



WORK WELL

SUMMER 2021

# How We Can All Work Safe, and Work Well



**Karen Low**

President, MERIT  
Saskatchewan

The time when it was relatively routine to hear of serious construction-related injuries and even fatalities is – thankfully – long past. But I can easily think of three recent suicides involving young construction workers in Saskatchewan. And thousands of our colleagues are coping with less severe but still potentially debilitating mental health issues every day.

Mental health is sometimes referred to as a “silent epidemic” in our industry, and as long as that remains the case, our journey towards fully safeguarding the wellbeing of construction employees is only partially complete.

The prevalence of mental health issues in our industry has several reasons: long stints working away from family and friends, hard work that wears down both body and mind, and a pervasive culture that says you’re weak if you say you’re struggling.

Taking the next steps to address that prevalence will mean broadening our focus to encompass both physical and mental wellbeing – and helping everyone in our industry become more comfortable talking about and taking meaningful action to advance mental health.

At MERIT Saskatchewan, we’re rolling out a new Workplace Wellness Program now to our members and their employees. This publication provides a bit more insight on this program – which was developed by our sister association in British Columbia, and specifically tailored to the circumstances of



our industry – and elaborates on why it’s so badly needed in our industry today.

“Work Safe” is an imperative we’ve become good at meeting in the Canadian construction industry. From here forward, though, we need to be equally focused on the broader imperative to “Work Well”. MERIT Saskatchewan looks forward to helping make that happen.

## Mental Wellness in the Construction Industry

**Mental wellness issues are common and afflict people in all walks of life. In fact, one in five Canadians experience a mental health challenge in any given year. But some industries involve stress factors that create an even greater risk. Statistics clearly indicate that construction is one of those industries.**

### The Construction Industry Involves:

- Seasonal and sometimes irregular work
- Strenuous physical demands and long hours
- High performance expectations within often tight timelines
- Sometimes remote work and isolation from family and friends



StatsCan

**41%** of Construction WORKERS do not seek help for substantial MENTAL DISORDERS

WorkSafe Saskatchewan

**Risk of Suicide for Those Working in Construction is 7X the National Average**

Lancet Medical Journal

# Mental Health is a Bottom Line Issue



Creating workplaces where both physical and mental wellbeing are prioritized, protected and promoted is not only the right thing to do for your team - but is also important from the standpoint of a healthy business. When mental health challenges impact a workforce, the knock-on effects can be devastating.

- Greater absenteeism
- Increased disability claims
- Reduced productivity
- Increased turnover
- Increased safety incidents
- Reduced employee satisfaction

## Common Signs of a Mental Health Challenge

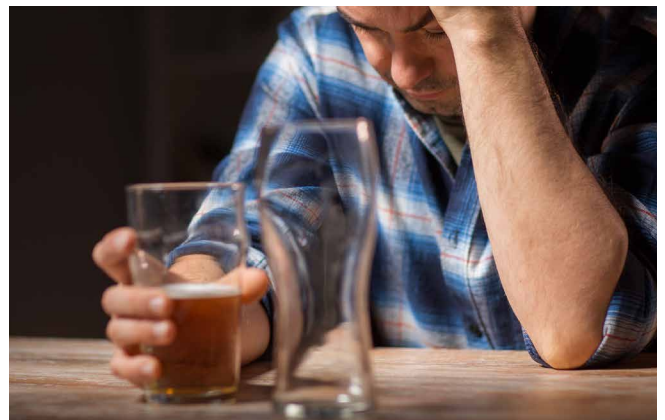
- Feeling sad or down
- Confused thinking, difficulty concentrating
- Excessive fears, worries, guilt
- Extreme mood changes
- Withdrawal from friends, family and activities
- Poor sleep, low energy, significant tiredness
- Problems with alcohol and drug use
- Major changes in eating habits
- Excessive anger and hostility
- Suicidal thoughts

# Addiction Issues are a Particular Vulnerability

Substance use and addiction are a common outcome of mental health challenges. The physically demanding nature of construction work - with the possibility of injury and ongoing pain management - creates some particular vulnerabilities. The ongoing opioid crisis has hit the construction sector especially hard.

**Saskatchewan has 3rd HIGHEST OPIOID DEATH RATE** among all provinces  
(10.8 per 100,000 people in 2018)

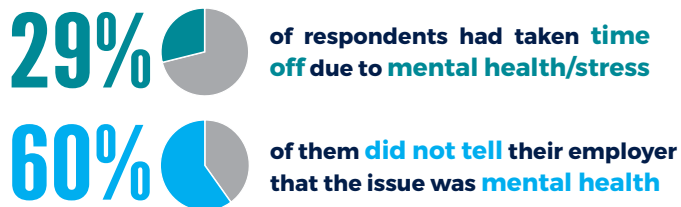
**Construction workers in the US HAVE NEARLY TWICE THE RATE of substance abuse AS THE GENERAL POPULATION**




# Getting Help Starts with Getting Past the Stigma

One of the biggest hurdles when dealing with mental health is often a reluctance to ask for help. This is likely driven by negative and skeptical views about the reality of mental health challenges. The stigma that is widely associated with mental health may be particularly deeply rooted in male-dominated sectors, where workers are often reluctant to talk about “feelings”.

A UK Construction Industry Survey Found:



Source: Construction News Mind Matters Survey, 1,140 respondents, 2017

**82%**   
believe there is stigma around  
**MENTAL HEALTH** in the industry

## Mental Health Stigma Can Originate With:

**Ourselves**  
**Our Co-Workers**  
**Supervisors/  
Employers**

Just  
'Suck it  
Up'

## And Can Play Out in Many Harmful Ways:

**Isolation** – Avoidance of a person with a mental health challenge

**Denial** – Downplaying a mental health challenge

**Stereotyping** – Assuming they are weak, incapable or even dangerous

**Gossiping or joking** about them or treating them in a **discriminatory** way

## Resources for Mental Health

MERIT Saskatchewan members and their employees can access counselling services through an Employee and Family Assistance Program. MERIT Saskatchewan has also launched a new and holistic Workplace Wellness Program tailored to the construction sector (see back page). Many other resources are also available to anyone with a mental health concern.

[Mental Health 101](#) – Tutorials from the Centre for Addiction & Mental Health

[Canadian Mental Health Association](#) – Information and Services from the Saskatchewan Division

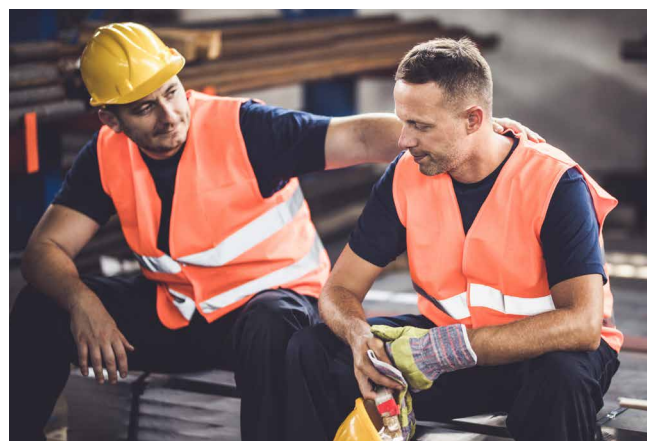
[Mental Health and Addiction Services](#) – Government of Saskatchewan

**211 Saskatchewan:** Call or text 211, [www.sk.211.ca](http://www.sk.211.ca)

**Crisis Services Canada:** 1-833-456-4566

**Mobile Crisis Hotline:** 306-757-0127

**Online Chat Service (for adults)** [www.CrisisCentreChat.ca](http://www.CrisisCentreChat.ca)





# New Workplace Wellness Program

MERIT Saskatchewan's new Workplace Wellness Program is designed to promote individual wellbeing and to foster healthy culture change in construction workplaces, through engaging information and resources. The program is scalable to companies of all sizes, and features ongoing client support and self-paced online courses and other delivery tools.

**Holistic** – Addressing diverse, inter-connected themes that include but extend well beyond mental health

**Informed by Expertise** – The program was developed and is delivered with the support of leading experts

**Ongoing and Inclusive** – Companies sign on for a full year, and make the program available to interested employees

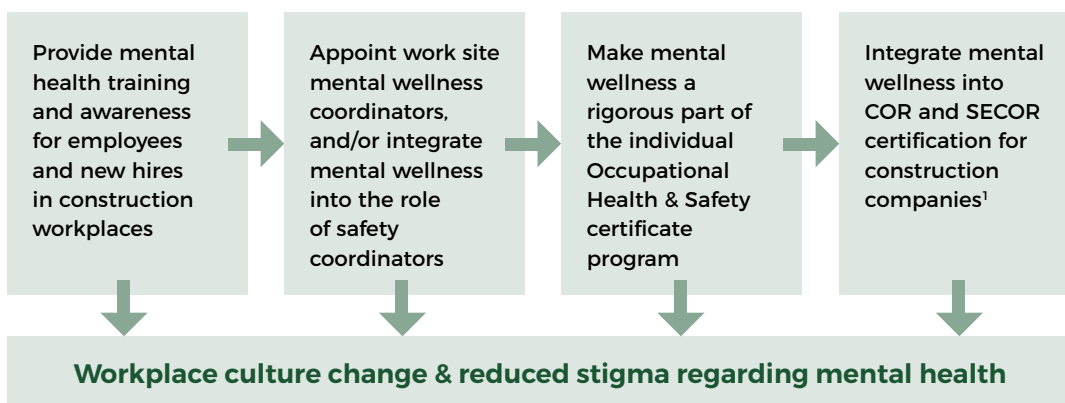
**Purpose Built** – Designed for the construction sector, the program delivers actionable, easy-to-access and relatable information



For more information on participation in this important new construction industry initiative, please contact [training@meritsask.com](mailto:training@meritsask.com) or call 1-844-637-4848.

## Building from the Safety Model to “Work Well”

The launch of our Workplace Wellness Program is part of a broader “Work Well” MERIT Saskatchewan campaign, aimed at elevating the priority of mental health in our industry. In cooperation with members, government agencies and other industry groups, MERIT Saskatchewan hopes to bring about a progression similar to what the Saskatchewan Construction Safety Association has achieved with respect to physical health and safety over the last 25+ years.



<sup>1</sup>Certificate of Recognition and Small Employer Certificate of Recognition for health and safety management systems.



Founded in 1988, MERIT Saskatchewan is the exclusive voice of the open shop construction community in the province.

Originally established by a group of six contractors, MERIT Saskatchewan has expanded significantly and includes contractors of all types, from within the more than 85 per cent of the Saskatchewan construction industry that operates on open shop principles.

Our members share a commitment to the Merit philosophy, and a desire to provide the best for their employees – with respect to training, benefits and all aspects of their wellbeing.

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