changed the Conversation About Behavioral Health

The impact of the global pandemic is surfacing behavioral health needs in unprecedented ways. Respondents to the MindWise workplace survey indicated that the biggest driver of investing in employee mental health programs is "providing a better office culture, emphasizing health and wellbeing." The second was increasing employee retention and morale, while the lowest priority was lowering health care costs.

When organizations begin looking at ways to address employee behavioral health, they turn to one of the most commonly used resources: Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). Ninety percent of organizations provide access to EAP services, yet historically utilization rates hover at just 5.5 percent (according to the National Business Group on Health in 2018). A MindWise poll found that 60 percent of employers direct employees to their EAP when they ask for mental health resources or assistance, with 15 percent sending people to internal HR staff. The most effective way to encourage help-seeking is making mental health visible by talking about it and providing a variety of resources while strengthening the bridge to the EAPs. 📌