

Why talk about mental health at work?

Explain dangers

Substance abuse, overdoses, and suicides are increasing problems in the trades. These outcomes are often the result of mental health challenges that have gone unaddressed.

We all need to do our part to ensure our actions and behaviours at work do not negatively impact the mental health of our coworkers.

Did you know?

- 1 in 3 of us will have a mental illness or addiction in our lifetime.
- By age 40, over half of us will have had a mental health problem.
- Workers in construction have the second-highest suicide rate of all working groups.
- White, working-age men are the most likely to die by suicide.

The COVID-19 pandemic added to mental health concerns for many of us. For example, in 2020:

- More than half of Canadians dealt with some sort of mental illness.
- Calls made to Canada Suicide Prevention Service were up 200% (over 2019).
- To cope with stress, loneliness, or boredom, Canadians drank more, smoked more, and consumed more drugs.

Workers in the trades have an increased risk of experiencing mental health problems and thoughts of suicide due to job-related factors:

- Work is often high pressure and high risk, which increases stress.
- Many workers have a “tough guy” attitude, which prevents them from seeking help or supporting others who may be struggling.
- Seeing or experiencing a traumatic incident might cause emotional harm.
- Chronic pain may develop from years of hard, physical labour, repetitive tasks, or long-haul driving.
- Workers are at high risk of developing an opioid addiction to manage pain. In fact, workers in the trades have the highest incidence of prescription opioid drug use.

- Separation from family and friends while on job projects or long hauling can be difficult.
- Inconsistent sleep due to work schedules and rotating shifts.

Identify controls

Everyone’s mental health is at risk if we don’t look out for and help each other, or if we allow teasing and bullying of those who may be struggling with mental health issues.

These are some things each of us can do to prevent mental health issues at the workplace:

- Educate yourself to gain a better understanding of mental health, suicide, and substance abuse problems like opioid use.
- Tackle the “tough guy” attitude that says it’s not okay to seek help or to offer help.
- Challenge behaviours that are mentally harmful, such as bullying, harassment, racial comments, hurtful name calling, etc.
- Learn the signs of someone who may be struggling with their mental health—and what you can do to help them.
- Check in with your own mental health, learn about available supports (e.g., Employee Assistance Programs), and seek help when you need it.
- Keep learning together—and keep talking openly about mental health.

Demonstrate

Leaders, supervisors, and managers can greatly influence the culture of their workforce by publicly supporting their employees’ actions to take care of their mental health and support each other. Make yourself available to listen to your workers mental health questions and concerns, and always encourage open discussion. While there is no harm in taking the lead, there is great risk in holding back.

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facilitator support resources

Prepare

Review

[How to Talk About Mental Health at Your Workplace](#), IHSA's guide for supervisors delivering safety talks on mental health.

Watch

[Mental health awareness videos](#) from Workplace Strategies for Mental Health. Learn how to tackle mental health stigma from people who have experienced mental health issues at work.

Read

Contemplate [this quote](#) about building safe spaces for open talk about mental health.

Dive in/Bookmark

Sign up to receive weekly [bite-sized leadership strategies](#) by email.

Post

- IHSA's [Mental Health in the Workplace](#) poster
- [Don't Talk About Mental Health](#) poster

Reinforce

Leaders, supervisors, and managers can positively influence the culture of their workforce by publicly supporting their employees' actions to take care of their mental health and support each other. While there is no harm in taking the lead, there is great risk in holding back.

Next steps

Plan to host additional **safety talks** to help positively influence your workplace culture around important mental health issues.

1. Challenge current stereotypes about suicide, mental health, and substance abuse problems: [Challenging stigma and preventing mental harm](#) and [Opioids in the trades](#)
2. Tackle the "tough guy" attitude that discourages workers from seeking help or offering help: [Toxic masculinity](#)

3. Identify behaviours that are psychologically harmful, such as bullying, harassment, race- and sex-based comments, etc.: [Challenging stigma and preventing mental harm](#)
4. Help your team to learn the signs of someone who might be struggling with mental health problems—and what can be done to help them: [Declining mental health and suicide risk](#)
5. Understand the risks and signs of burn out, and how it differs from "normal" levels of stress: [Work stress and burnout](#)
6. Check in with our own mental health and team your workers to do the same: [Assessing your mental health](#)
7. Learn how everyone can work to improve psychological health and safety: [Psychological health and safety: a joint responsibility](#)

While presenting guided safety talks is a good starting point, it's important to keep the conversation going so that openness becomes a part of your company's health and safety culture.

Talking about mental health can be tough—especially at work. But providing space for respectful discussion and sharing (by asking the questions below, for example) is an effective way to combat stigma and help workers learn from each other.

Questions

Consider asking your crew these questions after delivering the safety talk:

- Growing up, what did you learn about mental health from the media? From your family? From school?
- Do you think it is important to talk about mental health at work? Why (or why not)?
- How do you think talking about mental health helps improve safety in the workplace?

Do *you* have questions? Did your crew have questions you couldn't answer? Remember, it's okay to not have all the answers.

For further comments, concerns or requests, please contact info@ihsa.ca