



TALKING ABOUT SUICIDE IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

**SAFE MESSAGING GUIDELINES FOR PRESENTERS,
TRAINERS, MEMBERS OF THE MEDIA & ANYONE
TRYING TO HELP**



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- Justin Azbill, *the Tribal Group*
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The following sets of guidelines are intended to serve as supplemental resources to help trainers, presenters, peer supporters, members of the media, and anyone trying to start a conversation around mental health better navigate the use of existing materials such as presentations, training modules, and research-based approaches to suicide intervention.

If you are in need of materials such as these, many FREE toolbox talks, handouts, and other products can be found on the CIASP and CPWR websites

(www.preventconstructionsuicide.org, www.cpwr.com/mentalhealth).

The goal of these guidelines is to better prepare you for discussions around suicide and mental health, which can be inherently challenging and may feel like a potential minefield to navigate if you don't have a background in mental health. We believe that anyone can be an advocate and a supporter, and having a conversation is the most important part. Don't beat yourself up if you make a mistake with the terminology or if you feel a bit awkward checking in with a colleague. Just being yourself, showing empathy, and being prepared to provide support if needed is enough.

Because conversations around suicide prevention look different depending on the context, we have divided this resource into three primary sets of guidelines: one set for members of the media, one set for presenters, trainers, and other individuals speaking in group settings, and one set for anyone having a one-on-one conversation with someone believed to be struggling. Users are encouraged to select the guidelines that best suit them, however there is significant overlap between all three. A final section offers ideas for self-care after hard conversations.



SOME KEY TIPS TO KEEP IN MIND IN ANY SETTING INCLUDE:



Check in with yourself before presenting, training, or starting a conversation about mental health. Are you feeling up to it?



Be yourself. Bring your authentic, human self to the conversation and approach it with empathy and sincerity. Each person may need a different approach when they are struggling, so the most important thing is to be real and listen to express support.








Validate any problems or challenges someone is facing while providing and maintaining hope. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, even when it may not feel that way in the moment.



Be prepared to assist those struggling as they take the first steps to seek professional help or additional peer support. Even if it's simply being there while they call 988, it's critical to ensure someone gets the help they've asked for.

SAFE MESSAGING AROUND SUICIDE IN THE MEDIA

The messaging used in media and news reporting has a significant influence on the way people talk about suicide and mental health. It is important for spokespeople and members of the media to discuss the issue responsibly. Below are some tips to do so. Keep these in mind when speaking to the media or if you are a reporter, editor, podcaster, or other media professional.

-  **Consult CIASP's glossary of terms for clarification on mental health terminology and terminology commonly used in the construction industry.** It is important to know what the language you're using means, especially when discussing a challenging topic such as mental health, and it will resonate with readers and viewers more when it is written specifically for members of the construction industry.
-  **Use terms like “died by suicide” or “ended one’s life” instead of “committed suicide” or “successful attempt”.** By focusing on what happened to the victim rather than the action they took, we can change the conversation to reduce stigma and make it easier for others to ask for help. Individuals who die by suicide are victims just like those who die from injury or illness. The causes may be more complicated and harder to empathize with, which is why the language used is so important.
-  **Be aware that contributing factors to suicide and mental health are complex.** Avoid oversimplifying suicide deaths by making audiences aware of the many possible contributing factors and the complicated relationships between them. Suicide is extremely complex and does not typically happen because of any singular reason or contributing factor. Instead, there are many factors – some of which are unique to the individual, and others which are more external. It is important to discuss the nature and context of the construction industry and how that can contribute to mental health struggles, but also to acknowledge personal risk factors that may be at play.
-  **Avoid details about methods.** It's natural for people to feel curious, but knowing the specifics of how a person died adds nothing useful to the conversation and can instead be a trigger for those struggling personally or those who have lost loved ones in a similar way.
-  **Avoid identifying individuals unless it is necessary, and you have express permission from family.** Is there a reason to include the victim's name, location, or other identifying information? Unless it is helpful for the safety of others or the family requests it, it is best not to include specific information about the individual.

SAFE MESSAGING AROUND SUICIDE IN GROUP TRAININGS & DISCUSSIONS

There are a variety of settings in which you might be addressing a group about suicide in the construction industry (e.g., conducting training, presenting at a conference to raise awareness of the issue, or engaging with a peer support group). Even if you are experienced, it's important to keep in mind that group settings can be unpredictable. When discussing a sensitive topic that could trigger an individual's emotional response, it is important to think through how the conversation might impact attendees and to be prepared in case anyone has a negative reaction.

Here are some tips for anyone addressing a group on the topic of suicide or mental health in general:

- ✓ **Complete a self-check or audit before beginning.** Evaluate your own capacity and ability to support others.
- ✓ **Prepare the Environment.**
 - ✓ **Create a Safe Space:** Arrange the room to encourage a sense of safety and openness. Use a semi-circle seating arrangement, if possible, to promote a sense of community and equality. Enlist volunteers to be “helpers” in case attendees need to step away and talk (see more below).
 - ✓ **Visual and Auditory Comfort:** Ensure good lighting, comfortable seating, and minimal distractions. Consider using calming background music or visuals before and after the session.
- ✓ **Start the presentation or discussion with an acknowledgement that the conversation may be challenging and may bring up past or current trauma for the audience.** Offer the option to leave the room at any time and consider having “helpers” to check in on audience members as needed. These can be volunteers who are trained in mental health first aid, peer supporters, or others who have basic awareness of how to intervene and/or support those struggling in real time. Consider opening the training, presentation, etc. with a statement such as:

“Suicide prevention can be a difficult topic, and the discussion may feel too uncomfortable for some. That is completely fine; please feel free to leave the room at any time and for however long you need. If you’re just going to the bathroom or making a phone call, go ahead and give us a thumbs up, but if it looks like you might need some assistance, one of our helpers at the back of the room will come check in with you.”

- ☑ **Be prepared to offer support and/or assistance to audience members seeking additional support.** Not everyone is equipped to lead a conversation on suicide prevention and that is fine. If you are in that position, you will often be looked at as a safe person by those in the audience. Because of this, you should have some baseline knowledge on how to seek support for suicide prevention, mental health issues such as depression, and substance use disorder. Calling 988 is often the first step, however it is even better to be able to provide local resources to make sure no one is left hanging.
- ☑ **Set ground rules.** While audience discussion and sharing of stories can be beneficial to the group, it is important to avoid delving into group members' past trauma in a setting where (a) others might be triggered, and (b) there is insufficient time and/or professional expertise available to dissect and address the trauma(s) at that specific moment in time.
- ☑ **Avoid glorifying suicide or presenting it as a viable option.** Instead, focus on a message of hope.
- ☑ **Be comprehensive when talking about contributing factors to suicide and the complexity of mental health.** Avoid discussing the causes of any specific suicide deaths that have occurred, but do make audiences aware of contributing factors and the complicated relationships between them. Suicide is extremely complex and does not typically happen because of any singular reason or contributing factor. Instead, there are many factors – some of which are unique to the individual, and others which are more external. It is important to discuss the nature and context of the construction industry and how that can contribute to mental health struggles, but also to acknowledge personal risk factors that may be at play.
- ☑ **End with a Call to Action**
 - ☑ **Personal Takeaways:** Ask participants to write down one thing they will do to support mental health in their workplace or personal life.
 - ☑ **Commitment to Change:** Encourage leaders and workers to make mental health a recurring topic at safety meetings or team huddles.



SAFELY TALKING ABOUT SUICIDE WITH AN INDIVIDUAL WHO MAY BE AT RISK

There are many resources available online to help guide you through talking to an individual you are concerned may be experiencing suicidal thoughts or ideation. To learn more, visit the websites from the National Alliance for Mental Illness (<https://www.nami.org/suicide/how-to-ask-someone-about-suicide/>), the Mayo Clinic (<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/suicide/in-depth/suicide/art-20044707>), or R U OK? (<https://www.ruok.org.au/>).



The following tips are applicable regardless of the approach selected.

- ✓ **Consider who you are speaking with.** Is it a friend? An employee? An acquaintance? The nature of your relationship will likely impact your approach, but in any situation, the most important thing is to be authentic and show empathy. When talking to someone you know well, you can rely on your own best judgement to determine how to approach a conversation. However, when you are concerned about someone at work that you may not know as well, it may be helpful to stick more closely to a script or method such as TASC.
- ✓ **Be yourself.** Bring your authentic, human self to the conversation and approach it with empathy and sincerity. Each person is different and may need a different approach or type of support when they are struggling, so the most important thing is to be real, listen, and express hope.
- ✓ **Share your story as is appropriate.** If you have first-hand experience with mental health struggles, it can be helpful to share that with someone struggling – as long as you focus on a message of hope! Practice your story before telling it and emphasize recovery when possible.
- ✓ **Avoid glorifying suicide or presenting it as a viable option.** Again, focus on a message of hope.
- ✓ **Validate any problems or challenges someone is facing without validating suicide as a legitimate option.** Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, even when it may not feel that way in the moment.
- ✓ **Be prepared to assist someone in taking the first steps to seeking professional help or additional peer support.** Even if it's simply being there while they call 988, it's critical to ensure someone gets the help they've asked for.



POST-CONVERSATION SELF-CARE

Engaging in conversations about suicide can be emotionally draining and impact your well-being. Taking care of yourself afterward is essential to ensure you can continue to support others while maintaining your own mental health. Here's how to prioritize self-care post-conversation:




Acknowledge Your Emotions

-  **Recognize Your Feelings:** It's normal to feel a range of emotions after such a conversation, including worry, sadness, or even guilt. Allow yourself to process these emotions without judgment.
-  **Write About It:** Journaling can help you sort through your thoughts and feelings, making them more manageable.



Debrief with a Trusted Person

-  **Talk to Someone You Trust:** Share your experience with a trusted friend, family member, or counselor. Expressing your thoughts can help relieve emotional tension.
-  **Maintain Confidentiality:** While debriefing, avoid disclosing details that could breach the privacy of the person you supported.

Engage in Stress-Relieving Activities

-  **Physical Activities:** Go for a walk, stretch, or engage in exercise to release built-up stress.
-  **Creative Outlets:** Paint, write, or play music to channel your emotions into something productive.
-  **Mindfulness Practices:** Try deep breathing, meditation, or yoga to calm your mind and body.

Set Boundaries for Future Conversations

-  **Reflect on Your Limits:** Consider what went well and what felt overwhelming during the conversation. This reflection helps you set boundaries for similar situations in the future.
-  **Recognize When to Refer:** Understand that it's okay to direct someone to professional help if you feel you've reached your emotional limit.



Seek Professional Support



Therapy or Counseling: If the conversation leaves a lasting emotional impact, consider speaking with a mental health professional for guidance and support.



Peer Support Groups: Join groups where others discuss their experiences with providing support, to gain perspective and coping strategies.



Reconnect with Joyful or Relaxing Activities



Do What Makes You Happy: Watch a favorite movie, spend time with loved ones, or engage in a comforting hobby.



Practice Gratitude: Reflect on something positive in your life to help balance your emotions.



Monitor Your Own Mental Health



Check for Signs of Burnout: Be mindful of fatigue, irritability, or feelings of helplessness, which may indicate you need additional self-care or support.



Take Breaks: If you frequently find yourself in emotionally intense conversations, ensure you schedule downtime to recharge.



Educate Yourself Further



Learn More: Read about suicide prevention, active listening, and self-care techniques to build confidence and reduce stress in future conversations.



Remind Yourself of Your Impact



Focus on What You Did Right: Remember, your willingness to listen and offer support could have made a significant difference in someone's life.



Affirm Your Effort: Acknowledge that it's okay not to have all the answers. Your empathy and presence were invaluable.



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