

Repairing Individual Mental Health in the Concrete Repair Industry

by John Gaal and Scott Greenhaus

The construction industry is high-stress, physically challenging, and mentally draining. Although these factors affect us all, the energy, pride in accomplishment, and teamwork environment of the job site are intoxicating and keep us in the game.

When the stress and potential isolation become too great, our mental health suffers. Living and working through the COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened the awareness and the adverse effects on the mental health of those who work in all positions in our industry.

Unfortunately, the construction industry is known to have a higher suicide rate compared to nearly all other industries, and it is helpful to understand and explore the many factors that contribute to this issue:^{1,2}

- **High-Stress Environment:** Construction work often involves high-pressure situations, tight deadlines, and physically demanding tasks, which can lead to high-stress situations and a negative effect on our mental health.
- **Job Insecurity:** in a dynamic industry that is often project-focused, construction workers may experience periods of unemployment or uncertainty about future job prospects, which can contribute to feelings of hopelessness or despair.
- **Isolation:** Construction sites can be isolated, extensive travel may be required, and therefore workers may spend long hours alone or away from their friends and families, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- **Culture and Stigma:** There has historically been a culture within the construction industry that discourages seeking help for mental health issues, leading to underreporting and a lack of support for those in need. This tough-it-out mentality has only recently been challenged, as the understanding and implementation of behaviorally-based safety programs has created a greater focus on the whole person. This approach is often referred to as Total Worker Health® Approach.³
- **Physical Health Issues:** The physical demands of construction work can lead to chronic pain or injuries, which can lead to dependencies on opioids and other

means of relieving the constant physical pain, which can further the downward mental health cycle of the individual.⁴ Workers may fear being judged or ostracized if they admit to struggling with mental health issues... which may limit one's opportunity for promotion.⁵

WHY DON'T CONSTRUCTION WORKERS DISCUSS MENTAL HEALTH?

There are several reasons why construction workers may be hesitant to discuss mental health:

- **Culture of Toughness:** Construction is still about 90% male-dominated field and, as such, has a culture that values toughness and resilience, which can discourage workers from showing vulnerability or seeking help for mental health issues.⁶
- **Lack of Awareness:** Some workers may not be aware of the signs and symptoms of mental health issues or may not realize that what they are experiencing is a mental health concern.
- **Fear of Repercussions:** Workers may fear that discussing mental health issues could lead to negative consequences, such as being seen as unfit for work or losing their jobs.
- **Perception of Weakness:** There may be a perception among construction workers that admitting to mental health issues is a sign of weakness, which can prevent them from seeking help.
- **Lack of Access to Resources:** Some workers may not know where to turn for help or may not have access to mental health resources, making it difficult for them to discuss their mental health. Not to mention, most Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are underutilized.⁷

To address these barriers, it's important to promote mental health awareness to reduce the stigma associated with mental health challenges and create a supportive work environment where workers feel comfortable discussing mental health issues. Providing access to mental health resources and training can also help empower workers to seek help when needed.

HOW CAN WE ADDRESS MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AND HIGH SUICIDE RATES IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY?

Addressing the high suicide rates in the construction industry requires a multi-faceted approach that involves employers, workers, industry organizations, consumers/customers, and mental health professionals. Here are some strategies that can be implemented:

It is important to note that too many of us conflate mental health with mental illness. While it is estimated that over 60 million people in the US currently experience some form of mental illness (i.e., depression, bipolar disorder, etc.), each and every one of us experiences mental health on a daily basis. How did you feel mentally (and physically) when you woke up this morning vs lunchtime vs bedtime? There is a good chance that your responses would ebb and flow throughout the day based on a variety of factors.



Fig. 1: Suicide and Crisis Lifeline 988lifeline.org

- **Mental Health Awareness and Training:** Provide mental health education and training for both employers and workers to recognize the signs of mental health issues and how to seek help. Getting comfortable discussing these issues is the first step in daylighting these critical issues. Training will help the individual better understand the issues and must be done in a way that develops trust and is non-judgmental. Free online courses focused on the construction industry are a great place to begin your journey.⁸
- **Access to Mental Health Resources:** Ensure that construction workers have access to mental health resources, such as counseling services, helplines (Figure 1), and support groups. Information regarding help services and educational opportunities is increasing rapidly, and resources are becoming much more accessible.⁹
- **Promote a Supportive Work Environment:** Create a work culture that prioritizes mental health and supports workers who may be struggling. This can include promoting work-life balance, encouraging open communication, and providing resources for managing stress.
- **Reduce Stigma:** Challenge the stigma surrounding mental health in the construction industry and encourage workers to seek help when needed. Creating a culture where the mental and physical safety of the individual are valued and balanced with the needs of the project and the customer, is essential.
- **Address Job Insecurity:** Implement policies and programs that help reduce job insecurity and provide support for workers during periods of unemployment or uncertainty.¹⁰
- **Suicide Prevention Programs:** Develop and implement suicide prevention programs that include training, resources, and support for those at risk. Awareness training for co-workers and supervisors can help with identifying early warning signs and ensuring the individual gets the proper care they need.¹¹
- **Access to Health Care:** Ensure that construction workers have access to affordable healthcare, including mental health services.
- **Peer Support Programs:** Peer support programs pair trained peers who can provide support and guidance to colleagues who are experiencing mental health issues.¹²
- **Support for Substance Abuse:** Address substance misuse issues, which can be a risk factor for suicide, through education, prevention, and treatment programs. This is especially true in the construction industry where chronic pain from tough, physically demanding work can lead to substance misuse.¹³
- **Promote Work-Life Balance:** Encourage a healthy work-life balance by offering flexible work arrangements, paid time off, and other benefits that support overall well-being.
- **Monitor and Evaluate:** Regularly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of suicide prevention initiatives to ensure they are meeting the needs of workers and making a positive impact.

While progress is being made, there is still much work to be done to address the high rate of suicide in the construction industry. Continued efforts to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and provide support to workers in need are essential to improving the mental health and well-being of construction workers. These efforts should include “safe spaces” to discuss these “taboo” topics!¹⁴

A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR IN THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IS THE USE AND ABUSE OF OPIOIDS. WHY IS OPIOID USE SO HIGH IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY?

The construction industry has been disproportionately affected by opioid use for several reasons:

- **High-Risk Work Environment:** Construction work often involves physically demanding tasks and the potential for workplace injuries. Injured workers may be prescribed opioids to manage pain, leading to a higher likelihood of opioid misuse or dependence—also known as opioid use disorder (OUD). If you are the breadwinner in your family, you find ways to show up (hurt) on the job site since most workers only get paid for the time they work!¹⁵
- **Lack of Access to Healthcare:** Many construction workers do not have access to adequate healthcare, including pain management alternatives to opioids. This can result in workers turning to opioids for pain relief.
- **Job Insecurity and Stress:** The cyclical nature of construction work can lead to job insecurity and financial stress, which can increase the risk of substance abuse, including opioids.
- **Culture of Self-Reliance:** There may be a culture within the construction industry that values self-reliance and toughness, which can discourage workers from seeking help for pain or mental health issues, leading them to self-medicate with opioids.
- **Easy Access to Opioids:** Opioids are often readily available on construction sites or through informal networks, making them easily accessible to workers who may be seeking pain relief or a way to cope with stress.

In the construction industry, the most abused opioids are prescription opioids. These are medications that are prescribed by healthcare providers to treat pain but are often misused or abused. Some of the most common prescription opioids abused in the construction industry include:

- **Oxycodone:** This is a powerful opioid pain medication that is often prescribed for moderate to severe pain. It is commonly sold under brand names like OxyContin and Percocet.
- **Hydrocodone:** Another commonly abused opioid, hydrocodone is often prescribed for pain relief. It is found in medications like Vicodin and Lortab.
- **Morphine:** Morphine is a strong opioid pain medication that is used to treat severe pain. It is often used in hospital settings and is also available in pill form.

On more than one occasion, one author has asked the group he is presenting to these three questions:

1. How many of you have a First Kit on your job site?
2. How many of you have an AED device on your job site?
3. How many of you have Narcan on your job site?

The responses typically go like this: 100%, 80%, <1%, respectively.

- **Fentanyl:** Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is much more potent than other opioids. It is often prescribed for severe pain, such as pain from cancer. Illicitly manufactured fentanyl is also a significant contributor to the opioid crisis.
- **Codeine:** Codeine is a less potent opioid that is often used in combination with other medications to treat mild to moderate pain. It is also found in some cough syrups.
- **Heroin:** Greater than 70% of the people who were on prescription opioids turned to heroin when their doctors stopped writing Rx for oxy, etc.¹⁶

It's important to note that while prescription opioids are commonly abused in the construction industry, illicit opioids like heroin and fentanyl are also a significant concern. These are highly addictive and can have serious health consequences, including death.

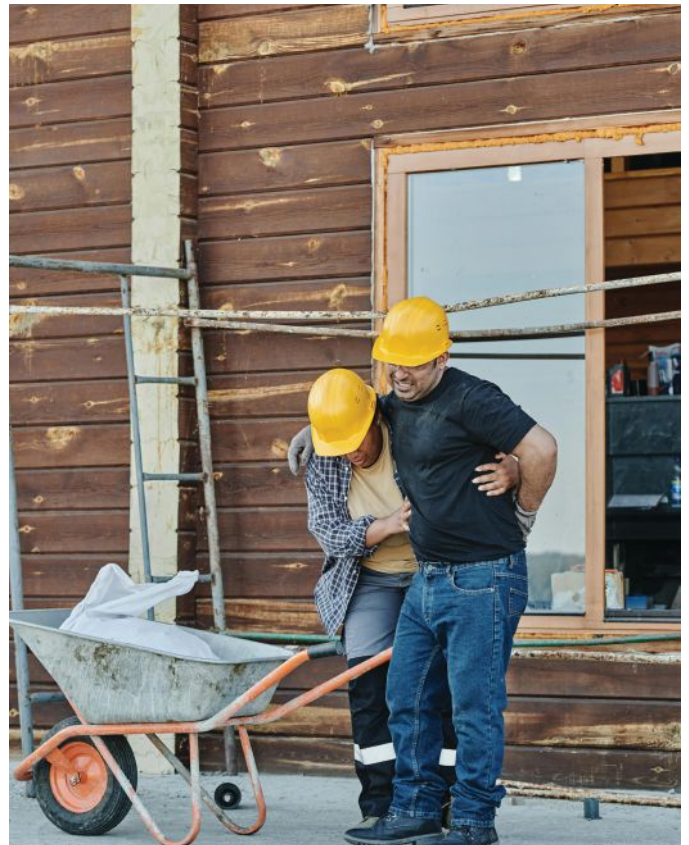


Photo by Mikael Blomkvist via Pexels

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT OPIOID ABUSE IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY?



Photo by Matthew Rakola via flickr

Addressing opioid abuse in the construction industry requires a comprehensive approach that includes prevention, education, intervention, treatment, and support. Here are some strategies that can be implemented:

- **Education and Awareness:** Provide education and training to construction workers about the risks of opioid use and alternative pain management strategies. Raise awareness about the signs of opioid abuse and how to seek help.
- **Implement Drug-Free Workplace Policies:** Establish and enforce drug-free workplace policies that include testing and consequences for drug use. Provide resources for employees who need help with substance abuse.
- **Access to Alternative Pain Management:** Ensure that construction workers have access to alternative pain management strategies, such as physical therapy, acupuncture, and non-opioid medications.
- **Healthcare Access:** Improve access to healthcare for construction workers, including mental health services and substance abuse treatment programs.
- **Peer Support Programs:** Implement peer support programs that provide workers with a supportive environment to discuss substance abuse and mental health issues.
- **Training for Healthcare Providers:** Provide training for healthcare providers who work with construction workers on appropriate prescribing practices for opioids and alternative pain management strategies.
- **Community Partnerships:** Partner with community organizations and treatment providers to improve access to substance abuse treatment programs and support services.

- **Monitor and Evaluate:** Regularly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of opioid misuse prevention and treatment programs to ensure they are meeting the needs of construction workers and making a positive impact.

WHAT ABOUT NALOXONE, AND THE USE OF “NARCAN” IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY?

Naloxone, commonly known by the brand name Narcan, is a nasal spray medication used to rapidly reverse opioid overdose. Using Narcan in the construction industry can be an important safety measure, especially given the high rates of opioid use and overdose in this field. Here are some key points about Narcan use in construction:

- **Training and Access:** Providing training on how to recognize the signs of opioid overdose and administer Narcan can be crucial. Construction companies can ensure that Narcan kits are readily available on job sites and that workers know how to use them effectively.^{17,18}
- **Emergency Response:** In the event of an opioid overdose on a construction site, having Narcan available can help save lives by quickly reversing the effects of the overdose until emergency medical help arrives.
- **Legal Considerations:** It's important for construction companies to understand the legal considerations around administering Narcan. Good Samaritan laws in many states provide legal protection to individuals who administer Narcan in good faith to someone experiencing an overdose.¹⁹
- **Community Collaboration:** Collaborating with local health departments, first responders, and community organizations can help ensure that construction companies have access to Narcan training and resources.

Overall, Narcan can be a lifesaving tool in the construction industry, but it should be part of a broader strategy that includes prevention, education, and support for workers struggling with opioid use. This is an example of an intervention strategy.

Addressing the opioid epidemic in the construction industry requires a multifaceted approach that includes providing access to alternative pain management strategies, improving access to healthcare, addressing job insecurity and stress, and reducing stigma around seeking help for substance abuse and mental health issues.