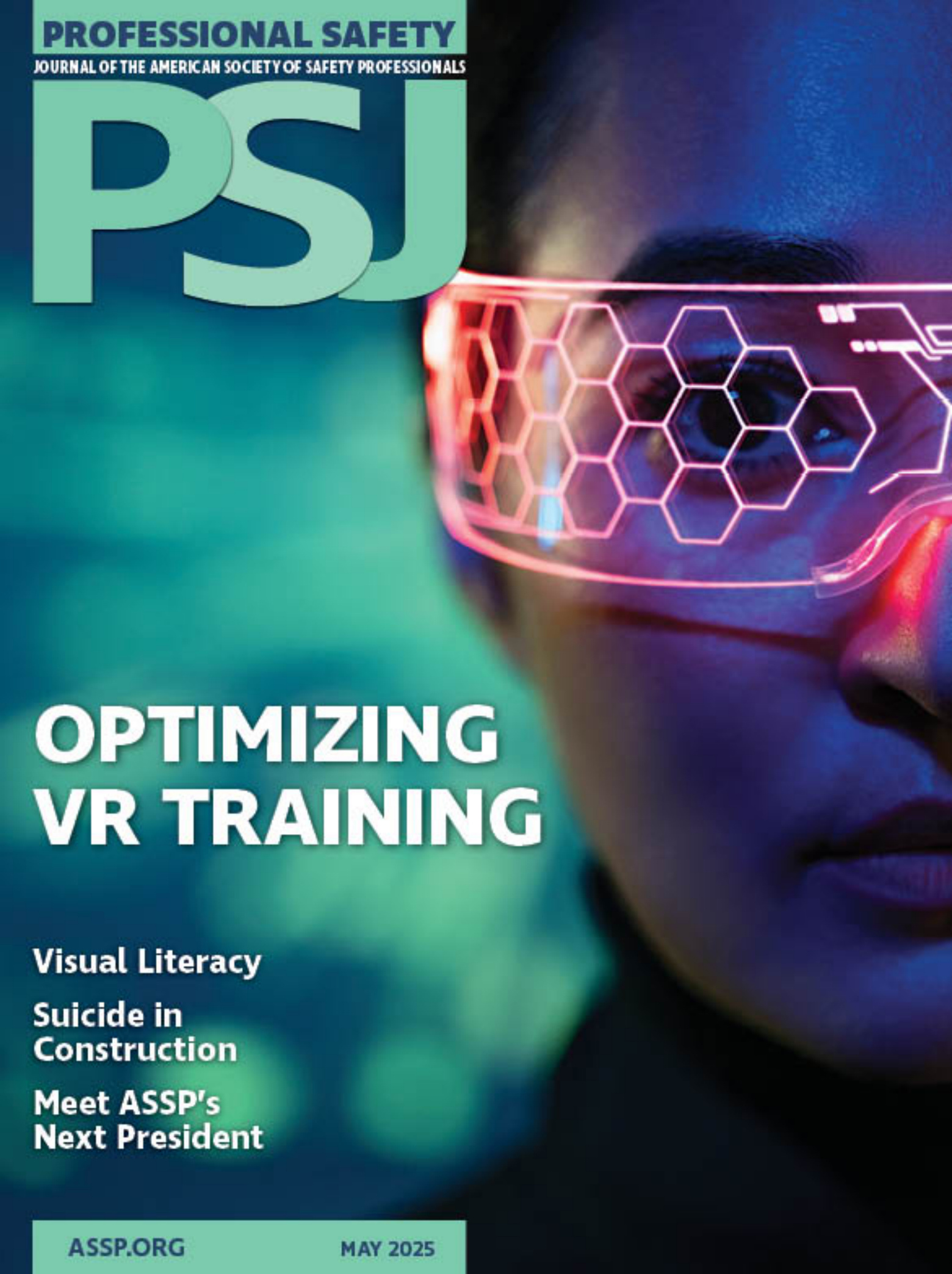
PROFESSIONAL SAFETY
JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF SAFETY PROFESSIONALS
PSJ



OPTIMIZING VR TRAINING

Visual Literacy

Suicide in Construction

Meet ASSP's Next President

ASSP.ORG MAY 2025

The Emotionally Naked Truth About SUICIDE IN CONSTRUCTION

By AnneMoss Rogers

My husband and I were sitting in a police car on June 5, 2015, when the officer said, "I have some sad news to share. Your son Charles has been found dead this morning." My chest burned, my ears filled with noise, and my mind was watery and unhinged as the unspeakable tragedy that forever changed our lives was delivered in a single sentence.

A few minutes later, my husband asked, "How did he die?" I was certain they would say it was an overdose, since my son had been addicted to heroin. Instead, the officer said it was a suicide and the method left no question.

My 20-year-old son Charles was one of those larger-than-life personalities, the younger of my two sons and the funniest, most popular kid in school. He lived with anxiety and depression, and by 10th grade he was misusing drugs and alcohol. It was hard to see the depression because Charles was always laughing, smiling and surrounded by friends. It was after his death that I read music lyrics he had written and saw the depth of his pain recorded in hundreds of pages of his journal. He used drugs and alcohol to numb the painful thoughts of suicide and to normalize his anxiety and depression. All that time, my son wore the mask of a clown to hide his pain.

Suicide in the Construction Industry

In the construction industry, five times more workers die by suicide than they do from work-related injuries (OSHA, 2022). While not all safety professionals work in construction, this industry has one of the highest suicide rates compared to other industries, and it has twice the total suicide rate for civilian working men.

There are several major issues underlying suicide in construction:

- **Stigma and shame surrounding the topic.** If leaders begin talking about mental health and promoting seeking help as a sign of strength, more workers may feel that they have permission to get help before they reach crisis.
- **Upper management unaware of the cost of poor mental health.** People who feel despair or hopeless about their job are less motivated and productive. They also make more costly errors.
- **Bullying, hazing and racism.** Experiencing bullying, hazing, and racism makes people feel excluded and isolated; feeling as if one does not belong is a serious risk factor for suicide.
- **Long work hours and a demanding physical culture.** A demanding culture does not allow for the self-care that keeps people emotionally and physically healthy.
- **Risk-taking work environment.** Work can be protective against suicide as a source of personal satisfaction and meaning, interpersonal contacts and financial security. However, when work is poorly organized or when workplace risks are not managed, work can raise suicide risk in some workers.
- **Shift work systems.** Shift work is associated with poorer mental health, a risk factor for suicide.
- **Ready access to lethal means (firearms).** More than 54% of deaths by firearm in the U.S. are suicides. Where there are more guns, there are more suicides because this method is more lethal than others (Harvard University, n.d.).
- **Aging work culture.** The aging workforce is at high risk of suicide and also recover slower after injury. Suicide risk factors for this group include chronic pain, sleep disruption and high levels of stress, and they often resort to drugs and alcohol to cope with stress or to self-medicate physical pain so they can continue to work. Redesigning the workspace for well-being after injury keeps people employed and reduces risk for substance misuse.
- **Financial and job insecurity with poor cash flow, lack of health insurance and little support.** Job strain and long work hours may be categorized as occupational risk factors for suicidal thoughts.
- **Substance misuse and addiction.** Those who misuse drugs and alcohol are 10 times more likely to die by suicide (Esang & Ahmed, 2018). A strong drinking culture will put a jobsite at risk for more safety hazards and suicide.
- **Limited time and support for addressing personal issues.** It is important to allow the workforce some hours to attend to personal needs.
- **People feel unheard, unworthy or unimportant.** Employees need a way to share their voice.
- **Transient work culture.** A transient work culture makes developing relationships difficult to build and maintain.

The Importance of Psychological Safety

Mental health, often referred to as psychological safety or psychosocial safety, should be an integral part of workplace safety culture. Nothing costs like an incident; safety impacts production as well as profits. It triggers litigation and harms a company's reputation. Stress affects everyone's cognitive ability. And all that stress affects mental health.

Safety professionals analyze, study, reinvent and improve processes to keep people safe on the job. They run checks, pinpoint potential incident triggers and strive to create a strong safety culture. How does emotional wellness factor in?

STEPS TO SUICIDE PREVENTION

- **Start the conversation at the top.** Leaders should openly acknowledge mental health struggles, share personal stories, and set a tone that normalizes seeking help.
- **Treat mental health like physical safety.** Identify psychosocial hazards in the workplace just as you would physical ones, and address them proactively to prevent risk.
- **Make space for honest dialogue.** Create a culture where employees can talk about emotional struggles without fear of judgment or job loss.
- **Train to recognize the warning signs.** Educate supervisors and peers to spot signs of suicide risk such as changes in behavior, mood, or work performance.
- **Enable discreet support systems.** Allow workers to temporarily step back from high-risk tasks or access support without disclosing personal details widely.
- **Directly ask about suicide when concerned.** Don't shy away from asking, "Are you thinking about suicide?"—it can be a lifesaving question.

What are the safety threats to others caused by those who are struggling emotionally or are potentially under the influence of drugs or alcohol? What is the cost and overall ripple effect if a worker dies by suicide? What can safety professionals do to create a culture where it is less likely that someone will reach crisis?

To promote a good psychological safety culture:

- **Promote connection and belonging.** For example, recognize employee contributions. This can include peer-to-peer recognition that highlights how employees are helping others across business functions.
- **Build resilience and coping skills.** Model listening and allowing people to feel heard, taking a pause (a deep breath) before reacting.
- **Promote help-seeking as a sign of strength.** Put up posters on 9-8-8 and other resources.

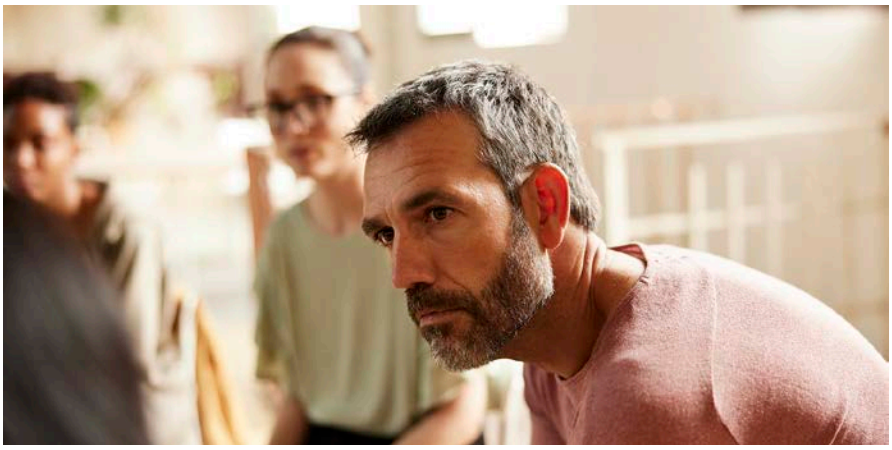
A culture of psychological safety is good for business and reduces hazards in the workplace. But men, who make up the majority of the construction industry, are often uncomfortable talking about emotions. Emotional pain does not go away no matter how much a person tries to numb or distract themselves. One can think of it like credit card debt. You get nowhere just paying the interest; it stubbornly remains until you dig in and do something about it. But mental health is awkward and uncomfortable to talk about. So where do we start?

Steps to Prevention

1) Provide Support From the Top

Support for workplace mental health and suicide prevention must come from the top. The key to starting this difficult conversation is a message from top leadership that sets the tone, trickles down, and offers others permission to be more open, find help and not be embarrassed to admit when they need support. Reaching out for help is not a sign of weakness but a sign of courage. Most safety professionals care deeply about their fellow human beings. But for any real change to happen, upper management must take more than a check-the-box approach. What does that look like?

Leaders can start by being vulnerable without oversharing. The leader need not share every detail of their life story, but rather highlights that are relevant. Workers need to know and hear that leaders are human, not just executives who sit in an ivory tower counting money and poring over productivity numbers without considering the people doing the actual work. Leaders can inspire others to have important conversations about mental health by first sharing their own. These four Hs can help leaders frame their story (Rogers, 2024).



TEMPURA/E+/GETTY IMAGES

Construction has one of the highest suicide rates compared to other industries, and it has twice the total suicide rate for civilian working men.

- **Hardship.** Start with your story. What happened before you received the help you needed? Think about the most important thing you would like workers to know. Keep this brief and do not include triggering graphic detail.
- **Help.** Describe how you got through crisis—what helped you? This step is important, as it illustrates the value of support and provides resources or actions others can take.
- **Healing.** Share your experience of recovery. How has this experience changed you for the better?
- **Hope.** Why you have hope. How have you grown from this process? Share how you maintain recovery and share your hope for others.

One leader told a story about a father whose substance use disorder impacted the leader's formative years. A CEO shared how a divorce plunged them into darkness and a journey through alcohol misuse before finding help and a path to recovery. Everyone has a story. Leaders should use theirs to inspire others to have the conversation.

2) Treat Mental Health Like Physical Health

Companies should treat mental health like physical health and look at the root causes behind the issue. Psychosocial factors and people's well-being play a role in workplace safety. Job insecurity, personal identity, bullying, and feeling transient or insignificant all add to the stress of today's work culture and people's sense of purpose and identity. Add to that substance misuse and addiction, which are unhealthy but common numbing strategies for people who are stressed and trying to cope with emotional or physical difficulty. All these stresses add up to foster an unhealthy culture of suicidal thoughts.

James Junkin, CSP, CEO of environmental, health and safety firm Mariner-Gulf Consulting and Services, says, "Identify psychosocial hazards. If someone doesn't feel support within the company, that leads to increased stress. That can be a tipping point for someone who is struggling with despair and can also lead to accidents."

No one should be doing a team job that could put other coworkers at risk if they are not in the right headspace. Workers who are stressed are less focused on their tasks and more likely to forget safety protocols, overlook safety equipment instructions, or take unnecessary risks. This can lead to incidents and injuries, then to guilt and shame or even substance misuse. All of this can spill over into the workday and create safety issues, adding to an unhealthy work culture and raising the risk of suicide.

3) Create a Safe Space for Mental Health Conversations

Around 80% of people who die by suicide are of working age (18 to 65), making

the workplace the most cross-cutting system for suicide prevention, intervention and crisis response (Workplace Suicide Prevention, n.d.). Consider whether your workplace is a safe space where someone can talk about emotional stressors. How might emotional dysregulation affect safety culture? Talk to your workforce in a nonthreatening manner. If you want to know how an incident occurred but workers are afraid of losing their job, they are less likely to be candid or to come forward at all.

Consider framing a work environment that is safe for mental health conversations as "having your coworker's back." This may gain more traction, as it fits with existing ideas and language in the workplace. Craig Gauvreau, CRSP, a safety professional from Canada with more than 20 years' experience, tells a story that illustrates a culture of having each other's back and a foundation of psychological safety.

One morning, after speaking at the prejob meeting, a grader operator was hanging back, looking like he had something to say. Everyone had left, so Gauvreau asked how he was doing.

"Not good, not good today. It's a hard day today," the worker said as he shook his head and turned to look out the window at the rain. His eyes were getting a little glassy.

After a moment, the worker composed himself, and Gauvreau asked, "Oh? What's up?"

The worker replied, "Today is the anniversary of my high school best friend's death." He then went on to explain that his friend was 19 and working in a gravel quarry, and that safety was not like it is today. Somehow, a conveyor belt pulled his friend into a rock crusher. He had been carrying this memory around for more than 20 years, and this was the first time he had talked to anyone about it.

Gauvreau said he then talked about a few other lighter things, and the two shared some laughs. He then witnessed the man's body language shift like a weight was lifted. He walked a little lighter. As Gauvreau reflected on the conversation, he thought about whether this worker needed to be heard, needed help or needed a hug. Gauvreau did not think the worker seemed like a hug kind of guy, so he chose "needs to be heard." Sometimes, that is all someone needs to get something off their shoulders.

Allowing employees the freedom to self-report and take themselves out of the mix for reasons they do not have to disclose is one way to give someone a break when they feel they are not up to the job that day.

Tips for Inspiring Difficult Conversations

It may be difficult for safety professionals to start mental health conversations with workers. Following are several ways to promote a culture of openness:

- Provide a safe space for difficult conversations, which starts with offering vulnerability and building trust.
- Be more thoughtful about why someone is hesitant to do a job and offer ways to manage it without humiliating them.
- Use existing events such as mental health awareness month in May or suicide prevention month in September to help launch discussion about these topics.
- Provide supportive materials in common areas, such as posters and pamphlets about mental health, substance misuses and available resources.
- Junkin suggests making free resources such as therapists available on site, during business hours.
- Conducting an anonymous survey about whether workers feel safe to speak up can also be helpful, according to Junkin.
- Addiction and depression can recur just like other health issues. Have a plan for what to do if someone relapses.

Signs of Potential Suicide

Workers may say something that indicates they may be suicidal. Their mood or behavior may change as well, indicating something is wrong. Things someone who is suicidal might say include:

- "I just want to die."
- "I can't do this anymore."
- "I don't want to live."
- "I feel so worthless."
- "No one would care if I was dead."
- "I'm such a burden."
- "I feel trapped."
- "This pain has to stop."

Ways that someone who is suicidal might behave include:

- isolate and withdraw
- drink or use drugs too much
- look for ways to end their life including online searches
- sleep too much or not enough
- anger easily
- give away prized possessions
- talk about death a lot

The mood of someone who is suicidal might be:

- depressed
- angry and irritable
- anxious
- loss of interest
- lots of shame
- seems checked out
- relief and then sudden improvement

Implementing Mental Health Action

No one can fix someone's mental health on their own—it requires professional support and appropriate resources. The goal is not to make safety professionals therapists, but to take action in supporting mental health in the workplace.

You can be there to listen, which is harder than you think. It is difficult to sit with someone in their tragedy or crisis without offering solutions or a word of encouragement. It may seem difficult to just listen and not offer solutions, but the first step is to help that person who is struggling feel heard. That might mean leaning in a bit, nodding your head, and asking questions to clarify. Then, after hearing the person, it is time to connect them with help.

Sally Spencer Thomas, a professional trainer for the construction industry, says, "Examples of suicide risk are when workers don't feel psychologically safe and feel outside of a group. When someone doesn't feel welcome or worthy it increases risk. Other reasons include feeling different, feeling like they make mistakes." The signs of suicide are not always what you expect. You might expect to see sadness when in fact you are more likely to see episodes of anger and irritability.

Key Talking Points

Consider these key talking points when approaching conversations about mental health.

- "I can't fix anything, but I can listen and help you discreetly find support to help keep you safe from suicide."
- "Let's figure out how to keep you on the job without putting too much stress on you right now as you work through this."
- "I promise to see what resources we have and handle this with discretion and check in with you to see what you think."
- "I don't have all the answers, but I do want to help support you. We need you."
- "Is there another licensed gun owner who is a friend and can keep your firearm in their space until you can work through this?"

Example Scenario

Consider the following example scenario about Ray, a good worker who has always been on time but is now always

late, seems distracted and, although he is still entertaining everyone with his jokes, you hear he is drinking a lot more. You also heard his wife left him for another man and took the kids. He looks disheveled and sometimes seems dazed. A conversation with Ray might go something like this:

Manager: Hey Ray, you don't seem like yourself lately. You're one of my best guys and I want to make sure you are okay. I'm not asking so I can write you up or add to your problems. I just wanted to see what's going on.

Employee: Nothing, I'm good.

Manager: On this jobsite, we have each other's back. No one's life goes perfect all the time. I know when my son had cancer 3 years ago, I was a mess and that's when Kyle stepped in here and helped.

Employee: I didn't know about that. Is he okay now?

Manager: Yeah, as far as we know. But it feels like I might be always waiting for the other shoe to drop, you know? My wife and I saw a counselor. She was handling it better than me honestly. She went because I needed it.

Employee: My wife took my kids last week. I'm so done. So worthless.

Manager: That sucks, man. I'm sorry. Lots of times when someone has a relationship issue that big and they say they feel worthless, they are thinking about suicide. Are you thinking about suicide?

Employee: Well, no. Maybe. Sometimes, sure. But I'd never do that.

Manager: Yeah? You probably wouldn't, but we need to keep you safe from suicide. We can handle this discreetly and rearrange some things here to lessen the stress but keep you on the payroll. No one has to know. Remember, someone stepped in for me. I know you wouldn't want to put any of your buddies at risk either. I've also done this for other guys, too.

Employee: Really? You've done this for other guys. Well, it would probably help.

Manager: Hey, I don't have all the answers but I can listen. Let's reach out to Janelle in human resources and get next steps. She's handled this before and she is very private. We can talk to her together by phone or walk over there. She'll want to help. In the meantime, I know you are a hunter. Is there a friend who is a licensed gun owner who might just hold onto your firearms right now for your safety until you are in a better place?

Employee: Maybe. But yeah, I can talk to Janelle. I like her.

Manager: Let's do that now. I promise I won't make any moves without your knowing.

Employee: Sure man. I trust you. You're a good guy.

Key Steps for Action

There are four key steps to remember for suicide prevention:

1) Engage in private conversation.

2) Listen with empathy. Do not try to "fix" the problem.

3) Ask the question, "Are you thinking of suicide?"

4) Connect the person with help. You can call 9-8-8 together and ask for next steps.

If you want to know if someone is thinking of suicide, you have to ask directly. You will want to ask the question directly when you ask a worker if they are thinking about suicide. It is awkward and uncomfortable, so expect it to be so. Work through that discomfort and ask it directly: "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" or "Are you thinking of suicide?"

Model and create a culture where it is okay to talk about hard things and where people feel heard. Without an outlet, emotional issues stay in workers' heads. Keeping it locked away is the fertilizer that makes emotional pain grow increasingly dark and dangerous. Talking about it releases some of the pressure before it becomes full-blown crisis. People who die by suicide do so for a constellation of reasons that converge all at once; work can be one of those stressors. But with the help of safety professionals, the workplace can also be a place of support. PSJ

RESOURCES FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

•Sign up for an email with resources, including a poster pack: **https://workplace-mental-health.grweb.site**

•Workplace Suicide Prevention: **https://workplacesuicideprevention.com**

•A Manager's Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace: **https://bit.ly/3RP8mLa**

•Resources geared toward men: **https://mantherapy.org**

•CDC's Critical Steps Your Workplace Can Take Today to Prevent Suicide: **https://bit.ly/3RNhiAD**

•Two guides for how to have mental health conversations ("Say this, not that"): **https://bit.ly/3RVudR3** and **https://bit.ly/3Gb2VUi**

References

Esang, M. & Ahmed, S. (2018). A closer look at substance use and suicide. *The Residents' Journal, 13*(6), 6-8. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp-rj.2018.130603

Harvard University. (n.d.). Firearm access is a risk factor for suicide. Means Matter. https://means-matter.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/risk

OSHA. (2022, Sept. 6). US Department of Labor, industry leaders, stakeholders call on employers, workers to combat surge in construction worker suicides [News release]. www.osha.gov/news/newsreleases/national/09062022

Rogers, A.M. (2024). Guidelines for sharing mental health stories at a public event. https://am-70afb.gr8.com

Workplace Suicide Prevention. (n.d.). https://workplacesuicideprevention.com

AnneMoss Rogers is a professional mental health speaker for workplace programs and keynote speaker who focuses on mental health and suicide prevention education, as well as coping strategies for managing adversity.

Cite this article

Rogers, A.M. (2025, May). The emotionally naked truth about suicide in construction. *Professional Safety, 70*(5), 18-21.

Need Help or Know Someone Who Does?

Contact the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Call 9-8-8. Use the online Lifeline Chat at https://988lifeline.org. Both are free and confidential.