

# ASKING FOR HELP

Suicide data suggests men working in construction can face significant mental stress but find it hard to talk about. **ANDY WALMSLEY** investigated how men could be encouraged to speak up.



**N**early 600 men from a wide range of construction roles answered questions on a survey related to attitudes towards help-seeking, barriers towards accessing support, sources of stress within the workplace, perceptions of seeking help from different help-seeking sources, and different ways of helping other workers access support for mental health issues within the workplace.

Men were found to hold positive attitudes towards seeking help from a counsellor or psychologist. However, their perceived perceptions of other men within the workplace are likely to create barriers to seek help. The majority of respondents reported that help-seeking could be perceived as a sign of weakness or failure by other men on the worksite. Stoic attitudes towards mental health – that men are supposed to be strong, self-reliant and not display vulnerability – were also identified as barriers towards accessing help.

## OPEN TO WORKSHOPS

Men who strongly subscribed to masculine gender roles (ie men who placed higher value on not displaying emotions, not talking about mental health issues, and being self-reliant) reported higher levels of mental distress. They are also less likely to talk to co-workers or supervisors about mental health conditions or display any signs of distress.

One approach to increase help-seeking among this group is to increase opportunities at work for men to have conversations about mental health.

The study found respondents open to accessing support via workshops. Workshops can be used to address myths surrounding mental distress, provide information on the prevalence of mental health conditions, and educate men on the different types of support services available.

Compared to psychology and counselling services – which take place off-site within the therapist's office – workshops can be delivered within the work environment, providing an opportunity for large groups of men to learn and talk about mental health and challenging the stereotype that men never talk about mental health.

## MULTIPLE STRESSORS

Long working hours and work pressure were found to be the most frequently reported stressors. These findings highlight the need for organisations to take a proactive approach towards supporting workers' mental health. This could include having realistic schedules for workers, policies to protect workers from overworking, and ensuring managers have the knowledge and skills to support staff who are displaying signs of fatigue.

Respondents also identified poor communication and conflict with managers as sources

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of stress. It is possible that construction managers have the most influence on a worker's productivity, work quality, and wellbeing within the workplace. Yet for many men within the study, it seemed this relationship was strained.

## SITE MANAGER SUPPORT

One way to improve this relationship is to provide additional support to site managers. Site managers experience stress from all sides of the industry. They bear the stress from having to deal with clients and line managers, and they also bear the stress of managing large groups of workers on the construction site. Because of the contagious nature of emotions, when a manager is overly stressed, this can set the tone for the rest of the work site.

This suggests the need for specific training and support to be directed towards managers, which could include education on communicating effectively, stress management, and strategies for dealing with difficult personalities.

## CLEAR INFORMATION

Lack of information on how to access support for mental health

issues was identified as a barrier. Having accessible information on where and how to access mental health services can provide a clear direction for someone who is struggling with mental health.

If help-seeking pathways are not visible at work, the likelihood of men seeking help is reduced and the view that problems with mental health don't exist is reinforced.

The results support the view that men do have the capacity to help other men at work to seek help for mental health issues. The majority of respondents identified positive strategies to support work colleagues to access mental health support. Men with lived experiences of mental distress were also open to discussing the benefits of talk-based therapies with other men.

This highlights the need for more platforms to be developed in the workplace for men to have conversations about mental health. Having a social network that supports help-seeking and rewards conversations about mental health is a key step towards improving the mental health culture of the construction industry.

**ANDY WALMSLEY** recently completed his clinical psychology training at Taranaki DHB. He now delivers workshops and conducts research within the construction industry.