

## **COVID 19 - Mental Health/Substance Abuse and the ICI Construction Industry**

In this article I will discuss future implications for ICI constructors with concrete suggestions to help ease specific mental health/substance abuse related harms COVID 19 is causing.

Employees who have mental health problems are more likely to use substances to cope with symptoms increased by COVID 19 containment measures. This will have effects on the ICI sector both during the pandemic and *once the pandemic is over*.

The extreme containment measures we are witnessing will also be a source of *brand-new* cases of mental health, substance abuse and recreational drug taking behaviour in the ICI construction sector.

Some of the new mental health cases will be employees whose mental health problems were very mild, allowing the employee to manage daily life before COVID 19.

Other cases will be employees with an underlying mental health condition (i.e., Not noticeable even to the employee.) that is triggered because of the unique stresses created by this crisis.

Additionally, new mental health cases will be created by the trauma of having family members, loved ones and/or friends hospitalized and possibly dying because of COVID 19. This trauma will be increased because of the employee's difficulty or inability to visit anyone hospitalized.

New cases of substance abuse will occur when employees cross the line from recreational to problematic substance use. Others will be employees who are now using substances recreationally because of their experiences during their isolation.

In either case, any employee with an underlining mental health condition is at higher risk of developing a dual diagnosis. (i.e., Having a mental health condition and a substance abuse problem.)

The Ontario Cannabis Store experienced an 80% increase in orders, March 14<sup>th</sup>. Some LCBO stores have more than doubled sales leading one employee to say, "We've earned enough in the last week to pay for three weeks of sales."

### **Isolation and Social Distancing**

Isolation has been used for many years by different intelligence agencies to extract confessions and as a form of torture.

Even while understanding that most cases of COVID 19 isolation are not as extreme as the above examples, it's important to recognise that otherwise healthy people can experience depression, fear, anxiety, panic, paranoia, even audio and visual hallucinations as the result of prolonged isolation.

Negative feelings generated by isolation don't stop once an employee leaves the house.

While outside getting supplies the atmosphere is surreal. There is an eerie silence almost everywhere you go. People are subdued, fearful and distrustful when in close proximity to each other. Many people wear masks so you can't see the expressions on their faces. There is a sense of foreboding when outside. The signage everywhere, news reports and change in everyone's behaviour reinforces these uncomfortable feelings.

All of these things will lead to employees *developing* mental health conditions. It's worth noting that about 50 % of people with a severe mental health condition also have a substance use disorder. Some employees who never used substances will become recreational users. Some employees who are recreational substance users will become substance abusers.

## **Other Considerations**

Isolation and social distancing are only two aspects of the mental stresses brought about by this crisis. Having normal routines interrupted throws employees off balance. Having all clubs, gyms, restaurants, coffee shops and recreational facilities closed removes important stress relieving outlets for countless employees. Employees who are laid off cannot pay bills easily and are worried about their financial future.

All 12 Step Recovery groups have shut down meetings everywhere. This did not happen even during World War 2. Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous currently have no in person meetings. Though many meetings are available online, this lack of in person contact presents a special danger for those in the beginning of their Recovery or those trying to get clean and sober - especially those without a sponsor.

## **What does this mean for the ICI construction sector?**

In the short term it's likely more employees on jobsites *right now* aren't Fit for Duty.

Once the pandemic is over and its business as usual, jobsites are going to have *more employees and subcontractors* reporting for work who aren't Fit for Duty.

This is simply an increase in substance use brought about from the negative effects of COVID 19 on employee's mental health.

## **New WSIB Developments**

Pandemic mental health support for employees is a *brand-new addition to the WSIB Excellence Program*. This training will help maximise company rebates and minimise the mental health/substance abuse related harms to the ICI construction sector aggravated by COVID 19.

## **What can I do now?**

1. Train all employees with concrete suggestions to improve employee's mental health during this crisis. Have a booklet available on all active jobsites for employees to take. Distribute it electronically to employees working from home.

2. Arrange industry specific Fit for Duty/Drug and Alcohol training sessions for management, supervisors *and* employees.

Training combined with a compliant Fit for Duty/Drug and Alcohol policy can *protect you* from fines and prosecutions under the OHSA section 66 (3).

Substance specific policies and training are summed up with one word – essential. Once completed if there were a substance related incident on any jobsite, a GC can present strong evidence that “...every precaution reasonable in the circumstances was taken.”

3. Develop a compliant Fit for Duty/Drug and Alcohol policy. This can be accomplished via e-mail, phone and/or Skype and requires no face to face contact. It is essential for every GC to have one *even if all of your employees* have been trained.

Julian Toy H.S.C. Substance Abuse Professional

### **Products/Services Available:**

1. Online Training - *Optimising Mental Health during COVID 19.*

*(Training includes a PDF booklet for printing/electronic distribution.)*

*Meets WSIB Excellence Program rebate eligibility requirements under “Workplace Health Promotion.” Support Employee Mental Health Through the Pandemic.*

2. Online ICI sector specific Fit for Duty/Drug and Alcohol training for Management, Supervisors and Employees.

3. Designing/reviewing custom Fit for Duty/Drug and Alcohol policies for the ICI sector.

Preferred provider of Fit for Duty/COVID 19 Mental Health Training - Eastern Construction Ltd.

Direct Line: 905-866-7301

Julian's Story: <https://youtu.be/C79VSDVQ5Gk>

E-mail: [juliantoy@myaddictionexperts.com](mailto:juliantoy@myaddictionexperts.com)

Website: [www.myaddictionexperts.com](http://www.myaddictionexperts.com)