

# CHRONIC PAIN AND ITS IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH



American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Recently colleagues have noticed that Mike has been seen swallowing pills before putting on his hard hat. Twenty years of construction work and several injuries throughout that time had led to his regular use of pain medication. Lately, dealing with constant pain has been impacting his mood and outlook on life. One evening after work, Mike's roommate and colleague observed him adding alcohol while taking medicine and asked him if he was okay. Mike said, "I can't handle this pain anymore". His roommate and colleague listened to him and encouraged him to find a doctor to discuss his mental health and pain management needs. Six months later, Mike is able to manage his pain through physical therapy and non-addictive medication for pain when needed.

Construction workers are more likely to be prescribed opioids to manage pain than patients from other industries. When opioids are prescribed for pain, there is a higher risk of long-term use and developing opioid use disorder.<sup>ix</sup> In addition to managing pain on the job, addiction treatment and support for recovery may be needed.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

**Acknowledge the Pain:** Chronic pain can wear a person down mentally as well as physically. It's not just about a sore body—it's about the frustration and fear that come with it. Acknowledging when you are in chronic pain and seeking an effective treatment plan with a healthcare professional are steps we all should take.

**Adjust Where Possible:** It's important to follow the guidance of a healthcare professional, especially when recovering from an injury. Letting a supervisor know about injury or pain is important so that they can make adjustments where possible.

**Connect with Support:** Chronic pain is a factor that can put people at increased risk of suicide. If you are in chronic pain, don't hesitate to reach out to a healthcare professional or your EAP. The National Treatment Helpline 1-800-662-HELP (4357) confidential treatment referral and information service for mental and substance use disorders, prevention, and recovery. We should all know about and take advantage of resources like the 988 Suicide and Mental Health Crisis line- simply call or text 988 which is available in both English and Spanish.

## JOB SITE DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. What are some strategies that have worked to manage pain?
2. Pain and discomfort can be part of life working in construction. When should we see a health professional?
3. If pain is having a negative impact on our mental health, what are some things we can do to get help?

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Chronic pain doesn't just live in the body—it touches every part of a person's wellbeing, from their emotions to their sense of hope. When we truly acknowledge that, and choose to show up for one another with care, we offer comfort, understanding, and a sense of connection. You don't need to take someone's pain away to make a difference—just being there can remind them they don't have to face it alone.

*Don't forget to mention your company's mental health resources or local service options.*

<sup>ix</sup>Dale, A. M., Evanoff, B., Gage, B., Trout, D., Novakovich, J., Earnest, S., Garza, E., & Chosewood, L. C. (2021, September 14). Addressing the opioid overdose epidemic in construction: Minimize work factors that cause injury and pain. NIOSH Science Blog. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/2021/09/14/opioids-in-construction/>