

Declining mental health and suicide risk

Explain dangers

Everyone has mental health concerns from time to time. But what some may consider “normal” challenges can develop into a mental illness if left unaddressed.

A **mental illness** is a medically diagnosed disorder that affects how a person thinks, behaves, and interacts with others. It can have a prolonged, negative effect on quality of life.

- By age 40, about 50 per cent of people will have—or will have had—a mental illness.
- Approximately 11 Canadians die by suicide each day—about 4,000 people annually. Compare that to workplace-related fatalities, which are about three daily or 1,017 per year.
- For every suicide death, there are an estimated 20 to 25 attempts. On average, 275 people attempt suicide in Canada every day.
- The mortality rate due to suicide among men is three times the rate among women. Men aged 45 to 59 are at greatest risk.
- The suicide rate in construction is four times greater than the North American average.

Construction workers are at a heightened risk for suicide for a number of reasons, such as injuries and illnesses that lead to chronic pain, exposure to traumatic events at work, and a culture that, historically, has discouraged discussing and seeking help for mental health concerns.

Until cultural change takes place, it is critical to learn the signs of declining mental health and suicide risk, and learn how to support someone who may be struggling with their mental health.

Signs of declining mental health include:

- Increased substance use (i.e., alcohol or drug)
- Feelings or talk of helplessness or hopelessness; no sense of purpose in life
- Anxiety, agitation, or uncontrolled anger
- Ongoing complaints of being unable to sleep or sleeping all of the time; looking more fatigued than usual
- Talk about feelings of being trapped—like there is no way out of a situation
- Withdrawal from friends, family, and society

- Acting recklessly or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- Dramatic mood changes

Identify controls

If someone you know is showing signs of declining mental health, start a conversation with them using the **ALEC method**.

- **A—Ask:** Mention any changes you have noticed: “You have not seemed like yourself recently. Are you okay?” Trust your instincts. People often say they are “fine” even when they are not. If you think something is wrong, do not be afraid to ask twice.
- **L—Listen:** Give them your full attention, without interruption or judgment. You do not have to diagnose problems or offer solutions. Asking follow-up questions lets them know you are listening. For example, “That cannot be easy. How long have you felt that way?”
- **E—Encourage action:** Help them to focus on simple actions that might improve their well-being. For example:
 - Getting consistent sleep, exercising regularly, and eating properly
 - Taking other steps that may have helped in the past
 - Telling other people they trust how they are feeling
 - Reaching out to their doctor, especially if they have been struggling for a prolonged period of time
- **C—Check in:** Suggest you catch up soon—in person, if possible. Alternatively, make time for a phone call or drop them a message. This will show you care. Plus, you will get a feel for whether things have improved.

If you are worried that a person’s life is in immediate danger, contact emergency services directly.

Demonstrate

Check in with those you are concerned about. It is okay to ask if someone is okay!

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Facilitator support resources

Prepare

- Review CSNS' mental health safety talks facilitator's guide for advice on how to talk about mental health with workers, encourage participation, and become a workplace mental health leader.
- Watch the video [Be a Man of More Words](#), which encourages men to reach out when they are in need of help. (Trigger warning: The video features discussions of suicide.)
- Read the article "[Suicide in the Construction Industry: The Silent Killer](#)," which looks at the factors that increase suicide risk among trades workers.
- Bookmark the [Construction + Suicide Prevention webpage](#) for access to ten actionable steps that construction companies can take to save lives.
- Post the [STAND UP posters](#).

Reinforce

Continue checking in with anyone you may be concerned about. Use the [ALEC method](#) to help the conversation. It is okay to ask if someone is okay!

Next steps

Consider further training for key personnel on your team, so that they are better equipped to respond to a mental health crisis, if needed. The next time you renew your standard first aid training, level-up with mental health training, too. Visit [constructionsafetyns.ca/courses](https://www.constructionsafetyns.ca/courses) to browse training.

More resources

Explore the following resources:

- Brief psychological health screenings are the quickest way to determine if you or

someone you care about should connect with a mental health professional. Think of these as checkups from your neck up.

- Information about how to identify the [warning signs and symptoms](#) of mental illness.
- Further information about how you can [help someone who is thinking about suicide](#).
- The [Canada Suicide Prevention Service](#) (1-833-456-4566) offers 24/7 telephone support to anyone experiencing a mental health crisis. Its website also provides a number of resources for support persons.

Questions

Consider asking your crew the following questions after delivering the safety talk.

However, **be aware that talking about these sensitive subjects can be triggering for some people.** Be mindful of the conversation, and check in afterwards with anyone who you may be concerned about.

- If a person is struggling with declining mental health or thoughts of suicide, their peers (e.g., friends, colleagues) can be a strong source of support. How could you offer support to a co-worker who might be struggling?
- Where could you send someone for extra support in the workplace, if necessary?
- Do you recall what ALEC stands for—and how might it be useful to you?

Do you have questions? Did your crew have questions you could not answer? Remember, it is okay to not have all the answers. Visit [constructionsafetyns.ca/courses](https://www.constructionsafetyns.ca/courses) to browse training. **For further support, please contact CSNS by email: info@constructionsafetyns.ca**

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