



TOOLBOX TALK:

Building a Culture of Care



BUILDING A CULTURE OF CARE

STANDUP

We don't hesitate to stop work over a bad anchor point or an unshored trench that could lead to an incident, but we're a lot slower to stop and ask someone why they haven't been themselves for weeks. That gap costs us more people than the trench does. Construction has one of the highest suicide rates of any industry in the country — commonly cited at around **four times the national average**, with roughly **5,000 construction workers lost per year**. That's over 13 workers dying each day – way more than the roughly three fatal jobsite injuries a day we build our entire safety programs around.

Why is the rate so high in construction?

There are many industry related risk factors, including:

- Seasonal work, layoffs, and unpredictable income
- Long hours, sleep deprivation, hard deadlines, and a low margin for error
- Chronic pain and high injury rates — and the opioid medications that often follow
- A culture that taught us to tough it out and not talk about our struggles or feelings
- Isolation: you can be physically isolated because of the work or work-related travel, but you can also be emotionally isolated - surrounded by people all day and not have one real conversation
- No paid leave, no health benefits, or other barriers to accessing healthcare (including mental healthcare)

What can we do?

You may think that some of those risk factors are completely out of your control, and unless you are the boss, you'd be right. But everyone can play a role in building a **culture of care** on the job that helps support every member of the crew to overcome work-related stressors more easily.

What exactly is a culture of care?

Instructor Note: Feel free to put this in your own words and share what a culture of care means to you.

According to the Associated General Contractors of America, **a culture of care refers to a welcoming, safe, inclusive workplace free from harassment where every employee feels valued, respected, and heard.**

Actions anyone can take:

1. BUILD UP YOUR WORK COMMUNITY

- Treat the jobsite and your crew as a community. Take time to get to know your coworkers.
- Create opportunities to connect with other crew members outside of work.
- Ask your employer to provide training on communication skills, peer support skills, and suicide prevention.
- If you feel comfortable, be vulnerable about your own challenges. When you're willing to open up, it gives others permission to do the same.
- Be someone others can talk to and be ready to connect coworkers with professional support when needed. Consider identifying the "helpers" with a specific color hardhat sticker.

2. TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

A culture of care starts with mental health being a normal thing to mention here. That means:

- Mental health gets the same standing as physical health. "I'm struggling" gets the same response as "My back is killing me."
- No jokes at anyone's expense about therapy, medication, breakdowns, or "going crazy." Those jokes are the reason people don't speak up.
- What someone tells you isn't gossip. The information goes toward getting help — not to the break trailer.

3. RECOGNIZE STRUGGLING

You are not being asked to diagnose anybody. You're only being asked to notice when somebody changes from their normal behavior, attitude, or demeanor. Is someone pulling away and eating alone, saying things like "what's the point", not doing a quality job anymore, drinking more, on a short fuse, making a mistake, etc.? We need to be able to look and listen out for each other.

4. TAKE ACTION

This may feel like the hardest part, but all you need to do is show up and:

ASK. Privately and directly. “You haven’t seemed like yourself lately. What’s going on?” If you’re worried it’s serious, ask the real question plainly: “Are you thinking about suicide?” Asking does not put the idea in someone’s head. It’s often the relief of someone finally saying it out loud.

LISTEN. This is the hard part for tradespeople — we fix things. Don’t fix this. You probably can’t. Don’t minimize it by saying things like “others have it worse”, don’t rush to advice, don’t fill the silence. Just let them talk and take it seriously.

CONNECT. You are not the counselor. Your job is to hand them off to real help — our EAP (if applicable), 988, their doctor, their union. Best practice: don’t just give a number. Sit with them while they call or walk them to the office.

FOLLOW UP. Wednesday. Next week. Next month. “Just checking on you.” The follow-up is what tells someone they weren’t a burden for saying something.

Discussion Questions:

1. What’s one thing we do on this jobsite — a habit, a joke, a way we talk — that makes it harder for people to speak up?
2. What’s one thing we could start doing that would make this crew a place people actually feel looked after?