

Toolbox Talk

Mentally healthy workplaces in Construction



About this toolbox talk

This toolbox talk can be delivered by construction supervisors and is designed to raise awareness about mental health in construction, including how to recognise the signs of mental health risks and mental ill-health in colleagues, and provide examples of healthy coping strategies. This toolbox talk is one example of how to introduce mental health discussions and consultation with workers.

A person in control of a business or undertaking (PCBU) has the responsibility to ensure the safety of workers, including ensuring mental health hazards (also called psychosocial hazards) are effectively managed in the workplace. PCBUs must identify and control psychosocial hazards, consult with workers, ensure safe systems of work are in place, as well as a safe working environment.

Include these workers in your talk

- Sub-contractors
- Labourers
- Employees
- Labour hire workers
- Trade supervisors

Preparing for the talk

- You don't have to be an expert to talk with your workers about mental health
- Whilst you can't control what's happening in workers' private lives, you must, under the work health and safety legislation, minimise the risk of psychosocial hazards at work

- Familiarise yourself with what psychosocial work hazards are by reading the [SafeWork NSW Code of Practice for Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work](#) and the [SafeWork NSW Mental Health in Construction Fact Sheet](#)
- When you are ready for your toolbox talk, find a quiet area, free from loud noise so that your workers can hear you
- Have a pen and notebook to jot down any safety suggestions from workers
- Print out the [SafeWork NSW poster Let's Build Better Mental Health in Construction](#), to put up in your workplace
- Consider watching or showing workers the [Mental Health Challenges and Opportunities in the Building and Construction Sector](#) SafeWork NSW video on YouTube

The facts

Read out to workers

Construction workers are six times more likely to die from suicide than an accident at work.

Every year, 190 Australians working in the construction industry take their own lives. This means we lose a construction worker every second day to suicide (source: Mates in Construction).

Mental ill-health is a serious problem in the building and construction industry, just like any physical injury, and can be categorised as a condition that negatively affects your mood, thinking and behaviour.

Employers know that good mental health is not only crucial for workers' well-being, but it is also good for business. When someone is experiencing mental ill-health, it can affect them at work and home, reduce productivity and contribute to workplace accidents and injuries.

Whilst your boss may not be able to help you with what's happening at home, employers have responsibilities under work health and safety laws to ensure that the hazards at work that may lead to mental ill-health are effectively managed and controlled.

What are the risk factors at work?

Read out to workers

There are many things that could contribute to mental ill-health at work. These hazards are called "psychosocial hazards".

Psychosocial hazards that are not managed properly can start to add up and negatively impact your mental and physical health.

Ask your workers

Can you identify some of the things that happen on-site that could be called "psychosocial hazards" and might make workers stressed, anxious or worried?

Hint: they could be to do with workplace relationships/interactions, how organised the job is, or whether you have a physically safe working environment.

Possible answers for why workers may be stressed or anxious on-site

Workplace relationships or interactions:

- ☐ being bullied or harassed by supervisors or co-workers
- ☐ supervisors not supporting workers
- ☐ unreasonable or aggressive behaviour
- ☐ workplace violence

Job organisation:

- ☐ too much work to do, in not enough time
- ☐ not having a say in how to do the job best
- ☐ not being told how or what needs to be done for the job

Unsafe working environment:

- ☐ being asked to do tasks or jobs that are dangerous or where there is a physical safety risk
- ☐ witnessing traumatic events such as injuries in the workplace.

What are some of the outward signs?

Ask your workers

How could you tell if your workmate is stressed or anxious? What are the signs?

Possible answers

- ☐ they look or seem withdrawn
- ☐ they are unusually moody
- ☐ they are expressing constant negative attitudes or negative thinking
- ☐ they have mentioned self-harm
- ☐ they are making lots of mistakes with jobs
- ☐ they look unusually untidy or they don't seem to care about their appearance
- ☐ they have more time off work than normal
- ☐ they look tired or say they are having trouble sleeping
- ☐ they withdraw from social events or aren't interested in activities they usually enjoy
- ☐ they change their eating habits – maybe gaining or losing weight
- ☐ they seem overwhelmed or anxious all the time
- ☐ they over-react to situations that they wouldn't normally
- ☐ they are drinking more alcohol or taking drugs

What could have been done differently?

This scenario has been taken from a real-life incident reported to SafeWork NSW.

Read out to workers

Two young apprentice carpenters bullied at work - Josh* & Alex*

Josh and Alex were both teenagers when they got a building apprenticeship straight out of school. They were excited to start their new career, but as this was their first job, they didn't realise that it wasn't normal or acceptable to be constantly yelled at or sworn at by the boss.

Over time, this behaviour became the norm, where the boss would call them rude names in front of other tradies, swear and shout at them aggressively. He even threw scraps of timber and other building materials aggressively in their direction. Sometimes they were pressured into doing things that weren't safe, such as working on a roof without any fall protection.

The boss's behaviour made them feel anxious, distressed and fearful over time. They felt useless at their job and lost motivation. Alex had trouble sleeping and had nightmares.

They didn't want to go to work because they were afraid of what the boss might do or say. A few times other tradies who witnessed this behaviour spoke up, but not very often. The boys felt isolated and alone. Alex stopped going out with friends for a while, and Josh gave up playing football with his mates.

They eventually left the job and never finished their apprenticeships.

Josh's dad reported the boss to SafeWork NSW. The boss was prosecuted, found guilty and fined under Section 28 of the Work Health and Safety (WHS) Act for the bullying and harassment of two young building apprentices.

Ask your workers

What could have been done differently?

Possible answers

- ☐ the boss should not have behaved that way
- ☐ other tradies could have spoken to the boss or reported him to SafeWork NSW
- ☐ the principal contractor (or the person in control of the site) could have checked on the welfare of all workers, or made sure there were "respectable behaviour" site rules
- ☐ the boss could have undertaken training on how to effectively supervise others in the workplace
- ☐ the apprentices could have asked for help from their apprentice network provider, a Union or other support organisation
- ☐ the apprentices could have asked for help sooner from SafeWork NSW via the "Speak up Save Lives" app or by calling 13 10 50.

*Names and some details changed to protect the privacy of the injured workers

What to do if you are stressed, or feeling anxious or worried.

Read out to workers

There are things you can do at both work and home if you are stressed, anxious or worried.

AT WORK

Ask your workers

What are some of the things you could do at work if you are feeling anxious or worried?

Possible answers

- ☐ identify the things that are making you anxious or worried
- ☐ talk to the supervisor to explain the problem(s) and work together to address them
- ☐ ask the supervisor if things can be done differently. This could include changes to hours worked, reduced workload, having a safe work environment, respectful behaviour by others, better communication and consultation
- ☐ if the supervisor is the problem, talk to the big boss, other tradies, or company contacts
- ☐ ask if there are any support services offered by the company
- ☐ reach out to a colleague you can trust to talk to -either at work or after work

Ask your workers

What are some of the things you can do at work if you are concerned about your work mates?

Possible answers

- ☐ reach out and ask them if they are ok? (R U OK website has conversation starters)
- ☐ let them know you are there if they need to talk
- ☐ encourage them to talk to the mental health first aid officer if there is one on-site
- ☐ encourage them to talk to the supervisor -who may be able to make changes to support them
- ☐ encourage them to use an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if the company offers that service
- ☐ report injuries and unsafe or unhealthy situations to your supervisor or health and safety representative

Note: add in any support services, systems or processes that you or the company can offer for this site to be included in the list of possible answers.

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Ask your workers

Is there anything we could do on this site to ensure mental health hazards are controlled?

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AT HOME

Read out to workers

When people are anxious or worried they can turn to behaviours that may feel ok in the short term, such as drinking or taking drugs, but these things actually make them feel worse in the long run. There are some positive things you can do at home to help your mind and body feel better. Even if it's just a few small changes.

Ask your workers

What are some **positive things** you can do at home to help relieve anxiety or worries?

Possible answers:

- ☐ take time to do things you love – hobbies, sport or new interests
- ☐ spend time in nature – going for a walk in nature is proven to elevate your mood
- ☐ do some exercise – even if you don't want to and even if it's just a walk around the block
- ☐ play with your kids or pet
- ☐ try to eat better – a healthier diet will make you feel better
- ☐ get a massage or do some stretching
- ☐ talk to a trusted friend or family member
- ☐ make an appointment with your general practitioner (GP), psychologist, spiritual leader or community leader
- ☐ talk to a mental health helpline.

Ask your workers

Think about what positive steps you could take in your life if you are anxious or worried. If you want to, you can share them with the group.

What do we do now?

Read out to workers

There are so many ways you can work more safely, including understanding and addressing psychosocial hazards in the workplace. Planning, communication and the right safety systems can ensure workers go home at the end of the day healthy and well.

Safety is everyone's responsibility. Speak up on-site about safety if you have any concerns.

Site supervisor notes:

After the talk

- Consider the answers workers provided during the talk to see if there are any improvements you can make to your safety systems around mental health
- Make sure you communicate your mental well-being systems to current and new workers
- If things have been raised with you and you need help giving or getting support, visit <https://www.nsw.gov.au/mental-health-at-work/managing-mental-health-your-workplace/get-and-give-support-now>
- Prepare for your next toolbox talk.

Where to get help

Contact SafeWork NSW on 13 10 50 or see safework.nsw.gov.au

Visit <https://www.nsw.gov.au/mental-health-at-work> for more information and resources on promoting, managing and supporting workplace mental health and your duties.

Other mental health resources or counselling services:

- [Lifeline Australia](#) – 13 11 14
- [beyondblue](#) – 1300 22 4636
- [MensLine Australia](#) – 1300 78 99 78
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) – 1300 659 467
- [NSW Health Mental Health Line](#) – 1800 011 511
- [Kids Helpline \(for under 25s\)](#) – 1800 55 1800
- [Mates in Construction](#) – 1300 642 111

Record of Toolbox Talk

Business name

Date

Name of supervisor or presenter

Time

Workers present

Name

Signature

Name

Signature

Topics discussed

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Comments/feedback

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Disclaimer

This publication may contain information about the regulation and enforcement of work health and safety in NSW. It may include some of your obligations under some of the legislation that SafeWork NSW administers. To ensure you comply with your legal obligations you must refer to the appropriate legislation.

Information on the latest laws can be checked by visiting the NSW legislation website

www.legislation.nsw.gov.au

This publication does not represent a comprehensive statement of the law as it applies to particular problems or to individuals or as a substitute for legal advice. You should seek independent legal advice if you need assistance on the application of the law to your situation.

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