



# The Straight Dope on Substance Abuse and the Construction Industry

By Sheryl S. Jackson

In a survey of 847 construction workers concerning stress, anxiety, coping and substance abuse, 61.9 percent of respondents indicated that they experienced stress and 48.8 percent reported anxiety as a direct result of working in the construction industry.

Because the relationship between stress, anxiety and substance abuse has long been recognized by medical professionals, it is no surprise that the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's most recent study on substance use and abuse in U.S. industries shows heavy alcohol use reported by 16.5 percent of full-time workers between the ages of 18 and 64 in the construction industry. In fact, only one other industry – mining – has a higher percentage, with 17.5 percent of mining industry workers reporting abuse.

There is substance abuse in all industries, including the use of illegal drugs as well as abuse of prescription drugs, points out Kyle Zimmer, health and safety director for the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE), Local 478. The reasons for the increasing numbers of construction workers abusing alcohol and drugs are varied, he says. "There is a greater awareness and recognition of an employee's substance abuse, which may

be leading to an increase in the number of cases reported," he says.

"Another reason for illicit use of drugs is also the number of Baby Boomers in the workforce who are older and have experienced injuries for which they turn to illegal opiates to control pain," says Brian LeBlanc, employee assistance professional at the Communications Workers of America, Local 1298 and president of the Connecticut Chapter of the National Labor Assistance Professionals. "Boomers who are traditionally free-spirited are more likely to turn to illegal drugs when traditional medicine doesn't alleviate their pain."

Establishing management, supervisory and peer teams that recognize the signs of substance abuse as well as the signs of lifestyle issues that might lead to substance abuse is critical for everyone in the industry, says Zimmer. Not only is the cost of addiction treatment high, but from an employer's point of view, an impaired workforce increases the risk of jobsite accidents and can also lead to loss of business. "When I talk to different trades, I ask if they would hire an impaired contractor to renovate their home," he says. The answer is always no, because employers – owners and general contractors – expect a clean and

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sober workforce that will deliver good work. “And, a safe and healthy workforce is always a productive workforce,” he adds.

## Recognizing the signs

Although there are some obvious signs for alcohol or drug use on the jobsite, such as slurred speech, the smell of alcohol or staggering, other signs may not be as obvious.

A drastic change in a person’s behavior, such as arriving late to work when on-time arrival was normal or leaving the jobsite at lunchtime rather than eating with coworkers as usual may indicate a substance abuse problem, says LeBlanc. Distraction on the jobsite and little things like losing tools may also be the result of personal problems that affect the employee’s performance at work.

Although supervisory personnel should be trained on the signs of substance abuse and on how to talk with employees who are having problems, one of the most effective ways to reach impaired workers is through a peer counseling program. “During the construction season we spend more time with our coworkers than with our families, so coworkers are in the best position to notice lifestyle issues that are affecting employees,” says Zimmer. For example, if the conversation at lunch is about Sunday’s football game and one person who is an avid fan says he did not see the game, it is natural for a peer to ask why he missed it. It could be that he is working a second job to cover unusual expenses or that he had to care for a sick family member. “Asking the right questions can give a peer counselor a chance to suggest ways to get help,” he adds. “Someone is more likely to confide in a coworker than in a supervisor.”

## Offering assistance

Although access to an employee assistance program (EAP) is beneficial, an EAP is often an external program that offers counseling and referral services by academic professionals. Construction workers feel more comfortable talking with peers who understand their day-to-day life at work and at home so peer counseling offers a quicker, more effective way to reach employees, says Zimmer. Union labor assistance programs (LAP) provide a peer-based service focused on obtaining

comprehensive alcohol and drug treatment, and mental health services for union members. An LAP can work with or without the additional support of an EAP – depending on the construction worker’s needs.

Initial training for employers and employees who want to serve as peer counselors includes:

- How to recognize problems
- How to approach employees who need help
- What employers should do, and shouldn’t do
- Who employers should call for help

Specific educational program topics include:

- Introduction of LAP
- Overview of substance abuse in the workplace
- Signs and symptoms of substance abuse in the workplace
- How to handle reasonable suspicion
- Veterans, PTSD and eating disorders – how each affects the workplace
- Critical incident stress management
- Opiates and prescription/physician drug abuse
- Domestic issues with addiction

Those who want to become certified as labor assistance professionals attend a 40-hour training class that covers these issues in more detail and addresses LAP factors such as confidentiality, explains LeBlanc.

“We’ll visit jobsites to provide counseling after an accident, talk to workers by telephone or meet someone in a neutral site such as a restaurant,” says Zimmer. The key to LAP success is the personal, immediate response to an employee’s needs, he adds.

Creating a workplace that is constructive versus punitive and that does not stigmatize an employee’s effort to get help with a substance abuse or mental health problem is a win-win for everyone. “The ability to support an employees’ recovery and get their experience and skills back on the jobsite after they receive help saves the time and money required to recruit, train and develop another employee,” says Zimmer. “I’ve worked with contractors who say they want the employees back after treatment because they are such good workers. I’ve also worked with an employee who said that if he’d known about the program, he would have sought help three years ago.”

*For more information about training sessions or the labor assistance professional program, contact Kyle Zimmer, health and safety director for the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE), Local 478 at 203.537.2207 or [kzimmer@local478benefits.org](mailto:kzimmer@local478benefits.org). For more information about the National Labor Assistance Professionals, visit [www.laborassistanceprofessionals.com](http://www.laborassistanceprofessionals.com).*



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