

Improving Standard of Care and Reducing Mental Health Risk in Construction

Guidance for Managing Psychological
Health and Safety at Work



While mental health awareness is on the rise across industries, the construction sector faces especially high risks as workers face demanding working conditions, job insecurity, long hours, physical strain, and isolation from friends and family while away for projects.

As a result, not only are symptoms of depression and anxiety more prevalent in this sector, but the incidence of suicide risk is concerning. The construction industry has the second-highest suicide rate among all major industries in the U.S., more than four times greater than the national average.¹

The true toll of these experiences, faced daily by industry professionals, is immeasurable and only recently has mental health been discussed more openly from board rooms to project sites.

Mental health risks can quietly yet impactfully affect construction companies in several ways, and can often lead to:

- Emotional distress across the workforce
- Damaged workplace dynamics
- Heightened injury risks
- Financial and liability risk
- Increased absenteeism
- Reduced productivity
- Reputation and recruitment challenges
- Regulatory scrutiny

Mitigating mental health and suicide risk in the construction industry is crucial not only for the immediate wellbeing of individuals but also for the long-term health and sustainability of companies and the industry as a whole.

Implementing preventive measures, promoting mental health awareness, and providing adequate support services are essential steps companies can take toward creating a safer and more supportive work environment.

Despite progress, there may be notable gaps in mental health approaches within construction companies. Measurement and assessment tools are essential but may be lacking, hindering the ability to evaluate program effectiveness. Comprehensive mental health programs often miss crucial elements, such as access to clinical advice, ongoing support, and follow-up mechanisms for workers in need.





Current Industry Standard for Mental Health Care and Risk Reduction

Construction companies are increasingly focusing on fostering a culture of openness and support by providing baseline mental health education and offering access to counseling services. Toolbox talks may also include discussions on stress management, and managers are often put through training programs to recognize someone in crisis. Unfortunately, these methods often mean leaving support to a very late intervention point.

Many companies also implement EAPs and other forms of peer support to provide confidential counseling and support services. However, these methods also have significant limitations, such as being gated by a diagnosis, having session limitations, and requiring individuals to take the initiative to seek help.

Recognizing these obstacles to early care, there is a growing emphasis on preventive solutions to support overall wellbeing. Whether it be support apps, health and nutrition advice, or awareness campaigns, the industry is now aiming to empower employees to proactively manage their mental and physical wellbeing.

While these strategies recognize the critical need for preventive care, many programs lack measurement and peer-reviewed evidence. In addition, these strategies may not recognize the important role the employer and the company culture play in empowering their employees to manage their health proactively.

The Importance of Measurement

As risk managers and construction leaders alike implement innovative new solutions to address mental health in the construction space, measurement will play a pivotal role in assessing the effectiveness of strategies and interventions.

This data-driven approach not only enhances the precision of intervention strategies but also enables employers to proactively address potential issues before they escalate.

Measurement fosters accountability, allowing companies to demonstrate their commitment to employee wellbeing by showcasing tangible results and improvements over time. Moreover, in an industry where the stigma surrounding mental health persists, quantifiable data provides a solid foundation for eradicating misconceptions, promoting awareness, and cultivating a workplace culture that prioritizes mental health as an integral component of overall occupational safety.

Crisis Escalation and Safety Nets

Crisis escalation pathways are crucial in this space and are a large reason that tools that offer mindfulness resources but stop shy of clinical-level assistance often fall flat in this sector. The reality is that people often hesitate to reach out for help, even when it is available. To address this, digital alternative escalation pathways are a crucial tool for employees who may not feel comfortable going to a manager when they're in crisis.

Crisis escalation and Signs of Struggle (SOS) digital tools, such as artificial intelligence (AI), AI detection during chatbot conversations, clinical screenings, daily mood scores, and user-initiated SOS requests have been developed. In times of crisis, users can be guided towards local or national crisis helplines, customer-specific EAPs, personal safety plans, and custom resources. These alternative pathways help ensure that support is readily available when it's needed most, preventing issues from reaching a critical point.

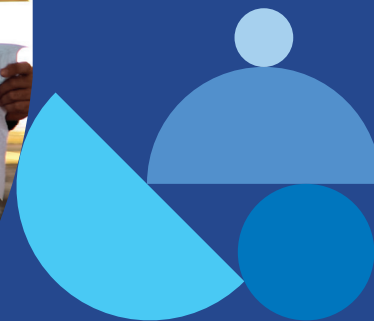
Risk Management Strategies to Address Suicidal Risk

Risk managers play a pivotal role in promoting mental health within the construction industry, offering mental health services, encouraging companies to invest in effective programs, and collaborating with employers to implement risk reduction strategies. Risk managers can also contribute to mental health awareness and prevention by partnering with organizations to develop training and awareness programs, providing mental health resources, and implementing peer support initiatives.

Regular mental health assessments and tracking/reporting mechanisms are crucial for identifying and supporting individuals at risk. Alongside traditional methods, an AI-first approach can enhance early intervention and provide additional layers of support.

It is crucial to ensure that construction professionals have access to clinically based guidance without any restrictions of diagnoses or session limitations. A dual AI and human approach effectively addresses the gap between prevention and intervention, allowing for a more flexible and responsive system.

Building a resilient and mentally healthy construction industry requires a collaborative effort. Companies, risk managers, and industry stakeholders must work together to bridge existing gaps, implement effective strategies, and create a supportive culture. Prioritizing mental health not only safeguards the wellbeing of individuals but also contributes to the overall success and sustainability of the construction sector. As the industry evolves, staying informed about the latest research and best practices will be instrumental in fostering a safer and healthier work environment.



Psychological Health and Safety at Work - Guidelines for Managing Psychosocial Risks

Ensuring employee wellbeing contributes to a company's successful ability to attract, develop, and retain top talent. Chronic diseases and injuries experienced within the U.S. workforce contribute to medical costs and lost productivity by more than half a trillion dollars each year, due to sick days, short and long-term disability, family and medical leave, workers compensation and impaired performance.² Mental health is a major contributor to these costs and lost productivity, with more than one in five U.S. adults living with a mental illness, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness.³

Additionally, the impact of unmitigated psychological risk on the organization can include increased operational costs due to higher rates of absenteeism, turnover, reduced service and product quality, subsequent recruitment, and training costs, and in some instances, lost time due to employee claims, workplace investigations and litigation expenses. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health identifies psychosocial hazards as factors in the work environment that can cause stress, strain, or interpersonal problems for the worker. (e.g., work environment, shift work, long hours, fatigue, violence, bullying and incivility).

| Psychosocial Hazard Factors | Examples |
|---|---|
| Workplace Culture (Structure and Organizational Design) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear or uncertain roles and expectations • Job control or autonomy • Inconsistent or conflicting job demands. • Organizational change management without practical support • Remote and isolated work • Workload and work pace • Work hours and scheduling • Job security; uncertain work hours |
| Social Factors at work | <p>Lack of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal relationships • Clear leadership • Organizational culture or communication • Rewards or recognition • Career development: promotion, performance, or skills • Support from supervisors and colleagues (inaccessible support services, training) • Work/life balance • Civility and respect <p>Instances of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harassment and discrimination • Bullying and workplace violence |
| Work Environment and Task | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate equipment availability or reliability • Poor working conditions (lighting, space, noise, air quality) • Extreme or hazardous work conditions (e.g., Climate, overhead or at height) |

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 45003:2021 is a globally harmonized set of guidelines for use in benchmarking management practices around psychosocial risks in the workplace. The guidelines are a holistic and systematic approach to organizational psychological health and safety at work.⁴

The ISO 45003 Guidelines for Managing Psychosocial Risks and are cross referenced as a standard element under the Occupational Health and Safety Management System (ISO 45001) compliance standard.

The main goal of the ISO 45003: is for organizations to:

- Raise awareness and identification of psychosocial risk at work
- Develop competence in the management of psychosocial risks
- Support retention of impacted workers/employees
- Plan for response to emergency situations

While acknowledging the rising cost of psychosocial risk amongst workers, it is critical to understand that not all aspects of an employee's psychosocial state can be attributed to work-related hazards, risk or within an employer's control. It is essential to approach this with a balanced perspective, recognizing the complex interplay of factors impacting the U.S. Workforce. As you read through each clause, consider your organization's strengths and opportunities to further improve your OHSMS.

The following includes the scope of the ISO guidelines. If you wish to learn more about ISO 45003:2021, the entire set of guidelines is available for purchase at: [ISO 45003:2021 - Occupational health and safety management — Psychological health and safety at work — Guidelines for managing psychosocial risks.](#)

Workplace culture

This starts with an examination of the internal and external factors that can affect the organization's Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) management systems, specifically identifying psychosocial risks. Develop tailored strategies unique to your organization to foster leadership commitment and promote supportive communication.

Proactive identification and mitigation of psychosocial risk

Leadership commitment

The guidelines are prescriptive in how executive leadership will lead this effort together with its managers and employees at all levels within the organization.

Executive leadership's commitment should include:

- Defining leadership commitment, setting policies, roles and responsibilities to ensure protection for employee reporting incidents, employee communication of that commitment and ensuring wellbeing is aligned with other organizational policies (e.g., human resources, safety and social responsibility governance)

Supportive communication and education

Various resources in support of achieving the OH&S objectives concerning the management of psychosocial risks should be established, provided, and maintained, including the use of technology, financial, human and infrastructure resources.

- Establish resources, including technology and training, to raise awareness of workplace factors affecting health and wellbeing and promote adherence to OH&S policies



Effective management strategies:

Effective management strategies include operational planning and support. This includes addressing psychosocial risk factors, which typically fall into one of three categories: work design and organization, social factors, and work environment (which overlaps with the physical concerns associated with traditional occupational hazards).⁵

Strategies should consider the best fit between tasks, structures, social risk factors, and the needs and expectations of the employees⁶

Performance Evaluation

The organization should define methods for internal monitoring, measurement and evaluation of performance, including ongoing employee consultation and continuous improvement efforts. Regular review of safety protocols, analyzing incident reports and soliciting feedback can aid in evaluating and improving performance in managing psychosocial risk.

Conclusion

ISO 45003:2021 is a flexible framework for organizations to manage psychosocial risks and enhance worker wellbeing through continuous improvement. By implementing ISO 45003 guidelines and practices, organizations can establish structured processes to promote a safe and healthy work environment. Successful application of these guidelines may identify gaps that can be met with holistic strategies and innovative digital solutions. These guidelines are designed to be flexible enough to fit any size and type of organization yet have sufficient rigor to be recognized internationally.

Finally, tools such as training and 'Toolbox Talks' can be supplemented with technology that provides data analytics, AI chatbot support, and crisis escalation resources to promote a healthy and safe work environment.

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