

Today's topic is Building Hope: Tackling the Silent Crisis of Suicide in the Construction Sector

In the sprawling landscape of occupational health concerns, one issue features with alarming frequency: the prevalence of suicide within the construction sector. As we marvel at the towering and intricate infrastructure that results from project work, it's crucial that we also recognise the hidden toll this demanding industry takes on the mental well-being of its workforce.

The construction sector, despite its vital role in shaping our world, faces a glaring paradox. While it builds the very foundations of our urban existence, the high-pressure nature of construction, coupled with long hours, physical demands, and job insecurity, creates a perfect storm for mental health challenges.

A [University of South Australia study](#), in collaboration with mental health charity [MATES in Construction \(MATES\)](#), explored the drivers and experiences of suicidal thoughts and psychological distress of industry workers.

One of the foremost obstacles to addressing the issue of suicide in the construction sector is the culture of toughness and resilience ingrained in the industry that may discourage workers from seeking help or discussing their struggles openly.

This silence perpetuates a cycle of suffering, preventing those in need from accessing the support and resources that could potentially save their lives.

But what if we could do more to incorporate elements that promote a sense of well-being into the workplace design and culture?

Learnings bring hope

Professor Helen Lingard and Associate Professor Michelle Turner, work health and safety academics from RMIT University published their research in the *International Journal of Project Management* this month. You can download a free copy of their work [here](#).

It is widely documented that a strong sense of place can have a profound impact on worker well-being and emotional health.

If workers feel connected to their surroundings, colleagues, and the company's culture, they are more likely to experience a sense of social support, which reduces feelings of isolation and enhances their emotional well-being.

Many office-based organisations focus on fostering a sense of place amongst their office-based teams with initiatives like thoughtfully designed workspaces, team-building exercises and shared morning teas, to name a few. But how do we develop a health-promoting sense of place on project sites where the work is demanding, time is money, trades are siloed, and the work is temporary?

Lingard and Turner are on the way to finding out. They are the first to assess a 'sense of place' in project-based work environments in the construction industry.

The purpose of their research was "to identify the qualities and attributes of project work environments that contribute to the development of a sense of place, and to develop and test a survey instrument designed to measure these qualities and attributes."



Lingard and Turner developed a survey tool for workers to complete, that measures the levels of community, engagement, respect, life balance,



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support, and resilience in their workplaces. This survey tool was then tested in several project-based work environments in the New Zealand construction industry and was useful in identifying what gave workers a sense of place and what didn't. Importantly, the six sense of place components were positively and significantly linked to workers' mental well-being.

Finding the 'sense of place' gaps may hold the key to giving project workers a voice and the tools to create environments that promote positive mental well-being in the otherwise challenging context of project-based construction work.

Resources currently available

Resources such as [Incolink Counselling](#) and [Incolink's Bluehats Suicide Prevention Initiative](#) helps workers who are doing it tough by providing someone to talk to on-site.

Construction work is unique and Bluehats can be the circuit breaker, by providing support if things feel like they are getting out of control.

Lifeworks EAP

[CICA also provide a free well-being platform as well as an Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#) for its member companies and their staff.

The platform is a combination of pro-active apps which have a variety of resources relating to five key areas:-

- Personal well-being and health
- Relationship issues
- Family Issues
- Substance abuse and addiction
- Workplace challenges.

These include articles, videos, podcasts as well as links to other resources, and this is backed up by a traditional Employee Assistance Program (EAP), as well as a manager's hotline.

EAP counselling services, are predominantly provided on a telehealth basis, are completely confidential with 24 / 7 availability. Calls are triaged and prioritized depending on immediacy of need.

A phone-based manager's hotline provides support to managers, who may lack the confidence or experience to deal with a particular situation, such as interpersonal conflict or other leadership issues. The hotline equips them with the necessary assistance and guidance to help them, develop skills to manage situations going forward.

This service is provided free of charge to all CICA members and their employees and is completely confidential.

In Conclusion

The alarming prevalence of suicide within the construction sector is a stark reminder that further research in this area is critical to honour the dedication of construction and project workers - ensuring they build not only our cities but also lives filled with hope, resilience, and purpose.

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