

The silent epidemic



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RESCON encouraging dialogue on mental health issues

Slips, trips and falls often top the list when safety issues on construction jobsites are discussed. But there's another less visible threat that's just as dangerous – mental illness.

Alarming, it is the number one cause of disability in this country. Work-related stress, depression and anxiety are now the most reported workplace health issues in the construction industry.

Mental illness affects people of all ages, education and income levels and, while 44 per cent of Canadians say they have coped with a mental health challenge, sadly only 25 per cent get the help they need.

As Richard Lyall, president of the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON), points out, COVID-19 has brought on even more new challenges and amplified the struggles that Canadians face, so we must reduce the stigma and encourage open conversation about mental health issues, as that is the first step to helping those who are struggling.

"Many Canadians in construction and other industries are living with mental health conditions year-round," says Lyall. "We must work towards a Canada where all those who need mental health resources can ask for help and get the support they need without feeling weak or labelled inadequate.

"We must ensure that people who work in the construction industry are aware of the benefits and resources available through industry health and wellness funds as well as government programs."

Indeed, RESCON is encouraging more dialogue about mental health issues within the construction industry – whether it be amongst the skilled trades who work on site or employees in the offices.

The organization made combating mental health and addictions a strategic priority back in 2017 and now hosts an annual mental health and addictions symposium every November to raise awareness, share resources and best practices. The focus of the event this year is on the opioid crisis as well as mental health first-aid training.

RESCON VP Andrew Pariser, who is chair of the organization's health and safety committee, says Ontario's construction workforce has been tested by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The pandemic has increased mental and physical

strain and added to the stress felt by workers on construction sites. We must tackle the issue of addressing mental health in Ontario's construction workforce by making sure that all workers on a jobsite know how to get help when they need it and reach out for assistance with the mental health challenges they face."

RESCON has long advocated for dedicated construction statistics to better understand the scope and depths of the issue. While actual statistics are difficult to come by, those that are available point to the fact that mental health injuries in the construction industry are higher than those in other sectors.

Last fall, then Ontario chief prevention officer Ron Kelusky noted in his remarks at RESCON's mental health symposium that work-related stress, depression and anxiety had overtaken musculoskeletal disorders as the most reported workplace health issue in the construction industry.

A report released last year shows 2,500 Ontarians died of drug overdoses in 2020, a 60-per-cent increase from the year before, and of those who died, 30 per cent were construction workers – by a wide margin the industry most impacted. The report was prepared by the Ontario Drug Policy Research Network, the office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario, and Public Health Ontario.

Research by the Construction Industry Rehabilitation Plan (CIRP) in B.C. showed that 83 per cent of construction industry workers have experienced some form of moderate to severe mental health issue.

RESCON manager of government and stakeholder relations Amna Dibe, who recently completed a course on mental health first-aid, noted that several U.S. studies have found that suicide rates in the construction industry are up to three times higher than in other industries. Other studies indicated that at least one in five construction workers suffer from mental illness.

RESCON, through its annual symposium, is educating employers about the effects of mental illness and encourages any construction worker who is experiencing a mental health injury to seek help.

We have made progress on the issue, but there is still a long way to go.

Grant Cameron is senior director of public affairs at the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON).