

Toolbox Talk

Mental Health in Construction



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help workers understand how mental health can affect people in construction, recognise when someone may be struggling and feel more confident starting a conversation or seeking support.

I want to start with a simple question. If you turned up to work with a broken arm, would you tell someone? Most of us would. We'd get it checked, get some support and make sure we weren't making it worse but what happens when what's hurting isn't something other people can see? Maybe you're stressed, anxious, overwhelmed, constantly worrying about something or simply don't feel like yourself. A lot of people carry those things quietly and still turn up to work every morning as if everything is fine. That's one of the difficult things about mental health. Someone can be standing next to you on site, doing their job and having a laugh, while dealing with far more than anyone around them realises.

Why It Matters

Construction can be a brilliant industry to work in but it comes with pressures. Early starts, long journeys, physical work, deadlines, changing programmes, job uncertainty and financial pressures can all become part of everyday life. Then there are the things happening outside work: relationships, family responsibilities, health problems, money worries and whatever else life throws at us. Sometimes we're dealing with several of those things at once. Most of us are used to getting on with the job. If something goes wrong, we sort it out and move onto the next thing. That attitude can be useful in construction but it can also mean we keep pushing through when something isn't right. Mental health can affect concentration, patience, decision-making and communication. If your head is somewhere else, you might miss an instruction, become distracted during a task or make a mistake you wouldn't normally make. That's why this conversation belongs on site. Looking after ourselves and the people around us is part of working safely.



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Signs To Look Out For

There isn't one particular way somebody looks when they're struggling. Some people become quiet and withdrawn. Others become more irritable, impatient or angry. Someone might seem constantly tired, lose interest in their work or stop joining in with the usual conversations. You might notice somebody making unusual mistakes, struggling to concentrate, turning up late when that's completely unlike them or simply seeming different from the person you normally work alongside. The same applies to ourselves. Maybe you've noticed you're not enjoying things as much as you used to, everything feels harder than it normally would or you're finding it difficult to switch your head off. You might be getting frustrated more easily or finding yourself avoiding people because you don't feel like talking. None of these things automatically means somebody has a mental health problem. Everyone has difficult days. What we're paying attention to is a change from what's normal for that person, particularly when it continues for a while.

What Can Help

If you're struggling yourself, one of the most useful things you can do is tell somebody. You don't need to explain everything and you don't need to have the right words. Sometimes saying, "I'm having a difficult time at the moment," is enough to start the conversation. That person could be a workmate, supervisor, partner, friend or family member. The important thing is that you don't have to carry everything on your own. If you're worried about someone else, you don't need to become their counsellor. Start with a simple question. "You alright, mate?" might be enough, but if you're genuinely concerned, try going a little further: "You don't seem yourself lately."



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Everything alright?" Then give them a chance to answer. If they do open up, listen. You don't immediately need to give advice, compare it with something you've been through or try to solve the problem. Sometimes being heard is what somebody needs first. If they don't want to talk, don't force it. Let them know you're there and check in again another time. People don't always open up the first time they're asked and sometimes a conversation with a mate isn't enough. If something has been affecting you for a while or you're finding everyday life increasingly difficult, there is nothing wrong with getting some extra support. That might mean speaking to your GP, a counsellor, a support service or a charity. You don't have to wait until you've reached breaking point before asking for help. Dealing with something earlier usually gives you more options.

Discussion Questions

- What are some of the pressures people working in construction might be carrying without anyone else knowing?
- What changes might make you think a workmate isn't quite themselves?
- If somebody told you they were struggling, what could you do that would actually be helpful?

Takeaway Message

Mental health isn't always obvious. Someone can look fine, turn up every day and still be having a difficult time. We don't need to diagnose each other and we don't need to have all the answers. What we can do is notice when something changes, make it easier for people to speak and take someone seriously when they do. Sometimes the most important thing you can give somebody is your time and attention.



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Action

Before you leave site today, check in properly with one person. Not because you think something is wrong, but because we should make asking how someone is doing a normal part of looking out for each other and if someone asks how you're doing, try to give them an honest answer. One conversation won't fix everything, but it can be where things start to change.

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