



BUILDING BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

By Lisa Desai & Bryan Kohl, MindWise Innovations

A national poll of United States employees found that 76 percent of workers struggled with at least one issue that affected their mental health. Behavioral health problems, including substance abuse, can harm employee performance and wellbeing in significant ways.

In the construction industry, the risks are far greater. A recent study, published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), found that 20 percent of all men who died by suicide in the United States were in the construction or extraction industry. In its November 16 Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, the CDC identified construction and extraction as the occupational group with the highest rate of male suicide among American workers. Mental health is an aspect of overall wellness and it is imperative that employers recognize the need for equal access to behavioral health information and access to resources. The Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation report on the Opioid Crisis cited that absenteeism, presenteeism and excessive healthcare costs total \$4.8 billion dollars.

Those in construction are one of the highest risk groups for suicide risk and substance misuse. Why the increased risk? Studies cite that the short-term, transient nature of the job resulting in financial instability and lack of workplace community, as well as the physically demanding nature of the job contribute to risk. Specifically, workplace injuries can result in use of prescribed medication which might be abused. More than 15 percent

of construction workers have abused drugs or alcohol or prescription medications. Some of the most abused prescription drugs include OxyContin, Percocet, and Vicodin. The contribution of substance misuse to high-risk behavior is highlighted when we consider that opioid use is associated with a 40 to 60 percent increased likelihood of suicidal thoughts, and a 75 percent increased likelihood of suicide attempt.

Starting the Conversation

The CDC has recommended specific actions to decrease suicide risk, which include fostering social connections, facilitating access to appropriate mental health and substance misuse resources and providing postvention responses when possible. The first step, however, is talking more openly about the problem. Why is it so hard to talk about mental health issues? In some ways, we may speak more openly about alcohol abuse and substance misuse but less easily talk about anxiety and depression. Stigma, the fear of being judged and considered less able, perpetuates the silence surrounding mental health issues. Awareness campaigns such as Stamp Out Stigma by the Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness (ABHW) highlight

Impact by the numbers:

Workers with opioid use disorders miss an extra

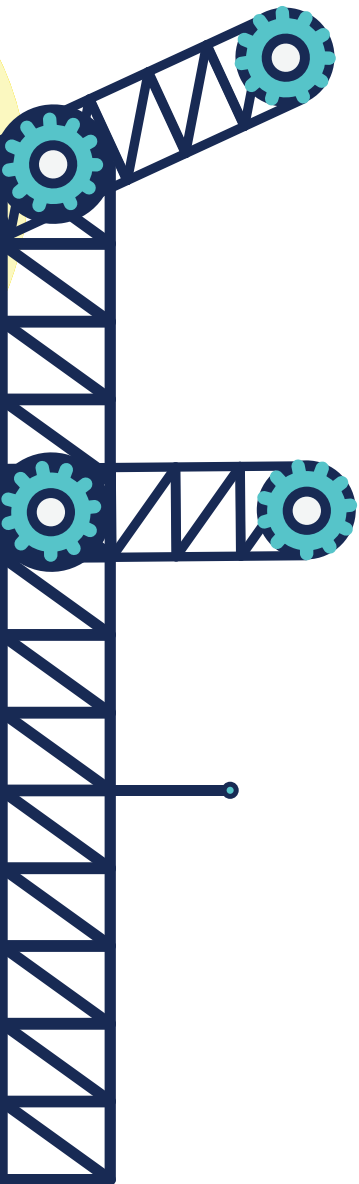
18.5 days of work per year (three work weeks) compared to the general workforce.

Workers in construction experience the highest rates of substance use disorders,

15.6 percent of employees on average living with a substance use disorder.

An estimated **\$74 billion** is lost every year in reduced work productivity due to alcohol consumption, from absences, reduced output, premature retirement or death, or reduced earning potential.

—National Survey on Drug Use and Health



Suicide in the construction industry is **4X** the national average.



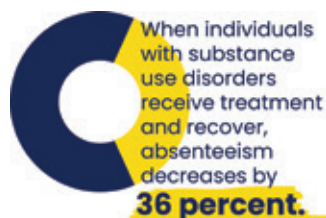
Lack of Community
Short-term, transient jobs make it hard to establish stability and connections



Culture
Risk-taking, stoicism & self-reliance make them less likely to seek help



Demographics
Mostly white men ages 45-64, who have the highest risk of suicide



personal stories so that voices of courage and survival are heard. In the construction industry, conversations need to be initiated and continued at a systemic level to encourage change.

Stereotypes perpetuate false information and myths, and can best be combatted by accurate information. For example, research shows that depression, anxiety, alcoholism, and even eating disorders have contributing biochemical factors. So, while many individuals continue to think of mental health struggles as personal weaknesses, biochemical and genetic factors, in concert with environmental stressors, contribute significantly to behavioral health.

The incidence of mental health in the population is staggering. 50 percent of Americans will experience a mental health issue during their lifetime. Yet, less than half of Americans with diagnosed mental health conditions received treatment (NAMI by the numbers). Barriers to seeking treatment include stigma and access to healthcare. Consider also that health benefits are being underutilized by employees; for example, a 2014 Towers and Watson study showed that only five percent of employees were using stress reducing services offered by Employee Assistance Programs. Underutilization of mental health treatment can be related to stigma, lack of time, and perceived or real barriers to treatment options. Education about the reality of the mental health treatment process and the short and long-term impact of effective intervention is needed.

Behavioral Health Screening and Early Intervention

A recent article in Human Resource Executive stated that 72 percent of employers

counted stress as a major issue interfering with productivity. The good news is that clinical interventions work: 80 percent of treated employees report improvements (*Bustle.com*, 2017). Early identification of behavioral health challenges facilitates improved health outcomes and reduced healthcare costs. Mental health and substance abuse screenings are an effective way to provide education about symptoms so that individuals might identify signs early and access care. While hospitals provide health screenings for cholesterol, blood sugar and the like on a regular basis, the utility of mental health screening has been less recognized. Healthcare systems are now addressing the need to conduct mental health screening as a way to address overall health and refer individuals to specialized, intensive care when needed. MindWise Innovations, a division of Riverside Community Care, a preeminent behavioral healthcare provider in Massachusetts, has long recognized the need to provide population-based behavioral health screening via a public health model. The MindWise screening platform consists of twelve validated, web-based tools accessed privately on any device and is completely anonymous and confidential. Individuals using the screening tools can identify signs and symptoms of various behavioral health problems and connect to resources as identified by their organization or community. Mental health and substance misuse screening in the construction industry provide the language to engage in conversations about mental health. For example:

Are you feeling down?

Are you having trouble sleeping?

Are you feeling nervous all the time?

These questions, as well as many others, can be used to check in with employees and oneself. Accessible via smartphones, the screening tools can be taken privately and easily.

Data Matters

Gathering information about behavioral health trends can guide administrators in their decisions about behavioral health and wellness purchases. The investment in health and wellness materials can be best informed by employee population data. For example, the aggregate—nonidentifying—data from the MindWise screening program reflects utilization according to demographics selected by a given company. In this way, human resource professionals and those in relevant leadership positions can determine what information needs to be collected. Awareness campaigns and education about mental health and substance misuse needs to accompany behavioral health screening for full and comprehensive impact.

Thinking about mental and emotional wellness as a health issue is central to opening the door to conversations which need to take place at various levels in construction and other industries. Leadership teams, managers and employees need to hear unified, consistent messaging which emphasizes a holistic view of health, inclusive of physical, cognitive and emotional well-being. Referring to work in the construction industry, MindWise Senior Vice President Bryan Kohl states, “For decades, we’ve been focused on what happens outside the hardhat. It’s time to pay attention to what’s happening inside the hardhat.” This can and will be accomplished by addressing mental wellbeing as

15.6% of workers
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experience a substance use disorder.
-National Survey on Drug Use and Health

Employees with opioid use
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3 weeks on average
-National Survey on Drug Use and Health

\$4.8 billion
are lost annually due to lost productivity,
absenteeism, and excess health care costs.
-Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation

\$775 million
are lost every year due to "presenteeism."
-Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation


Opioid use is associated with a
75% increased
likelihood of suicide.
-National Survey on Drug Use and Health



a part of overall safety—both physical and psychological safety. Psychological safety is a concept first recognized by experts studying organizational dynamics in the 1960s and was revived in 1999 when behavioral scientist Amy Edmundson highlighted applications of psychological safety in the workplace.

A psychologically safe environment is characterized as trusting with open communication, respect, the ability to give and receive constructive criticism and admit mistakes. In our work at MindWise, we recently conducted numerous focus groups through all job categories in construction and heard firsthand the desire for a workplace that fosters trust and genuine relationships. Whether it is bridging communication from blue to white collar workers or knowing one's boss cares about you as an employee,

the message was loud and clear: a call-out for communication, empathy and support in the workplace. The active role of leadership at all levels in construction is paramount to creating a foundation which can support behavioral health initiatives.

Managers and team members who contribute to a psychologically safe, trusting work environment give space for employees and workers to speak openly, provide constructive feedback and try new skill-building challenges. Training and education to better inform construction workers, regardless of ethnicity and gender, is crucial in decreasing suicide risk and substance misuse. Building a culture of resilience and support through behavioral health education, screening and access to resources is a sustainable solution for those working at all levels in construction. 

Lisa K. Desai, Psy.D. is the Director of Mental Health Screening and Research at MindWise. She leads the development of new screening tools and innovative programs with the goal of reaching underserved populations. In her role, Lisa regularly consults with MindWise partners. She has been a practicing, licensed psychologist for 25 years, providing behavioral health services to youth, adults, and families. Lisa is fluent in Gujarati.

Bryan Kohl is our Senior Vice President, leading MindWise Innovations. After more than 20 years in companies like Tiffany and Co., Bose Corporation, and Dell Technologies he decided it was time to offer a non-profit the benefit of his experience in organizational development, educational technologies, and innovation. Bryan's role is to ensure MindWise reaches as many people as possible across the globe by meeting the behavioral health needs of communities, organizations, and industries.

MindWise Innovations is a not for profit organization that equips schools, workplaces, colleges, and communities with tools to help them address mental health issues, substance use, and suicide risk—enabling their members to live healthier lives. Powered by the behavioral health professionals at Riverside Community Care, our suite of products includes online tools and trainings that provide guidance to those struggling with depression, opioid and substance use, anxiety, trauma, eating disorders, and more. We use technology to inform community members by providing access to tools that connect them with quality treatment options. Additionally, organizations can gain insight into the behavioral health trends affecting their communities. Through informing, identifying, and connecting individuals with quality resources, MindWise empowers organizations to promote the well-being their community members deserve—and ultimately saves lives.

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