

# Male Mental Health:

Why it Matters in the Workplace



# Strategies for addressing an often-overlooked health and safety issue in labor-intensive industries.

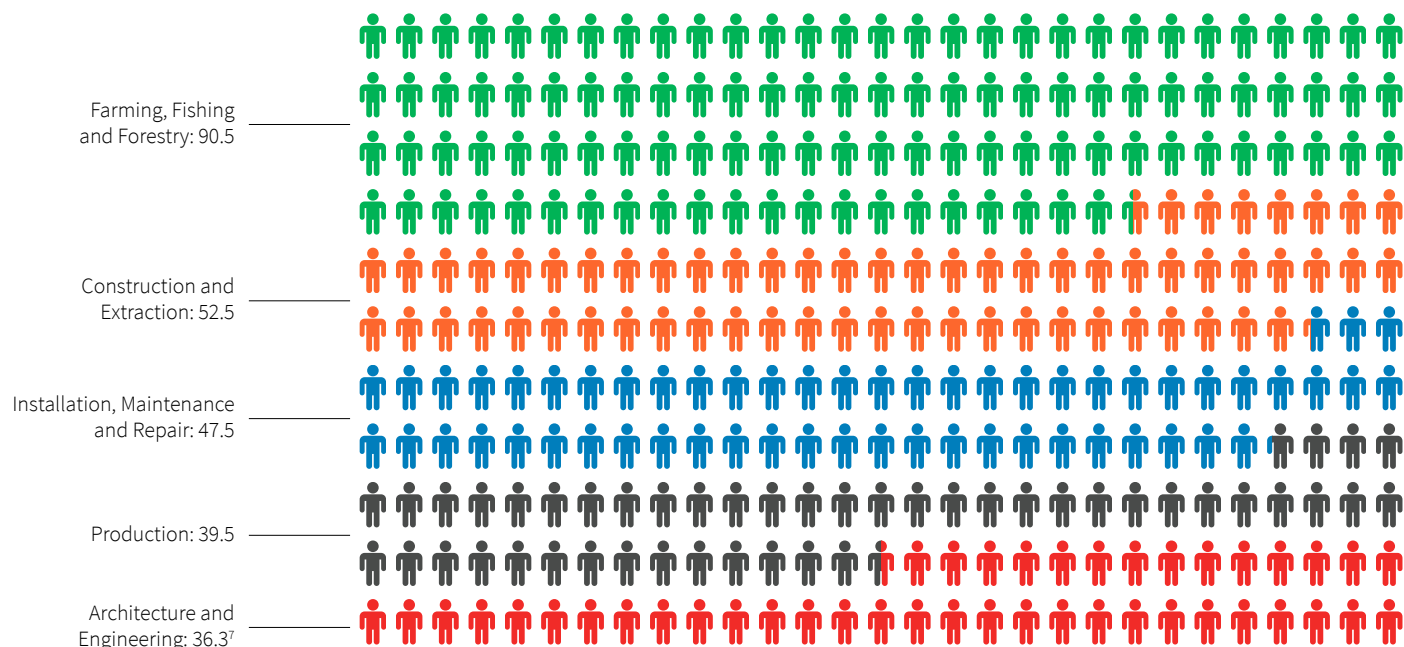
The stigma of mental illness can be deadly in sectors that are traditionally dominated by men. Historically, heavy manufacturing and construction sites around the world have never been perceived as environments where workers felt comfortable discussing their problems.

This lack of openness and support can lead to catastrophic results. For instance, in the United States (U.S.) the construction sector has a suicide rate of 53 per 100,000, which is four times higher than the general population, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.<sup>1</sup> In Australia, suicide is the leading cause of death for men aged 15 to 44.<sup>2</sup> Another study, conducted by the European Commission found that men completed more than 75 percent of suicides in the EU.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, as indicated in these statistics, this issue isn't isolated to a specific region, with almost two-thirds of worldwide suicides completed by men.<sup>4</sup>

Stress is a common issue in many workplaces globally. In the United Kingdom (UK), one in 10 male workers say they're "significantly stressed."<sup>5</sup> Key workplace factors that have been identified as detrimental to an individual's mental health include poor ergonomics, exposure to hazards, increasing work demands and employment insecurity.<sup>6</sup> It's undeniable that workers in industrial environments are just as prone to mental health hazards as are workers employed in occupations traditionally perceived as high stress, such as the financial sector (see graphic, "Highest Male Suicide Rates by Industry in the U.S.").

This white paper will explore why male mental health is a critical issue in traditionally male-dominated industrial environments around the world and the steps organizations can take to address these issues.

Highest Male Suicide Rates by Industry in the U.S. (Figures per 100,000 Men)





## Old Problem, New Perspective

Why are workplaces just now beginning to recognize that male mental health is a real issue they must address? Stereotypes and attitudes about masculinity have played a major role in the current mental health problems plaguing male-dominated workplaces. At an early age, boys are often taught to hide their feelings, a form of conditioning, say many health care experts.

■ **“We raise boys and men not to cry, not to show emotions. That is amplified further when you’re working in a high-pressure sector which is incredibly competitive.”** –Poppy Jaman, Chief Executive of the UK’s City Mental Health Alliance<sup>8</sup>

This attitude is particularly prevalent in British culture, according to Dr. Shaun Davis, Global Director of Safety, Health, Wellbeing and Sustainability, Royal Mail Group. Davis, co-author of “Positive Male Mind: Overcoming Mental Health Problems,” says “real men don’t cry” attitudes condition men to thinking they should not display emotion, particularly sadness or despair. But these outdated perceptions may be changing.

“People have talked about physical health for a long time, but it was felt that mental health was previously thought of as a weakness,” Davis says. “Now, more public figures are coming forward, such as the younger members of the British Royal Family who are bringing male mental health to the forefront.”

Men also continue to feel extraordinary pressure to succeed in their work roles, even as societal norms are changing. They are more likely to hold senior positions, twice as likely than women to work full time, and typically have a poor work-life balance.<sup>9</sup>

Another common cause of mental distress in the workplace is physical pain. One of the most frequently reported musculoskeletal complaints among construction workers is low back pain.<sup>13</sup> Injuries, such as these, play a role in the mental health of the individual. In fact, a 2014 study confirmed injured construction workers were 45% more likely to be treated for depression than non-injured workers. The study, which examined several occupations, also showed that the effect of injuries on mental health was higher for men than for women.<sup>14</sup>

Conversely, preexisting mental health issues may impact physical safety on the job. For Chinese construction workers, the risk of work-related injuries increased more than twofold when they reported depressive symptoms.<sup>15</sup> Other studies show that mental distress can negatively impact worker attitudes about safety and lead to unsafe behavior.<sup>16</sup>

## Increasing Awareness in the Workplace

Public campaigns and high-profile stories about men who have suffered from mental illness or completed suicide are driving more awareness about the issue globally. For instance, in the UK, one young man launched a Twitter campaign to find and thank a Good Samaritan that intervened when he attempted suicide. The hashtag, #findmike, went viral in several countries, further progressing the conversation.<sup>17</sup> Another example is a global organization called Movember, which two friends from Australia launched in 2004 to inform people about men's health issues, including mental illness.<sup>18</sup>

## Work-related stress in Japan

This has become such an issue that the Japanese actually have a term for it called “karoshi,” which translates to “death by overwork.”<sup>10</sup>

The phenomenon is leading to premature deaths across the country as many Japanese workers work excessively long hours. About one-fourth of Japanese companies have employees who work at least 80 hours of overtime a month.<sup>11</sup> Also, in Japan 30% of men work more than 49 hours per week compared with 9.7% of women.<sup>12</sup>



The campaign encourages men to grow mustaches during November and use it as a conversation starter to ask friends and families for donations to support men's health. In 2017, Movember participants spanned 20 countries and raised \$67.5 million in donations.<sup>19</sup> The campaign includes several initiatives focused on mental health, including a suicide prevention program coinciding with World Suicide Prevention Day and the Making Connections Community of Practice in the U.S., which brought together men and women from 16 cities to develop community-based programs aimed at helping disadvantaged and minority populations of men, including men of color and veterans.<sup>20</sup>

- The message is reaching more employers, who are beginning to understand the risks that mental health issues pose to employees. There is now an increased and distinct level of attention from senior executives on male mental health in their organizations. This new focus and acceptance are changing the conversation and creating an improved level of awareness in the workplace.





It is also helping employers understand how poor mental health impacts their bottom line. For instance, the impacts of poor mental health cost UK employers between £33 billion and £42 billion a year.<sup>21</sup> More than half of the cost is related to presenteeism, defined as lost productivity due to poor mental health, with additional costs from sickness absence and staff turnover.<sup>22</sup> A European Union study found that each case of a stress-related illness leads to an average of 30.9 lost days of work.<sup>23</sup>

Workers who suffer from chronic stress may also experience anxiety, which can affect sleep.<sup>24</sup> Health and safety managers need to recognize that sleeplessness and stress often make workers more prone to incidents or injuries.

■ **“There had been fatalities that had occurred as a result of that, strictly because of the number of hours worked. Because of the demand and the physiological response in the body, people just start breaking down, it affects a person’s ability to think and to make decisions, good decisions that you would make if you weren’t in that stressed state.”**

■ **–Micki Siegel de Hernandez, Health and Safety Director at the Communications Workers of America<sup>25</sup>**

Mental health issues throughout an organization also can impact a company’s reputation. In the age of technology, dissatisfied employees are more likely to discuss poor work experiences relating to mental health issues potentially caused by their employment using online media. These posts, found on social media and job review websites, such as Glassdoor, often attract negative attention from the media including potential recruits.

The consequences for employers can be significant. Poor mental health can lead to lost revenue due to decreased productivity, potential safety risks, low morale and loss of reputation, to name a few.

# How Employers Can Address Male Mental Health

In order to truly enact a healthy workplace, change must begin at the top with upper management. Senior leaders need to foster an environment that emboldens workers to feel comfortable discussing mental health issues.<sup>26</sup> A mental health program should be delivered consistently to all stakeholders, including the contract workers who come on your site or are supervised by a subcontractor.

Business in the Community, a corporate social responsibility organization based in the UK, suggests organizations adopt an eight-step approach to address mental health in the workplace, including:

01

## **Make a commitment.**

Demonstrate a commitment to mental health by signing a commitment such as a policy or statement of intent to address it in the workplace. An effective way to ensure that this commitment is delivered is to designate a mental health champion to lead a supporting action plan. Make sure it's endorsed by the CEO or top company executive. Then share it frequently, publicly and with all employees. "Stigma continues to be a major barrier, and having a CEO or someone at a high level speak openly about mental health really opens the door for people to feel safe to come forward and get help," said Darcy Gruttadaro, Director of the American Psychiatric Association Foundation's Center for Workplace Mental Health, after the American Heart Association CEO Roundtable released a report on mental health in the workplace.<sup>27</sup>

02

## **Build an approach.**

The first step toward building a plan is understanding the organization's obligations under local and national laws to address mental health in the workplace. However, don't feel limited to only addressing the issue according to legislation. Instead, assess the organization's mental health needs and use the information to implement relevant workplace policies and strategies, then develop a plan to address mental health issues. Organizations should include clear action items that they report on at least annually.

03

## **Create a positive culture.**

A key characteristic of a positive mental health culture includes continuous engagement and communication with management regarding mental health, anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies. Additionally, the positive impact a healthy work/life balance has on the individual should not be ignored. Seek employee and contractor feedback through surveys to gauge the overall effectiveness of mental health support across the organization, employee coping skills and behaviors, and the efficacy of existing mental health programs. "One of the best ways to create a culture that supports mental health is to ensure people experience their jobs in a meaningful and purposeful way. This can be achieved by giving employees autonomy and resources. If your team experiences support and independence, and that you trust them to do what they ought to do, they will generally be happier at work, which will reduce the risk of mental health problems," Dr. Tomas Chamorro Premuzic, ManpowerGroup chief talent scientist, told *Forbes* contributor Alan Kohll.<sup>28</sup>

04

**Provide training.**

Training for direct managers is critical as they are the ones most likely to notice when an individual on-site is experiencing problems. They should be knowledgeable about workplace health, stress risk assessments and strategies for managing illness-related absences. They should also understand the best ways to accommodate employees with mental health issues so they can continue working. An example of training may include programs such as the UK's Mental Health First Aid training program, which teaches people how to identify and address mental health issues.

05

**Manage mental health.**

Encourage communication and openness about mental health. Employers may want to change the way they approach the subject with men to address the stigma attached to mental health, suggests Davis. He recommends rephrasing the discussion in a way that's more appealing to a male workforce. "You can get people in leadership positions to talk about their experiences," Davis says. "That in itself will help to normalize it, but also if you move the discussion ... to be more about mental strength instead of mental weakness I think you'll get people to open up a lot more."

06

**Provide proper support.**

Early intervention is critical, so staff members must know how to spot the signs of mental distress and direct employees to appropriate resources. When an issue is identified, approach the worker by having an informal chat and then plan a more formal meeting if further action is necessary. Make sure any communication is conducted in a private place. Ask questions that are caring and supportive, such as, "How are you doing?" and "You don't seem to be yourself lately. Is anything wrong?"





07

**Help workers recover.**

Explain to employees how the company will help them return to work and the procedures for returning to the job site. Stay in touch with employees during their absence to monitor their progress and implement a plan for their return. It is important to have fair and consistent policies and approaches for returning to work.

08

**Continue to refine and improve the approach.**

Continue assessing the program through employee surveys and feedback. Make any adjustments as needed, including additional training, increased communication and ongoing initiatives, such as well-being days.

Ensure the approach is inclusive of remote, temporary and contract workers. Organizations need to secure a commitment from other partners, such as contractors, that they will follow through with mental health practices and standards, Davis says.

“I think practically minded people who work in businesses like construction respond really well to guidance and tools and insights, so I think if you give them the tools and a consistent message they can convey down the supply chain that takes away the fear factor that’s often associated with talking about mental health,” Davis says.

## Going a Step Beyond

Many organizations who bring contractors on to their worksites fail to understand the potential impact upon workplace safety if as part of the initial evaluation program they fail to assess how that contractor manages occupational health, preferring to address the more traditional assessment of complying with safety legislation. The fact that an individual from within a contractors organization can potentially suffer from mental health-related issues is real and if they have an accident as a result, your business as the client can still suffer consequences.





## Male Mental Health Today and Tomorrow

In recent years, high-profile men, including athletes, such as Olympic swimmers Michael Phelps,<sup>29</sup> and Ian Thorpe have discussed their struggles with mental health and their path to recovery. Others include, boxers such as Ricky Hatton, Frank Bruno and Tyson Fury and athletes that have moved into the film industry such as Dwayne (The Rock) Johnson where their candor about their issues have helped to destigmatize male mental health and opened the door for other men to come forward.

The benefits for male-dominated industries can be significant. Positive outcomes include lower absenteeism, reduced turnover, and fewer negative behaviors.<sup>30</sup> The Centre of MentalHealth in the United Kingdom calculated that male mental health cost business up to £34.9bn in 2018.<sup>31</sup> In the United States it was found that a \$1 investment in treatment for depression and anxiety leads to a return of \$4 in better health and ability to work, according to the World Economic Forum.<sup>32</sup> “Organizations realize additional benefits can include a positive brand reputation, which can help the company with recruitment, onboarding and retention”, says Davis. A comprehensive, well-planned mental health strategy that encourages openness in labor-intensive industries is essential for future business success and employee satisfaction.

- **A \$1 investment in treatment for depression and anxiety leads to a return of \$4 in better health and ability to work, according to the World Economic Forum.<sup>33</sup>**

Some business in the UK have already started to implement these ideals in their own organizations. As previously discussed programs such as Mental Health First-Aiders programs. These programs, often referred to as MHFA, help train leaders and managers on-site to notice and support those that may be struggling with mental health. Over the last decade, nearly 200,000 Mental Health First Aiders were trained in the UK.<sup>34</sup> Because initiatives such as these are still in their infancy, many still question their impact. However, a survey that monitored the effectiveness of these programs, found that 88 percent of respondents felt more confident about reporting mental health concerns in their organization.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, 73 percent mentioned that the training helped them in their personal lives.<sup>36</sup> While the initiative is not geared toward prevention, both men and women have noted that it has made great strides in improving the negative stigma that often surrounds mental health in the world.



For more information on how your organization can assess how companies within your direct supply chain manage male mental health awareness visit Avetta at [avetta.com](https://www.avetta.com).

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