



Safety Stand-Down: Mental Health (Construction)

We all know that our jobs require a certain amount of attention and focus. The level of focus required to do our jobs safely is easily impacted by stressful thoughts associated with our home lives, relationships, financial issues, and other factors. All these factors influence the state of our mental health. When our mental health is poor, the likelihood of incidents at work is heightened due to a lower level of focus.

What is Mental health?

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It determines how we define our potential, cope with everyday stressors, work productively, relate to others, make choices, and contribute to our community.

Why are we talking about mental Health?

Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood to adulthood. Despite this reality, there is still stigma and discrimination attached to the topic of mental health.

- Just 50% of Canadians would tell friends or co-workers that they have a family member with a mental illness, compared to 72% who would discuss a diagnosis of cancer and 68% who would talk about a family member having diabetes.
- 42% of Canadians were unsure whether they would socialize with a friend who has a mental illness.
- 55% of Canadians said they would be unlikely to enter a spousal relationship with someone who has a mental illness.
- 46% of Canadians thought people use the term mental illness as an excuse for bad behavior, and
- 27% said they would be fearful of being around someone who suffers from serious mental illness.

A complex connection of genetic, biological, personality and environmental factors contribute to mental illnesses. Almost one half (49%) of those who feel they have suffered from depression or anxiety have never gone to see a doctor about this problem. Stigma or discrimination attached to mental illnesses presents a serious barrier, not only to diagnosis and treatment but also to acceptance in the community. By having an open dialogue, we can help end the stigma and normalize talking about mental health.

Canadian mental health statistics:

- Mental illness is a leading cause of disability in Canada.
- In 2020 depression became the leading cause of disability worldwide
- 1 in 5 Canadians will experience mental illness or addiction problems this year.
- About 4,000 Canadians per year die by suicide—an average of almost 11 suicides a day.



Mental Health & The Construction Industry:

Contributing factors of poor mental health in construction:

1. Competitive, high-pressure work environment.
2. End-of-season layoffs.
3. High prevalence of alcohol and substance abuse.
4. Physical strain and chronic pain caused by manual labor.
5. Travel which may separate workers from families and friends.

In addition to these issues, employees are affected by an industry culture which has historically valued “toughness.” Because of this cultivated culture, workers often do not feel comfortable discussing mental health. Some people shame themselves for experiencing anxiety, distress, depressive symptoms, and even suicidal feelings, because it contradicts the idea that we should not be affected by our emotions. As a result, workers often feel they must “deal with it,” “leave it at home” or simply “ignore it”, thus not seeking out the help they need.

The construction sector tends to be male dominated. Suicide is the second biggest cause of death in men aged 25-54.

According to the Workers Compensation Board of NS:

- In 2019, 238 people were injured from Assaults, Violent acts, harassment in the workplace.
- There were 3 specific incidents in 2020 involving workers in the construction industry who have lost time due to psychological stress or traumatic events that happened in the workplace.
 - A worker who witnessed a traumatic event
 - A worker who was threatened with a knife.
 - A worker who had many stressors/events that they could not cope at work.

How does the workplace impact mental health?

1 in 4 Canadians spend 50 hours or more per week at work, so it makes sense that workplaces can have a major impact on a person's mental wellbeing. Unhealthy workplaces can make it more difficult to lead healthy lifestyles and it can encourage unhealthy habits due to work hours, insufficient breaks, travel, etc.

Benefits of having a positive mental health culture at work:

It gives people the opportunity to feel productive and companies to be a strong contributor to employee wellbeing as it sets a standard for your workplace in order to create and sustain a psychologically healthy and safe organization for everyone.

Some benefits could be:

- Increase attendance and productivity.
- Decrease presenteeism.
- Decrease amount of workplace conflict.
- Lower amount of turnover
- Improve retention.
- Lower disability claims



How can we support our own mental health, and help reduce the stigma?

- Become aware of our own personal/health behaviors such as coping techniques, eating habits, and physical activity levels.
- Learn more about the impact of our personal/health behaviors on mental wellbeing.
- When we understand how the two are connected, we can then identify areas where changes may be needed or beneficial.
- Talk to a friend about mental health. This helps normalize the topic and let others know they are not alone while allowing yourself to gain comfort in talking about your mental health journey.
- Access mental health supports if needed.

What are some signs/symptoms of someone who is struggling?

- Unhealthy or unkempt appearance/ abnormal appearance
- Mood swings, emotional rollercoasters, and erratic behavior
- Easily Irritated, frustrated, or angered.
- Taking or needing a lot of time off.
- Changes in eating or sleeping behaviors.
- Moments of confusion or an inability to solve a problem.
- Unnecessary fear, worry or anxiety.
- A decrease or lack in productivity.
- Withdrawal from social situations.
- Increased use or abuse of drugs, alcohol, or other routes of self-medicating.

What do you do if someone you know is struggling with their mental health?

If you are at work and are concerned about a co-worker, you can use the ALGEE acronym (see below) to navigate the situation. Depending on the nature of the issue, you may also need to speak to your supervisor or human resources department if you are not comfortable approaching someone. The most important thing is you **take action**.



ALGEE: THE ACTION PLAN



ASSESS for risk of suicide or harm.



LISTEN non-judgmentally.



GIVE re-assurance and information.



ENCOURAGE appropriate professional help.



ENCOURAGE self-help and other support strategies.

References:

www.mdsc.ca

<https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/index.htm>

<https://www.fieldboss.com/post/mental-health-in-the-construction-industry>

<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/>