

COVID-19 taking a toll

November 20, 2020

By Grant Cameron

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health of Canadian workers and the construction industry must continue taking steps to ensure that workplace health and safety strategies remain front and centre.

That was one of the prevailing messages that emerged from a [recent symposium](#) on addressing mental health in construction hosted by the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON).

The virtual event featured a lineup of speakers and professionals who explained how to address and prevent chronic stress in the workplace and what resources and practices employers can put in place. The symposium was the second on the issue of mental health that has been hosted by RESCON.

Richard Lyall, president of RESCON, kicked off the session, explaining that the organization is focused on raising awareness about mental health and addictions and removing the associated stigma.

“COVID-19 has certainly exacerbated many mental health and addiction challenges that people face daily,” he told the symposium. “It’s imperative that the entire construction industry continue to prioritize mental health and addictions and incorporate it into our health and safety strategies.”

There is still a lot of work to be done on the issue, including changing the culture on construction sites, he said, and it’s incumbent on employers to make workers feel safe and comfortable to talk about mental health. He applauded the work that the government has been doing to create a connected system of care with comprehensive services so that every Canadian can be fully supported.

“Since COVID-19 began, the government has improved and increased accessibility and availability of mental health and addictions supports – virtual and in-person – for all Ontarians, including construction workers.”

Michael Tibollo, associate minister of mental health and addictions, addressed the symposium and noted that since the start of COVID-19 the province has concentrated on providing a comprehensive suite of options to help people get through the pandemic and connect individuals with treatment.

The COVID-19 outbreak is “unprecedented” and “these are truly extraordinary times,” the minister said. In the last year, the province has announced more than \$350 million in ongoing annualized funding towards building a comprehensive mental health and addictions system in Ontario.

Ron Kelusky, chief prevention officer at the ministry of labour, training and skills development, reported that work-related stress, depression and anxiety have overtaken musculoskeletal disorders as the most reported workplace health issue reported in the construction industry these days.

However, the image and persona that continues to surround construction work and the fear of being stigmatized can make individuals in the industry reluctant to speak out about mental health issues, he said.

“We want to ensure that persons working in construction have access to resources that are available, both anonymous and other.”

Cal Beyer, vice president of workforce risk and worker wellbeing at CSDZ in Minneapolis, Minn., said suicide rates in the U.S. construction industry are three and a half times greater than the national average.

Ironworkers have the highest rate, followed in order by millwrights, brick/block masons, roofers, labourers, carpenters, equipment operators, construction managers, electricians and first-line supervisors.

A number of factors make construction riskier for mental health issues, Beyer said, including, among other things, the fact that the job can cause chronic pain, the pressure of commuting or working out of town, and the perception that workers in the industry are big, stoic, tough guys or gals.

Chad Pearson, director of business development at Plexxis Software Inc., provided an overview of how the brain reacts to stressful situations and offered tips on how to help workers overcome struggles.

An individual can’t control the world, he noted, but they can prepare in advance to deal with the issues.

Amina Dibe, policy and programs analyst at RESCON, emceed the event. She stressed the importance of removing the stigma around mental health and bringing about meaningful changes.

“RESCON will continue to advocate on behalf of the residential construction industry on mental health and addictions and will push for greater access to stats and research,” she said.

Grant Cameron is senior director of public affairs at RESCON.