



Mental Health – Let’s talk about it!

Construction workers are ten times more likely to take their own lives than die as a result of a workplace accident.

Anyone who has attended a funeral following a suicide will recognise the nagging question “could I have said or done something to prevent this” and to be honest most of us couldn’t.

That said, if we lived or worked in a culture where we felt able to discuss our mental health or knew where to go if we were troubled then maybe the answer would be different.

My eyes were opened to the epidemic of poor mental health 18 months ago and during the intervening period I have been exposed to several schemes aimed at addressing the problem; Mates in Mind, Mates in Construction and several bespoke programmes drawn up by people determined to challenge the stigma surrounding mental health and point those suffering under the burden of illness to the resources out there and available to them.

What we have to avoid however, is a duplication of effort, likely to water down the effect of the training.

Even worse is that we get another behaviour based safety scenario where all of the major contractors have their own schemes, and decline to recognise each other’s.

For that reason, a group of likeminded individuals, representing many of the industry’s biggest names, have been discussing ways to avoid this. The common consensus has been to draft a charter outlining what they expect of a mental health awareness programme.

The group believe that the approach to reducing the impact of poor mental health should be three tiered.

Firstly, that everyone should receive awareness training. This is a short interactive session led by someone who has the skills to engage with their audience.

Guidance and a presentation will be available for all, free of charge.

Experience has shown us that despite initial fears that workers will shy away from this topic, attendees have expressed a desire to learn, to engage and help make a difference.

The second level is to educate mental health champions for the workplace. We have seen that there is a surfeit of volunteers for this as a result of attending the initial awareness training. The training for this is more specialised and a great example is currently being offered by Mind.

The top level is to educate mental health first aiders and applied suicide intervention skills training. Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) England can provide this training, or perhaps for larger organisations they educate staff to deliver MHFA training.

The charter will align the participants to engage with this process and to recognise the training given by other signees.

In this way we hope to connect with a significant number of workers in the next twelve months and for the movement to grow exponentially so that within a few years everyone will have had an opportunity to attend an initial awareness session.

The truth is we have to work on this together, the problem is not going away. If we can start to talk about the problem, those in need of help today might have a chance of finding it. Going forwards we can begin to look at the issues causing these problems and to developing the skills and resilience needed to

prevent the more serious health implications from building up.

Some organisations already have employee assistance programmes (EAPs) in place, whereby employees are able to speak in confidence to counsellors about a range of issues likely to affect their health and wellbeing, whether that be financial, legal or emotional concerns. The key is getting those in need to engage with these services and that is where we need an industry wide plan to raise awareness.

Whilst suicide is the ultimate peril associated with poor mental health a recent survey identified that 39% of construction workers believed that productivity was impaired by their own poor mental health, illustrating a clear business case for addressing this problem.

The same respondents claimed that there are insufficient outlets to discuss mental health and a lack of help; we know this isn't so, our job is to spread that message.

If you want more information on where to go next, learn of the charities who can help then contact me at mentalhealth@thsp.co.uk

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