Why Are There So Many Suicides in the Construction Industry?

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by Bob Swanson

In 2016, there were nearly 45,000 suicide deaths in the United States. This is an increase of 35 percent in the past ten years. It is also estimated that there are up to 25 suicide attempts for each suicide death.

The construction industry has the second highest suicide rate per industry. The suicide rate of our industry is 53 per 100,000, which is four times the rate of the general population. However, with the total number of individuals in construction, our industry has more suicide deaths than any other industry.

What contributes to this high rate of suicide in our industry?

• Our industry is customer driven, which means overnight travel, shift work, weekend work and long hours are often required. These factors all impact personal relationships, normal sleep and diet. They also affect the ability to maintain normal external support systems.

• Seasonal work and project-specific employment creates financial insecurity and personal uncertainty.

• Long-term, repetitive physical work often results in chronic pain, which can lead to the regular use of prescription medications and self medication. This can lead to an addiction to alcohol and/or drugs.

• There is a general acceptance in our industry of the regular use of alcohol and/or drugs.

• Use of a firearm is a common means of suicide, and many in our industry own firearms because they enjoy hunting and shooting.

• An “old school, tough guy” persona is prevalent in our male-dominated industry. Due to his persona, employees are less likely to show any vulnerability or seek help.

It is essential for each of us to achieve a reasonable life balance of a healthy diet, adequate sleep, regular exercise and stable personal relationships. For a person living with a mental illness, a reasonable life balance is absolutely critical in preventing the onset of a mental crisis.

In the next few months, I will be suggesting industry practices you can adopt to help identify and assist a colleague who may be living with a mental illness or experiencing a mental crisis.

Remember that all mental illnesses are treatable and suicide is preventable!

About the Author - Bob Swanson

Bob Swanson is the past president of Swanson & Youngdale and the first Chairman of FCA International. He tragically lost his son Michael to suicide on March 13, 2009 at the age of 33. Bob now focuses his efforts on creating awareness of the impact of mental health and suicide in the construction industry.

Find more of Bob’s blogs at:

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