

For most of the history of the construction industry, says Cal Beyer, the topic of mental health has been taboo. Addressing things like depression and substance misuse were nonstarters.

“We see this often in male-dominated industries — in the military, heavy manufacturing, oil, gas, and mining,” he explains. “People talk about ACEs, adverse childhood experiences, which looks at early childhood trauma and construction has high rates of that — separation anxiety, single parents, people raised without a lot of stability.”

The expectation was that folks should leave their issues at home, notes Beyer, vice president, workforce risk and worker wellbeing for Holmes Murphy & Associates.

“This industry is high risk. Many owners require strict drug testing. People working in insurance — even me — were advocating for that because the risk was lower for contractors with testing programs.”

Alas, it’s been a strategy with consequences.

“We kicked a lot of good people to the curb,”

Beyer admits. “We didn’t have great pathways for treatment and recovery.”

These days, however, things are trending positive. Companies across the spectrum have been stepping up to address and

Indeed, COVID-19 was a game changer.

“It really, really, really brought mental health issues to light,” says Pat Devero, vice president, national safety for McCarthy Holdings, Inc., who says one positive of the pandemic has been the light it shined on this, one of the industry’s darker corners. “We’d been talking, pre-COVID, about how as an organization, we could better push out our various suicide prevention campaigns.”

In the past, milestones like May’s Mental Health Awareness Month or September’s Suicide Awareness Month would trigger messaging addressing the issues, but at some point a collective light bulb went off amid McCarthy’s leadership in safety, HR, and elsewhere in its national and regional divisions.

“We need to be talking about this all year long, we realized. We need to maintain a cadence of communication on this topic.”

Once suicide was a subject out in the open, says Beyer, the big elephants in the room became fair game, factors like depression, anxiety, substance abuse that can put people on the road to self-harm.

The industry had done a good job of unearthing substance misuse, “but these individuals either got no help or were left to their own devices; there wasn’t a clear path to getting people help.”

Things like union member assistance programs and allied trades assistance programs, he says, began popping up, “and 10 or so years later, some of the more established programs were expanding nationally.

“We began to see big stories about misuse, treatment, and recovery,” says Beyer.

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That’s been key in the shift toward building caring cultures within firms like his, says Devero, whose career at McCarthy spans 17 years.

“Unfortunately, we’ve had our own experiences here with our

Gatekeepers are peer resources, meant to help start that initial conversation.

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“There are so many resources available today compared even to 2016,” says Beyer, who notes that the voice of lived experience is a powerful amplified message.

“It highlights hope when a person can share that they are struggling themselves, or grief stricken by a loss, but can fight to get help for themselves or for others.”

For Devero, one among many who share so others understand the avenues through which they can seek help, it's that simple: “You have to be willing to invest as an organization in the support you're going to provide if you expect people to use these mechanisms.”

Top-level executives, he says, should be delivering these messages as often as safety or human resources teams or wellness professionals.

“When you have the message coming from the top,” he says.

And when all the parts work together, says Beyer, it's magic.


“I'm seeing leadership support from associations, employers, labor unions, and health trusts. We're starting to collaborate really well. Visibility is at an all-time high.”

Construction Safety Week has addressed mental health for two years running, with construction leadership driving topics like the whole-person concept of physical and mental wellbeing, or this year's theme of United in Safety, where a field guide resources for mental health were shared.

“It's a huge initiative,” touts Beyer, who says he pinches himself when considering the progress made in the past decade.

“And yet, there's so much to do. Our industry is so diverse and fragmented, with lots of nooks and crannies where we need to shine light on mental health — and so it's going to take the whole industry to bring the message.”

In the past, he notes, construction professionals were conspicuously absent in this regard, but no more.

“Now, we are leaders, breaking barriers, empowering people, sharing resources,” says Beyer. “We're tackling this head-on — and we're leading the way for other high-risk industries.” 



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