



Mental Health Is a Leadership Imperative in Construction

by George Nash, Maxim Consulting Group

In 2023, there were 982 work-related fatalities in the construction industry. During that same period, an estimated 5,095 construction professionals died by suicide. While our industry has made tremendous progress in improving physical safety, these numbers make one thing clear: protecting our people requires more than hard hats, PPE, and safety meetings. It requires a commitment to Total Human Health—a culture that values the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of every individual in our organizations.

Whenever I tell people that I teach VitalCog classes—a specialized suicide awareness and prevention training program designed specifically for construction—I am often asked two questions: “Why has the construction industry begun focusing on mental health?” and “Is mental health really a problem in our industry?” The answer to both questions lies in the data. According to the CDC, construction has the second-highest suicide rate of any industry in the United States. In 2021, 66 construction professionals per 100,000 died by suicide, compared to 14 per 100,000 in the general population (2023 CDC report). Those statistics have compelled leaders across our industry to rethink what safety truly means.

For many people outside our profession, these numbers can be difficult to understand. But anyone who has spent time on construction projects recognizes the realities our workforce faces. Long hours, extended periods away from home, demanding schedules, labor shortages, strained personal relationships, and the pressure to overcome every obstacle regardless of the cost can take a significant toll. When left unaddressed, these challenges can contribute to mental health struggles and increase the risk of substance abuse,

depression, and suicidal thoughts.

As awareness of these issues has grown, the construction industry has expanded its definition of safety. What began as a focus on preventing physical injuries has evolved into a broader commitment to the total health and well-being of construction professionals. This shift did not happen overnight. In the early 2020s, Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) introduced its Total Human Health Initiative, recognizing that worker well-being extends beyond physical safety. In 2023, ABC further reinforced this commitment by integrating Total Human Health into its STEP Safety Management System, helping companies connect mental health and wellness directly to their safety cultures. At the same time, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) continued advancing its Total Worker Health framework, which integrates workplace safety with overall worker health and well-being. Together, these initiatives helped move mental health from the margins of industry conversation to a central component of workforce development and safety leadership.

One example of this commitment is VitalCog, a suicide awareness and prevention program developed through the Helen and Arthur E. Johnson Depression Center at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus in collaboration with construction leaders. The program equips construction professionals with practical skills to recognize the warning signs of suicide, engage in supportive conversations, and connect individuals with appropriate resources. Its development reflects the industry’s growing belief that protecting people includes addressing the mental and emotional challenges they may be facing.

The momentum behind mental health awareness continues to grow. Organizations such as Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC), Associated General Contractors of America (AGC), and the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters have partnered with VitalCog to provide training throughout the country. In 2025, CURT, the Construction Users Roundtable, launched an initiative in conjunction with VitalCog to address why mental health is a leadership challenge...not simply an HR issue. This effort reinforces a growing belief throughout the industry that creating healthier workplaces requires visible commitment from executives, project leaders, supervisors, and field teams alike.

This is where leadership becomes critical. My approach to safety has always been simple: if someone I care about is doing something unsafe on a jobsite, I would not walk by without saying something. I would intervene because I care about that person’s well-being. The same principle applies to mental health. If we are willing to step in when a coworker is at risk of physical injury, we must also be willing to recognize when someone may be struggling emotionally and connect them with the support they need. Many of us are trained in CPR, and when we see someone in distress, we do not walk by—we step in to help. We must bring that same commitment to supporting the mental health of our teammates, families, and friends.

Many companies have already begun taking proactive steps by providing employee assistance programs, mental health resources, wellness initiatives, and onsite support services. Some organizations have partnered with groups such as Workforce Chaplains to offer confidential support through

phone calls, virtual meetings, and jobsite visits. These resources can provide an important outlet for individuals who may be more comfortable speaking with someone outside their organization during difficult times. Many industry leaders have also invested in professionals who visit jobsites specifically to check on the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of their teams, reinforcing the message that every worker matters. Gaylor Electric out of Indiana has not only established a team of professionals to carry out this mission but they also rely on the help of Workforce Chaplains to ensure their employees' mental health needs are a focus that matters.

The encouraging news is that suicide is preventable. While no single program can eliminate the risk, leaders can create cultures where people feel valued, supported, and comfortable asking for help. Small actions—checking in on a coworker, recognizing signs of distress, encouraging professional support, or simply listening—can make a meaningful

difference in someone's life. The goal is not to become a mental health professional; it is to care enough to start the conversation.

My approach to safety is simple: I challenge myself and others to ask how much we truly care about our fellow workers. If someone I loved most was doing something unsafe on a jobsite, would I walk by without saying anything, or would I speak up because I cared and wanted to prevent harm? We must apply that same philosophy to mental health. Many of us are trained in CPR, and when we see someone in distress, we do not walk by—we step in to help. We must bring that same commitment to supporting the mental health of our teammates, families, and friends.

The construction industry has made remarkable progress in improving physical safety over the past several decades. Now we have an opportunity to make similar progress in protecting the mental health of our people. The path forward is simple:

- Admit there is a crisis,
- Believe change is possible, and
- Commit the resources necessary to support our workforce.

If we can make physical safety a core value, we can do the same for mental health. Our people are our greatest asset and protecting them means caring for the whole person—not just the worker who shows up on the jobsite each day.

About the Author

George Nash is a Director at Maxim Consulting Group and is responsible for assessing, evaluating, and implementing client processes. With over 40 years of experience, he works with construction-related firms to solve complex business challenges and improve organizational performance. Throughout his career, he has focused on developing high-performing teams and building strong relationships with employees, clients, and industry partners. George can be reached at george.nash@maximconsulting.com

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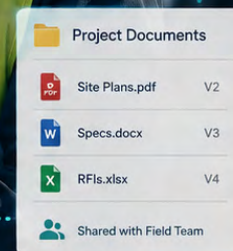
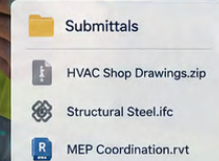
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