



International Journal of Applied Technology & Leadership
ISSN 2720-5215
Volume 3, Issue 1, January 2024
ijatl@org

Survey: Current Climate in the Construction Industry - Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Awareness

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Abstract

The construction industry has one of the highest rates of suicide compared to other industries. To provide a solution to this and reduce these numbers, it is important to determine what employers are currently doing to address suicide in the workplace and how these efforts are received by employees. Finding the root cause(s) and implementing proactive solutions to suicide in the construction industry is the goal. Before this can be achieved, an industry assessment is necessary.

This article evaluates the current perception of suicide in the construction industry. More specifically employee comfort levels on addressing challenges, crises, and persons that are suicidal. The information used is from construction employees at all levels from field workers to executives. The research will also address ways that an organization can spread suicide prevention awareness and conduct training. The studied population includes affected bodies from Utah, Colorado, Idaho, and Arizona.

1. Introduction

In 2017, thirty-eight thousand working-age persons died by suicide in the United States (Peterson, Sussel, Schumacher, Yeoman, and Stone, 2020). In the construction industry, the suicide rate is 45.3 suicides per 100,000 workers. This is three times greater than the national average. It is estimated that there are more than 5,500 construction-related suicides per year, this equals around 15 suicides per day in the construction industry. In the construction industry, 20% of employees will experience a serious diagnosable mental disorder. An estimated 45% of construction workers with serious diagnosable mental disorders will seek professional help. Of

those, 80% will have a successful recovery with early intervention. (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2021)

Research found that 83% of construction workers have experienced some form of mental health risk factors. Among construction industry workers, 90% have childhood trauma, and 70% are suspected to have undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. (BC Building Trades, 2020).

According to the University of Colorado Department of Psychiatry, risk factors for suicide in construction include work-life balance, culture, and substance misuse (2022). Other risk factors include mental health disorders, trauma, and chronic injury and illness (Kapil, 2022).

2. Theory

Speaking about suicide in construction carries a stigma. Several reasons for this include lack of knowledge and awareness, fear of negative impact on employment, and fear of being viewed as a burden.

If a construction worker were to reach out for help or resources for a mental health or suicide-related issue, they are not confident that their peers or supervisors are equipped to assist, deterring them from seeking help (See Figures 2b & 2c).

In the construction industry, organizations are aware of the need for suicide prevention efforts (Figure 2a) but the challenge lies in implementing these programs.

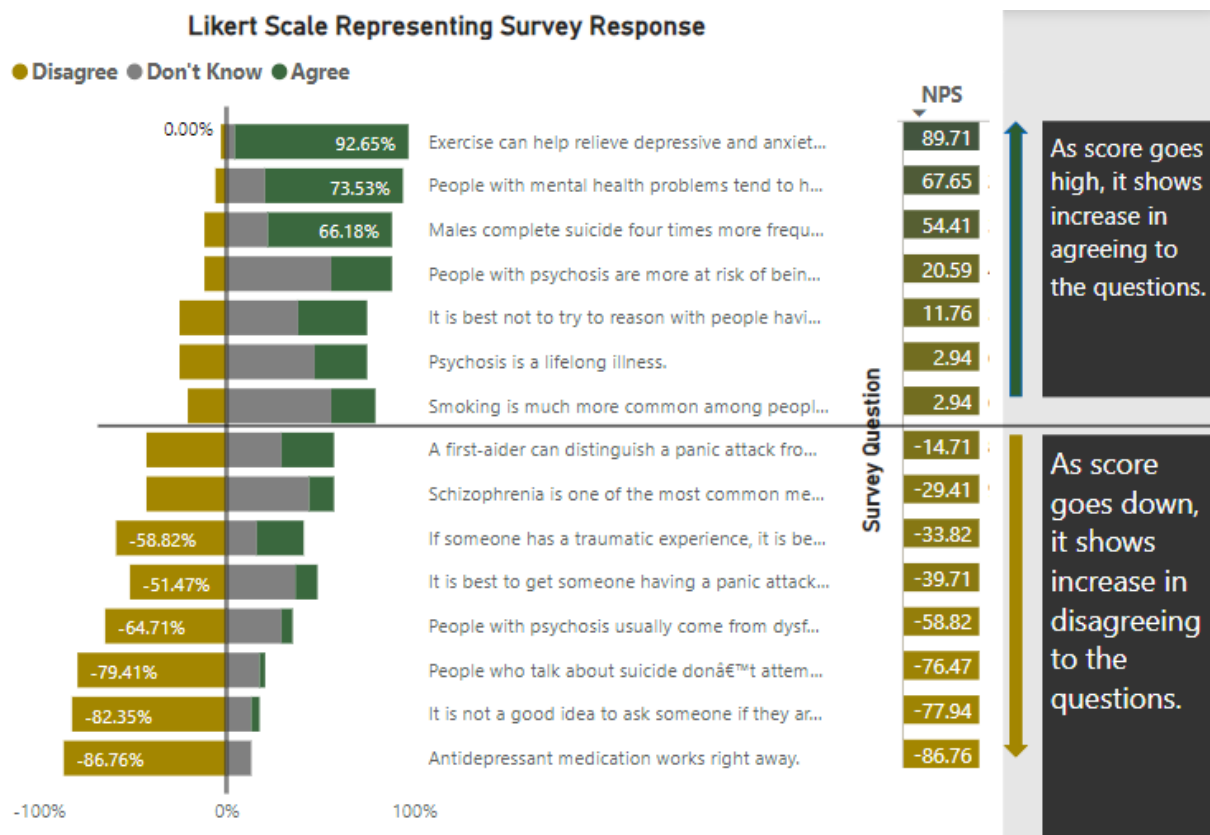
2. Methods and Findings

A survey was given to participants prior to taking the Mental Health First Aid course. The purpose of the survey was to gauge the understanding of mental health and suicide prior to taking the course. Sixty-eight participants took the Likert scale questionnaire, the questions can be seen below. Possible answers were: Disagree, Don't Know, and Agree.

1. Exercise can help relieve depressive and anxiety disorders.
2. People with mental health problems tend to have a better outcome if family members are not critical of them.
3. Males complete suicide four times more frequently than females.
4. People with psychosis are more at risk of being victims of violent crime.
5. It is best not to try to reason with people having delusions.
6. Psychosis is a lifelong illness.
7. Smoking is much more common among people with mental health problems.
8. A (Mental Health) first aider can distinguish a panic attack from a heart attack.
9. Schizophrenia is one of the most common mental disorders.
10. If someone has a traumatic experience, it is best to make them talk about it as soon as possible.

11. It is best to get someone having a panic attack to breath into a paper bag.
12. People with psychosis usually come from dysfunctional families.
13. People who talk about suicide don't attempt suicide.
14. It is not a good idea to ask someone if they are feeling suicidal in case you put the idea in their head.
15. Antidepressant medication works right away.

Figure 1.

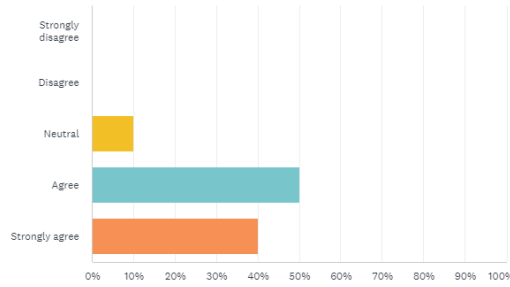


Another survey was distributed to participants via social media (LinkedIn). There were ten responses to this survey. The purpose was to identify the feelings toward mental health and suicide in the industry. This was a Likert scale evaluation with the possible answers of: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree. The questions can be seen above the results.

Figure 2a

Mental health disorders and suicide are prevalent in the construction industry.

Answered: 10 Skipped: 0

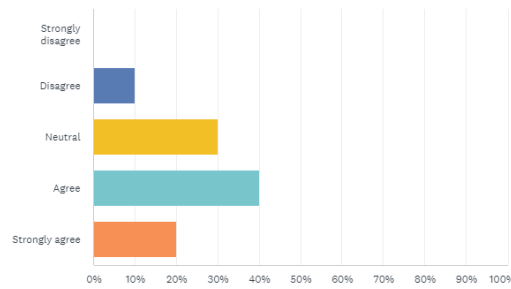


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
Disagree	0.00%	0
Neutral	10.00%	1
Agree	50.00%	5
Strongly agree	40.00%	4
TOTAL		10

Figure 2b

There is a stigma associated with mental health disorders and suicide in my organization.

Answered: 10 Skipped: 0

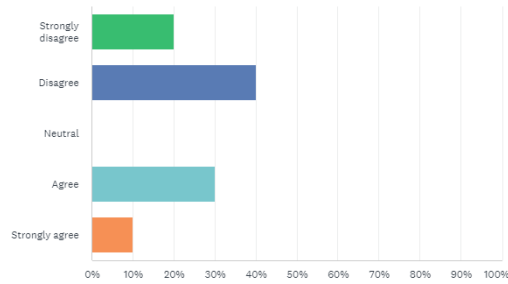


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
Disagree	10.00%	1
Neutral	30.00%	3
Agree	40.00%	4
Strongly agree	20.00%	2
TOTAL		10

Figure 2c

I would feel comfortable speaking with my supervisor about mental health issues or thoughts of suicide.

Answered: 10 Skipped: 0

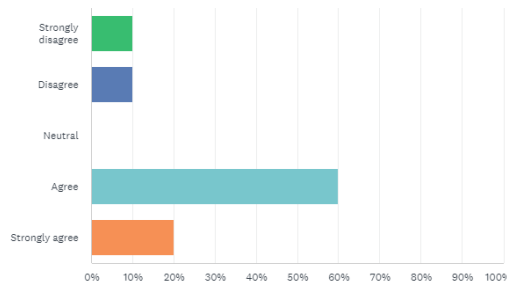


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Strongly disagree	20.00% 2
Disagree	40.00% 4
Neutral	0.00% 0
Agree	30.00% 3
Strongly agree	10.00% 1
TOTAL	10

Figure 2d

I am familiar with my companies resources regarding mental health support and help.

Answered: 10 Skipped: 0

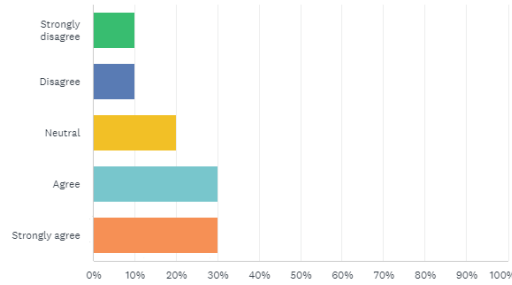


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Strongly disagree	10.00% 1
Disagree	10.00% 1
Neutral	0.00% 0
Agree	60.00% 6
Strongly agree	20.00% 2
TOTAL	10

Figure 2e

If a co-worker comes to me and expresses that they are contemplating suicide, I feel confident that I could get them help.

Answered: 10 Skipped: 0

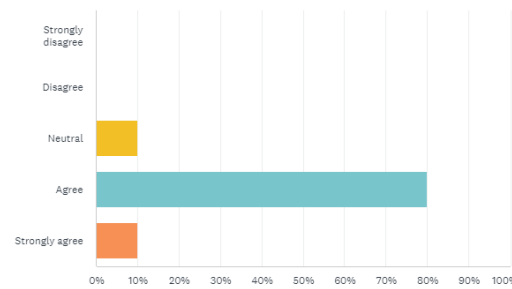


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly disagree	10.00%	1
Disagree	10.00%	1
Neutral	20.00%	2
Agree	30.00%	3
Strongly agree	30.00%	3
TOTAL		10

Figure 2f

I believe there is a need in my organization for a mental emergency response plan. (This would outline instructions on how to respond to different mental health emergencies.)

Answered: 10 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
Disagree	0.00%	0
Neutral	10.00%	1
Agree	80.00%	8
Strongly agree	10.00%	1
TOTAL		10

3. Analysis

Results from the MHFA survey show that participants agree that general knowledge of mental health such as exercise can help with depressive and anxiety disorders and antidepressants do not work immediately. Questions that were split in results were those that focused on specifics regarding mental health disorders i.e. psychosis is a lifelong illness, first aiders can tell the difference between a panic attack and a heart attack, and it is best not to reason with people having delusions. Participant results were agreeable on general knowledge of the subject, but disagreeable on more specific questions.

The other survey that was sent out shows that about half of the participants feel comfortable helping a co-worker experiencing a crisis and that they are familiar with their organization's resources. Still, a majority of the results show that mental health and suicide are prevalent in construction, there is a stigma associated, and there is a need for a mental health emergency response plan or guideline.

4. Conclusion

Employees understand the basics when it comes to mental health and suicide as it relates to their industry. Efforts to spread awareness have been received but more knowledge is needed. Organizations (wanting to implement suicide prevention and mental health awareness) are advised to focus efforts on educating employees on the facts surrounding specific mental health disorders to dispel myths and increase understanding. Also, strategies for cultural improvement should be made. Since most employees see that mental health disorders and suicide are having a large effect on the industry, a focus needs to be placed on reducing stigma and increasing communication.

When it comes to the initial implementation of mental health awareness and suicide prevention programs and training, one of the primary emphasis areas should address the stigma/culture and awareness of common disorders.

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