



HEAVY CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY OPENING UP ON MENTAL HEALTH

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BY JACKIE JONES

Mental health is a relatively new topic within many workforces, but slowly, the stigma attached to mental illness seems to be lifting.

Historically, the stigma around mental health has discouraged people from seeking help, particularly in traditionally macho industries such as with heavy construction, where people were expected to “tough it out” and remain quiet about their problems.

But the heavy construction industry is making the shift toward a more open discussion of mental health. Although the construction industry may be about the last place you would expect workers to talk about depression or anxiety, it is becoming a leader in mental health awareness. Employers are understanding the importance of mental wellness, realizing their employees are working in a competitive, high-pressure environment, and often are separated from family or working remotely.

Mental health can be seen as an invisible health hazard, unlike the physical risks of our industry such as working around heavy equipment.

Most importantly, people in the heavy construction industry are starting to see the connection between physical and psychological safety.

The first step to eliminating the stigma is starting a conversation.

“Promoting a safe, non-threatening work culture can really help,” notes Peter Paulic, of Brandt Tractor. “If employees understand that mental health is a legitimate health issue, and that their well-being, both mental and physical, is a priority for me then the conversation has started.”

“Start by setting an example,” Paulic says. “Be open, and show that you are there for your employees. Make mental health conversation a part of discussions so your job site becomes a safe place to discuss worries or concerns.”

Don’t assume mental health problems are not an issue in your workplace. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health estimates in a year, one in five adults experiences a mental health concern. Ela Partyka, a manager at the Canadian Mental Health Association, is frequently asked by employers what they can do to begin to tackle the issue of mental illness.

“In addition to engaging in open communication about mental health,” Partyka says, “it is also important to help employees recognize mental health problems early and support your employee’s efforts to get help.”

Once employers accept mental health is an issue, the next step is to identify signs of mental health issues through a worker’s behaviour. Look for increased tardiness, absenteeism and medical leaves. Reduced productivity is another indicator. “Presenteeism” -- showing up for work but not functioning effectively -- is also something to watch. Isolation, decreased self-confidence, increased inter-personal conflicts or reduced problem-solving ability are more signs of a developing mental health issue.

“Ultimately as an employer it is your job to provide a safe environment for your workers,” Paulic says. “This means that in addition to providing them with the tools to get the job done right, provide them the tools to help themselves mentally, as well.”

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Sources of information on mental health

- The Canadian Mental Health Association - mbwpg.cmha.ca
- Manitoba Health - gov.mb.ca/health/mb/faq
- Bell Let's Talk - letstalk.bell.ca/en/get-help
- Mental Health First Aid Training - mentalhealthfirstaidmanitoba.ca
- Movember - ca.movember.com/about/mental-health
- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety - ccohs.ca/healthyminds/topics/mentalhealth