

Unlocking Awareness & Adjusting Your Approach

The Importance of Mental Health as Part of a Broader Health, Wellness & Injury-prevention Plan

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There is a stigma attached to mental health in the United States. Misrepresentation in entertainment and the media has created a general misunderstanding, fear and negative perception of those battling mental health issues. As a result, those affected are often afraid to tell even their closest friends and family for fear of being labeled “crazy.”

According to Mental Health America, a national nonprofit, more than 50% of people with mental illness do not receive treatment for their condition (“Adult Data 2022”). Due to fear around how a mental health diagnosis will affect their personal and professional lives, people experiencing issues often delay or avoid seeking professional help. However, that could be changing for the better.

A Shift in Public Perception

One positive outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic is the shift in attitudes and awareness around workplace mental health that it prompted. The loss and uncertainty experienced in their personal, social and work lives had people experiencing stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues at a higher rate than ever before. As a result, people realized the reality of mental health and that issues are more common than they initially thought, fostering more honest and open communication around the subject.

According to a 2021 Harvard Business Review study, 50% of respondents said they had left a job for mental health reasons, and 76% reported at least one mental health issue in the past year (Greenwood and Anas). In addition, the study confirmed that the traditional stigma around mental health is receding, with two-thirds of respondents saying they had spoken with a coworker about their mental health in the past year.

The Role Employers Play in Worker Mental Health

Many employers are still hesitant to acknowledge how their workplace practices, culture and environment play a role in mental health. Traditionally, mental health was not a big topic in the workplace. When discussed, it was treated as a preexisting condition and the sole responsibility of the individual to manage and treat.

However, the disruption caused by the pandemic highlighted how work can directly impact an employee's mental health. Long hours, poor work-life balance, negative workplace culture, poor communication, high stress and monotony of work are some of the most commonly cited factors negatively affecting employees mentally.

Employers Who Take an Active Role Will Reap Rewards

How productive are you at work when you are having an off day emotionally? Happy, healthy people are less likely to miss work and are more effective when they show up. They also report higher job satisfaction, reducing employee turnover and creating a better workplace culture.

Mentally healthy people are less likely to get hurt. In high-risk trades like construction, the potential for severe or fatal accidents is constant, and an employee whose mind is elsewhere instead of the task at hand is more likely to be injured. The inherent dangers of construction require 100% of workers' attention, which can be challenging if they are dealing with emotional concerns or distractions.

Construction Workers Are an at-Risk Group for Mental Health Issues

There are all types of people in construction, but the general construction culture prides itself on toughness, self-reliance, and hard work with no complaints. Unfortunately, this toughness which serves them well in certain aspects of the trade, can also negatively affect mental health.

This culture of toughness and suffering quietly has led to an enormous mental health problem within the industry. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), construction has a higher rate of suicide than any other industry. Many construction workers are battling depression and thoughts of suicide but are not seeking treatment because the perceived weakness of having a mental health issue conflicts with their culture.

When you look closely at the nature of construction, it is not hard to see where these mental health issues stem from. Construction is a high-paced, high-stress industry that often requires workers to be away from their families and support networks for long periods. Add to that the long hours, lack of sleep, and the fear of work running out. To fight back against stress, loneliness, and exhaustion, workers could often attempt to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol.

Another common issue contributing to construction workers' mental health is the cycle of pain many workers find themselves in. The heavy physical toll of construction leaves many workers with constant aches and pains. Unfortunately, this pain often goes untreated because workers feel they are not supposed to complain and must suffer in silence.

These workers can also resort to self-medication. While drugs and alcohol may provide temporary relief, they can worsen mental health issues, creating a vicious cycle. It is also a slippery slope toward substance dependence and addiction, another big issue harming the industry.

How Can Companies Support Employee Mental Health?

Leaders within construction can no longer stay quiet on mental health, and employers must start taking an active role by changing workplace culture. Some employers have responded to the increase in the importance of mental health by implementing new benefits like mental health days and counseling services. While this represents a move in the right direction, they do nothing to address the workplace factors leading to mental health issues in the first place.

According to the Harvard Business Review study referenced above, what respondents wanted more than any other benefit or policy was to have an open company culture around mental health.

To achieve that, companies must begin training their leaders on how to address mental health issues correctly and how they can help create open and stigma-free communication around mental health.

If you ask a child how to have a healthy body, they will likely say eating healthy food and exercising. That is because we are taught in our early years about the steps we must take to promote physical health. However, due to the stigma around mental health, the vast majority of employees never learn how to nurture and protect their mental health.

"If we took as good care of our emotional health as we do our physical health, everyone would have a therapist they check in with from time to time just as they do with their medical doctors," said Kris Corbett, director at Atlas Injury Prevention Solutions. Companies can change that inconsistency by training their employees on mental health, giving them tools to understand it better, the steps to manage it, and how to seek professional help if they need it.

Another proactive approach gaining popularity is using an early intervention specialist. In contrast to a traditional on-site emergency medical technician you often see on construction sites, these coaches focus on both the physical and mental aspects of total worker health. Early intervention specialists are often trained in injury prevention and wellness and can address workers' aches and pains along with physical and emotional health of the workforce.

Some might believe that construction workers would not be willing to speak with someone about mental health, but that is simply not the case. “After over 10 years of embedding early intervention specialists into the construction industry, the No. 1 topic workers seek is coaching around stress and emotional well-being,” said Corbett. “The key is building a trusting relationship with workers, so they know they have someone there to help.” Culture has shifted, and the subject of mental health, while once taboo, is now a regular topic of conversation amongst friends, families and coworkers. Employees now demand better communication, benefits, and consideration around mental health. As a result, companies that want to stand a chance in an increasingly competitive job market must change how they train and communicate with employees about mental health.

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