



# SUICIDE IS TAKING ITS TOLL IN CONSTRUCTION

**WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW TO RECOGNIZE ITS DANGERS, AND HOW TO PREVENT IT.**

Working in the building and construction trades is a challenging career. There are high productivity demands on the workforce to meet deadlines, as well as working conditions that can often be an extreme danger if strict safety guidelines aren't followed.

According to a July report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the stress from these factors, coupled with several others, are taking their toll on the construction workforce in the worst possible way. The suicide rate for construction workers is the second highest of all industries (farming, fishing and forestry was first). The report showed that 53.3 construction workers out of every 100,000 fall to suicide. A stark difference to the overall suicide rate of 12.93 people per 100,000 in the United States.

## **WHY CONSTRUCTION?**

Before we can understand why suicide is so prevalent in construction, let's take a look at the national picture. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention:

- According to the last figures available from 2014, 42,773 Americans died by suicide (an average of 117 suicides per day)
- For every suicide, there are 25 attempts
- Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States
- Men die by suicide 3.5x more often than women
- White males accounted for 7 of 10 suicides in 2014
- The rate of suicide is highest in middle age – white men in particular

Research from the Carson J. Spencer Foundation, an organization focused on suicide prevention, has found that industries with the highest risk of suicide have the following factors:

- A male dominated workforce
- A widespread substance abuse problem
- A shift work system
- Access to a lethal means for suicide
- Fearlessness in a risk-taking environment

With these statistics and key factors of suicide in mind, the connection to what is being called an epidemic of suicide in the construction industry becomes more clear, especially when you consider the fact that the construction workforce is nearly 91 percent male, and 64 percent white.

Bob Swanson, retired president of Swanson & Youngdale, a longtime IUPAT paint and drywall contractor in Minnesota, and a suicide prevention advocate for the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI), draws an even more complete picture of connection between suicide and construction.

"As a worker in construction, there is the nearly constant uncertainty about the next job and your finances," said Swanson to the *Journal*. "There is also the fact that people who are suffering from mental issues that are making them depressed or suicidal need structure in their lives. The work schedule in construction can change on a dime which can

cause stress. Also, our line of work often calls for travel. If you're working on the road in a town where you don't know anyone, and you lack the support system you have in place at home, alcohol and drug abuse can become a problem which makes the troubles you're going through even worse."

Swanson became involved with the suicide prevention cause after losing his oldest son to suicide in 2009. He was 33 and lived with bipolar disorder. Swanson now speaks with groups throughout the country and explained that after years of grief, anger and guilt, he decided that he could make a difference by telling his own story. "Suicide loss survivors feel so alone because there's a stigma and shame about mental illness and suicide. This is a different kind of death, not a simple passing, so people treat suicide loss survivors in a much different way, a less supportive way. I'm working to change that and hopefully save some lives at the same time."



### KEYS TO SUICIDE PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

Swanson believes that education and being proactive for treatment are the means to bringing the count of suicide victims down. "We need to make people aware of just how big this problem is and how many lives we lose every day to suicide. We have to attack the disease, not the victims. Men in construction have the 'tough guy' job site mentality that they don't need any help from anyone. That has to change. If we see someone with problems on the job, we should reach out to them and ask if they need help. That has to come not just from the employers, but from their fellow workers, as well."

Another factor to prevention is convincing those that live with conditions such as depression or bipolar disorder that they are not to blame. They are suffering from a disease, just like anyone who is suffering from cancer or heart disease and needs treatment.

### RECOGNIZING SOMEONE WHO MAY NEED HELP

Read the following warning signs of someone who may be struggling and considering suicide, and take advantage of the resources and organizations for suicide prevention, as well. You just might make a difference and save a life.

As Swanson reminds every group he speaks to, all mental illnesses are treatable, all suicides are preventable.

### WARNING SIGNS

Some behaviors may indicate that a person is at immediate risk for suicide.

The following three should prompt you to immediately call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or a mental health professional.

1. Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself. Communication may be veiled, such as: "I just can't take it anymore." or "What's the use?"
2. Looking for ways to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun.
3. Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live.

Other behaviors may also indicate serious risk - especially if the behavior is new, has increased; and/or seems related to a painful event, loss, or change.

- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings (SPRC)



### RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE

#### Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

#### National Alliance on Mental Illness

NAMI.org / 800-950-6264

#### Carson J. Spencer Foundation

CarsonJSpencer.org / 302-219-5042

#### National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention

ActionAllianceForSuicidePrevention.org / 202-572-3784

#### Man Therapy - Using humor to engage men to manage mental health

ManTherapy.org