



# SAFE

## TOOLBOX TALK:

### Mental Health & Suicide Prevention as a Safety Priority

# STANDUP

In construction it is typical for us to discuss physical safety on a daily basis. For many years, the focus of our work plans has been on keeping ourselves and our co-workers safe from bodily harm. What we have not typically talked about is our mental health, and now is the time to include mental wellness as part of our overall total worker safety.

You might be shocked to know that construction workers have the highest suicide rate of any other occupation. As much effort as goes into keeping your fellow crew members safe each shift – would you consider putting that same effort in to making sure they return to work tomorrow safe as well?

**1 in 4 or 5 adults are currently experiencing a mental health condition like depression or anxiety,** or maybe something even more severe like bi-polar disorder. In most cases and with proper treatment, these conditions can be managed and overcome with those experiencing them having full and productive lives.

However, if these are ignored and not treated, as they are more than half the time, these conditions can lead to people being distracted, less productive than normal, and possibly unsafe and unable to perform their normal jobs. Because of this, mental health and suicide prevention need to be safety considerations.

In your safety huddles, check in on how your teammates are doing. Pay attention to those who may be acting or performing differently than normal and ask if they need to talk. Keep information on your EAP, the Suicide Prevention Lifeline and the Crisis Text Line available to share with those who might need to seek help.

Remember, safety starts with what's **under** the hardhat.



INFORMATION & RESOURCES AT  
[preventconstruction suicide.com](http://preventconstruction suicide.com)



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# TRAIN

## TOOLBOX TALK: How to Talk to Someone at Risk of Suicide

### STANDUP

If you are on a construction jobsite, it is almost certain that you have participated in safety training. Depending on your craft or trade, you may know about working around trenches, using fall protection, electrical safety and many other physical safety topics. These are all important to keeping you and your co-workers safe from physical harm each day.

Have you ever thought about what you would do or how you would handle the situation if you thought someone was at risk of killing themselves? The good news is, there is training available for that. Here are the basics of the TASC model from the LivingWorks Suicide Prevention training:

**T - Tune In** – pay attention, has their behavior changed? Are they not as talkative or engaged as they normally are? Do they say things like “it would be better if I weren’t here” or “I wish I could just die”? Are they having a lot more near misses or just aren’t producing like they normally do? All of these can be signs to watch for.

**A - Ask** – clearly and without judgement “Are you thinking about suicide?” or “Are you thinking about killing yourself?” These are hard questions to ask but are so important. Don’t say “you’re not thinking of doing something stupid?” or anything that will make them feel worse and not encourage them to talk.

**S - State** – tell them “Suicide is serious and it is permanent. Your problems aren’t so big that they are worth dying for.” Let them know that you care about them and that you, their family, everyone in their life, needs them to be here.

**C - Connect** – help them get the help that they need. You don’t have to be the one to solve their problems – but you can be sure that they access help and stay with them and keep them safe while they do. Start with your EAP, the Suicide Prevention Lifeline or Crisis Textline.

These conversations take courage to have, but they could save a life!



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# AWARENESS

## TOOLBOX TALK: The Risk of Suicide in Construction

### STANDUP

It's hard to change things that we aren't even aware are issues or are in need of change. For many years, the construction industry was unaware that its workforce was at 4x higher risk of dying by suicide than the rest of the population. While it is still shocking to hear that, now that we know, it's up to us to build awareness and help to save lives.

Each shift on most construction sites, crews complete a Task or Job Hazard Analysis. You may have already done one today. During this process, the jobsite and tasks for the day are discussed and the risks associated are identified, and then ways to prevent those risks from resulting in incidents are determined. Just like this, with awareness we can work to identify the risks and warning signs that somebody may be at risk of suicide and take the steps to reduce that risk.

Some of the warning signs for suicide are changes in behavior – becoming withdrawn, acting anxious, agitated or reckless, misusing drugs or alcohol – and changes in performance like missing work or showing up late, not being able to think clearly or solve problems, being less productive and having increased safety incidents.

Other warning signs come from what they say – talking about feeling trapped, wanting to die, feeling like they are a burden and saying that it would be better if they were gone.

It's also important to know what is going on in their lives – major life changes like children leaving home, divorce or breakups, death in the family, major illness or injury and financial issues can all put people at risk for suicide.

Now that you know the signs, you can be more aware of what is going on with the people around you. If you notice someone seems to be at risk, don't hesitate to ask them if they are ok and let them know you are there for them. You don't have to be the one to solve their problems, but you can help them connect to care like your EAP, or the Suicide Prevention Lifeline or Crisis Text Line.



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# NORMALIZE

## TOOLBOX TALK: How to Talk About Mental Health and Suicide

### STANDUP

Talking about mental health and suicide can feel awkward and uncomfortable. The stigma that surrounds these topics can make us embarrassed to bring them up and sometimes what happens is we use inappropriate phrases and language to address them. The problem with this is that it increases the stigma around mental health and suicide and can make it harder for someone in need of help to ask for it.

We have the power to eliminate the stigma and make these conversations easier by adopting proper language and increasing our mental health literacy. Don't feel bad if you don't know how to properly talk about these things – most people do! But you can make the choice to change your language so that you can help others.

If we think about mental illness like any other physical illness it helps to reframe our thinking and language. We don't say somebody "is cancer" so we shouldn't say that about mental illness either. Swap out "is" for "is experiencing anxiety" or "has depression". When we say they "are depressed" it labels the whole person as the disorder and it becomes their identity – as opposed to addressing it as a health issue.

Similarly, our language around suicide can be changed to help not only those at risk, but those who may have attempted or lost someone have more dignity as well. "Committed suicide" is the common phrase we hear but "commit" implies a crime or a sin. Suicide is a death caused by the disease of mental illness, addiction, or despair. Saying "died by suicide" is a much more respectful term to use.

The most important thing is to think about what you are saying and whether it will make you seem approachable for someone who is experiencing mental illness or suicidal thoughts to talk to. Avoid using words like crazy, psycho, schizo or wacko as descriptions for anyone – even if they aren't experiencing mental illness, using those words increases the negative stigma around mental health and makes it harder for those in need to speak up.



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# DECREASE

## TOOLBOX TALK: Changing the Statistics of Suicide in Construction

### STANDUP

Statistics drive a lot of what we do in safety. Activities and environments that have a high rate of illnesses or injuries spur the creation of new policies and procedures and maybe even added oversight by OSHA and other agencies. Despite all of the training, PPE, programs and other measures put in place, approximately 1,000 construction workers die on jobsites each year. This is a sad and sobering statistic, especially when we consider that one of those could be us or someone on our crew.

As shocking as those numbers are – there’s one that’s even more shocking. Over 5,000 people working in construction will die by suicide each year. That’s right – 5 times as many of your fellow construction workers will take their own lives as will be killed due to a jobsite accident. When we think about all of the time and effort we spend on the physical safety of the workforce – we must let these statistics drive increased attention on the emotional safety of the workforce as well.

Why do so many people working in construction die by suicide? Well, think about you and your co-workers. You probably pride yourselves on being tough, getting things done at all costs and working through whatever life throws at you. While those are all great traits to have, if someone is experiencing mental illness like depression or anxiety – which are real, treatable health conditions – or going through a major life crisis, or they have an addiction or substance misuse disorder, they might not be able to just “power through” – and they probably aren’t likely to ask for help, either.

If someone on the jobsite seems to be under stress or upset, you might hear others say, or even say yourself “suck it up”, “it’s not that bad” or “don’t be a wimp”. Instead of blowing it off when someone seems down or out of sorts, and rather than making fun of them about it – what if you took the time to talk to them about what is going on in their lives? Sometimes, just knowing that someone cares is enough. And if not, there are resources available that can help them like your EAP, the Suicide Prevention Lifeline or Crisis Text Line.



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