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It Starts with Stress:

Understanding Mental Health Challenges in Construction

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Contextual Backdrop

- **1 in 5 Americans** will experience a **mental health challenge** at some point in their lifetime (CDC, 2023)
- Men account for **3.5 times the number of suicides** compared to women (NAMI, 2018)
- The construction industry has **one of the highest rates of suicide**
 - About **4 times more likely** to die by suicide compared to general public (CDC, 2020)
- 90% of people who die from suicide have experienced a mental health concern/condition (e.g., depression, anxiety, substance use, PTSD)
 - Majority are **not engaged in services** (NAMI, 2023)

Mental Health

A state of well-being in which every individual realizes their own potential, **can cope with the normal stressors of life, can work productively** and fruitfully, and is able to **make a contribution to their community (WHO, 2020)**

- Enables people to realize their abilities, learn well, and work well
- Not simply the absence of mental illness/disorder
- Exists on a continuum
- Our mental health influences:
 - How we think
 - How we act
 - How we feel
 - How we manage stress
 - How we relate to other people



ILLNESS

HEALTH

Mental illness refers to a diagnosable psychological disorder characterized by the presence of symptoms that significantly affect behavior, mood, thought, and/or cognition.

- Languishing
- Mental illness
- Diagnosis
- In crisis

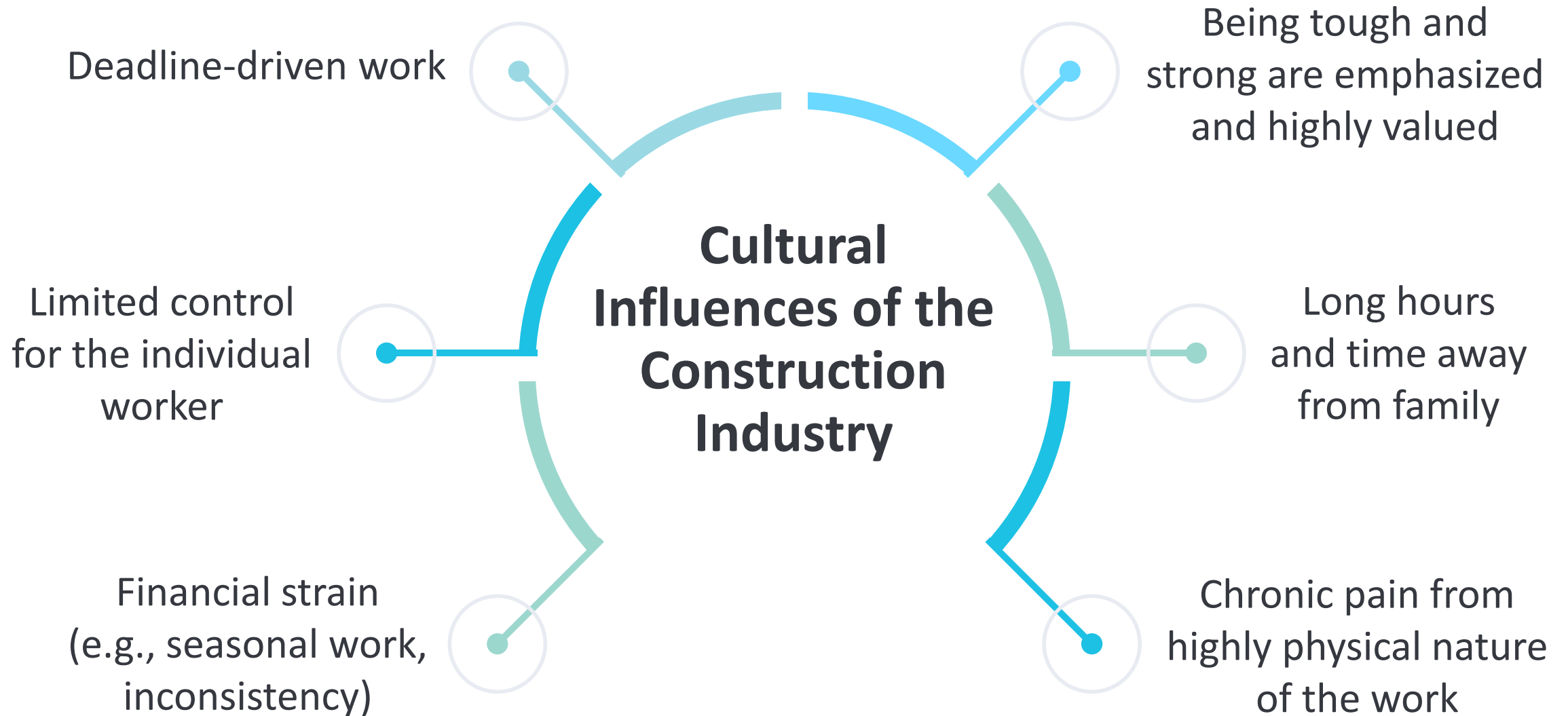
- Injured
- Struggling
- Strain
- Burnout

- Moderate mental health
- Surviving

- Reacting
- Thriving

- Flourishing
- Healthy
- Excelling

Mental health refers to a state of well-being beyond the absence of illness, in which individuals are generally satisfied, can work toward goals, and can contribute to their community.



Key Risk Factors to Consider

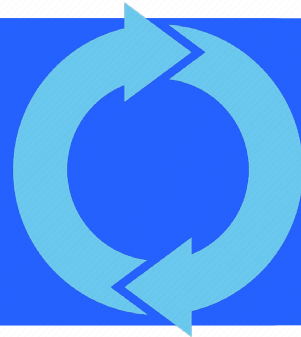
- **Individual** – Sense of hopelessness, financial problems, substance use, history of violence or adverse childhood experiences
- **Social** – Isolation, loss of relationships, high levels of conflict in relationships
- **Environmental & Societal** – Stigma, access to resources, perspectives of available organizational support

Understanding Stress

“A state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation...prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives.”
(WHO, 2023)

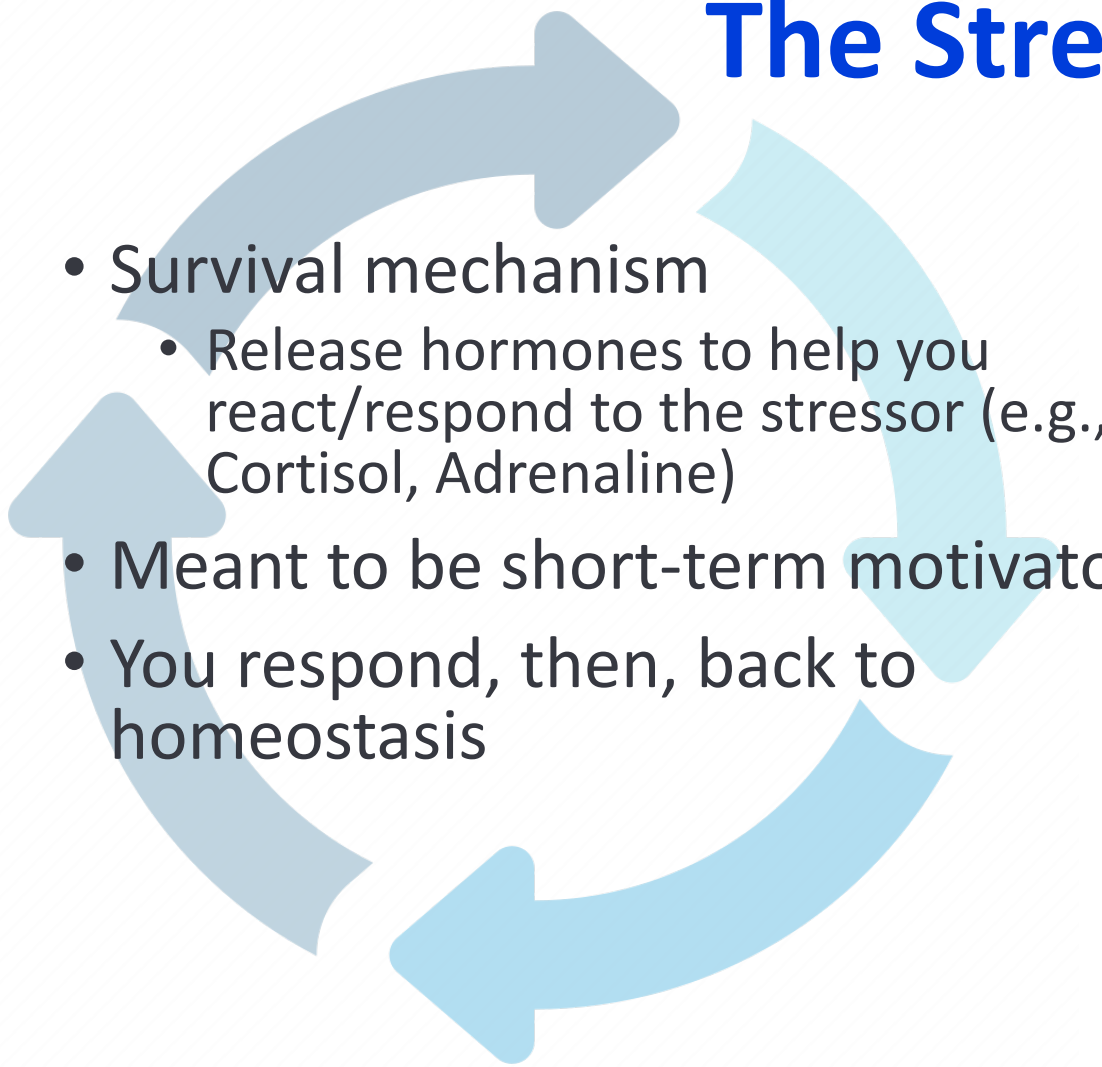
Natural, necessary, motivating

Work and life
domains



A “normal” part of our lives

The Stress Response

- 
- Survival mechanism
 - Release hormones to help you react/respond to the stressor (e.g., Cortisol, Adrenaline)
 - Meant to be short-term motivator
 - You respond, then, back to homeostasis

- Chronic – activated for TOO LONG
- Signs:
 - Difficulty sleeping
 - Withdrawing from social network
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - Physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, stomach issues)
 - Exhaustion
 - Irritability, frustration
 - Lack of emotion

How we rationalize overworking and stress

Messages fuel our mindset – What is the organization saying? (explicitly and implicitly)

- Stress means I am *successful* and hardworking
- I am stressed, but I can handle it
- Glorifying overworking



Surviving Not Thriving

How do we get here?



The Cumulative Build Up of Stress

Stress & Personal Health

*Unaddressed chronic stress puts you at
heightened risk for:*

- Impaired immune functioning
- Alzheimer's disease
- Cardiovascular disease
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Hypertension
- Diabetes
- Addiction
- Rumination
- Social isolation
 - Depression
 - Anxiety

**Stress &
Organizational
Health**

Productivity

Mistakes

**Focus,
Dedication,
Comradery**

Retention

Understanding Workplace Safety

- All workers are in a safe and healthful work environment, ***including protection from physical harm, injury, illness, and death***
- Ensuring employees are aware of the risks and hazards they might encounter on the job

What about...

- Cumulative/chronic stress
- Work-life spillover
- Isolation, fear
 - Perceptions of available support (e.g., my organization cares deeply about my wellbeing)



What are we missing?

How can you cope with work stress?

All of us can benefit by learning skills to manage fear and anxiety on the job. Several skills taught in cognitive behavioral therapy may help, including these:

- **Relaxation strategies.** Relaxation helps counter the physiological effects of the fight-or-flight response. For example, progressive muscle relaxation helps reduce muscle tension associated with anxiety. To practice this skill, sit comfortably with your eyes closed. Working from your legs upward, systematically tense and relax each major muscle groups. Hold the tension for 10 seconds; release tension for 20 seconds. Each time you release muscle tension, think "relax" to yourself. This skill and many other relaxation strategies can help reduce symptoms of anxiety.
- **Problem-solving.** Problem-solving is an active coping strategy that involves teaching people to take specific steps when approaching a roadblock or challenge. These steps include defining the problem, brainstorming potential solutions, ranking the solutions, developing an action plan, and testing the chosen solution.
- **Mindfulness.** Mindfulness is the ability to pay attention to the present moment with curiosity, openness, and acceptance. Stress can be exacerbated when we spend time ruminating about the past, worrying about the future, or engaging in self-criticism. Mindfulness helps to train the brain to break these harmful habits. You can cultivate mindfulness skills through formal practice (like guided meditation) and informal exercises (like mindful walking), or try [mindfulness apps](#) or classes. Mindfulness-based therapies are effective for [reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety](#).
- **Reappraising negative thoughts.** Chronic stress and worry can lead people to develop a mental filter in which they automatically interpret situations through a negative lens. A person might jump to negative conclusions with little or no evidence ("my boss thinks I'm incompetent") and doubt their ability to cope with stressors ("I'll be devastated if I don't get the promotion"). To reappraise negative thoughts, treat them as hypotheses instead of facts and consider other possibilities. Regularly practicing this skill can help people reduce negative emotions in response to stressors.

7 Ways to Handle Stress at Work

Employing techniques to stay physically and mentally healthy can alleviate stress and keep it at bay. Try these tips to tamp down workplace stress:

Identify your stressors. Write down what stresses you out during the workday and how you respond. Perhaps morning traffic makes you late and cranky from the start, or a noon meeting causes you to forgo lunch for chips instead. Whatever it is, jot it all down, then take time to reflect on how you might respond to each situation in a healthier way.

Practice relaxation techniques. Meditation, mindfulness and grounding techniques, such as deep breathing exercises, can help calm the mind and body. It helps to regularly practice these relaxation techniques so you can more easily use them when stressed.

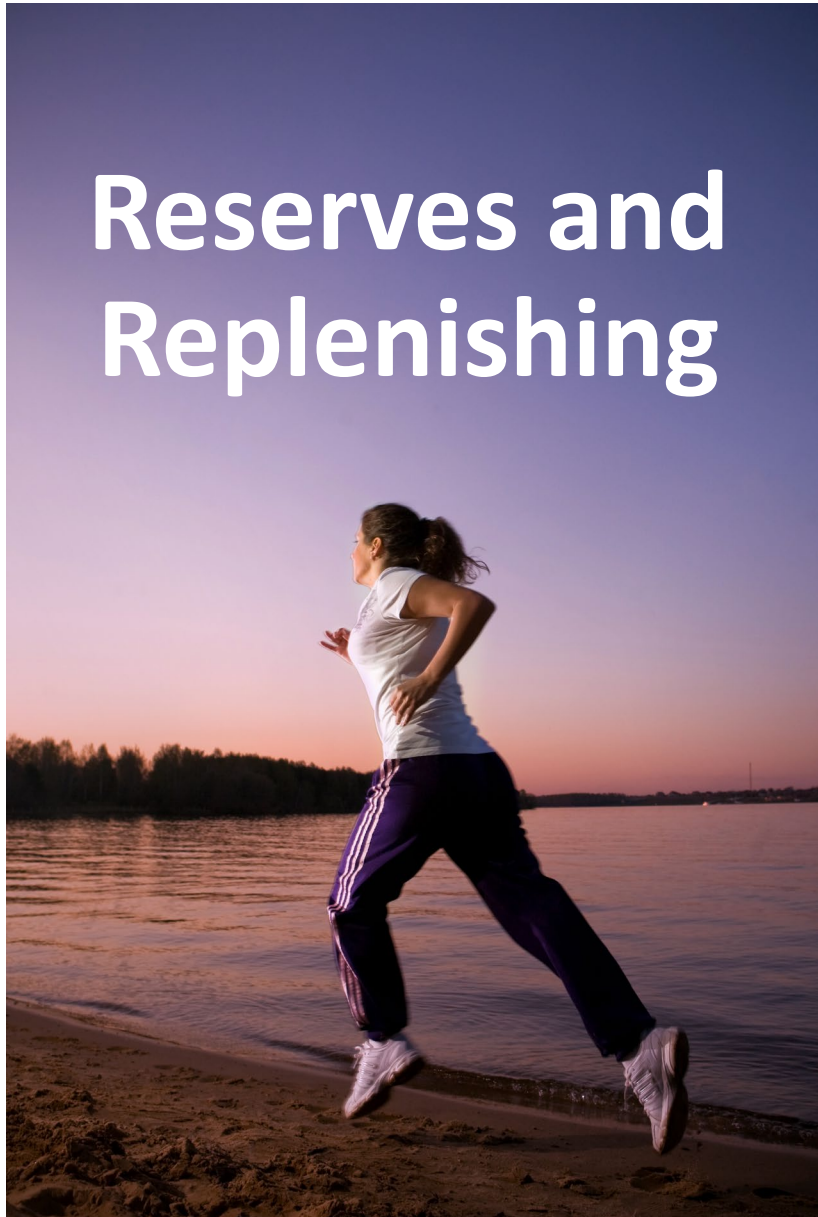
Dr. Lassen recommends keeping a "toolbox" to use in moments of stress that can include words of self-affirmation, calming or joyful pictures and a journal to help write away any negative thoughts.

Set aside time for yourself. Make time to do things that you enjoy, such as spending quality time with friends and family and exploring new or existing hobbies, suggests Dr. Lassen. The APA discourages fighting stress with fast food, alcohol or other unhealthy alternatives.

Step away from work. Give yourself space to recharge by turning off notifications and not thinking about work while on vacation. If you work from home, Dr. Lassen suggests closing your office door and shutting your laptop to signal to yourself and others that you're done working for the day.

Maintain a regular exercise routine. Dr. Pratt recommends setting aside 30 to 45 minutes for a walk during your workday. "It is 'me time' during the workday," he says. "When I return to the office after a walk, I return to a project with new energy, and often, with new insights."

Reserves and Replenishing



- Theory of Resilience & Relational Load
(Afifi et al., 2016)
 - Build relationships and practice **maintenance**
 - Emotional reserves – used to appraise stressor as less threatening
 - Resilience - positive adaption, thriving
 - Feedback loops
 - How can organizations facilitate this?
- Marathon runner analogy
 - Training – pulling from training on race day
 - Stretching, recovery

What Can Organizations Do?

Normalizing & Empowering Prevention

- Model and discuss self-care
- Share your experiences
- Recognize individuals who establish balance

Demonstrate Authentic Care

- How are stress and mental health talked about?
 - By whom?
 - When are stress and mental health discussed?
- Listen, identify needs
- Build relationships
- Take advantage of the “in between moments”

Approach, Listen, Follow Up

- Knowing employees enough to recognize change
- Approaching in ways that prompt sharing
- Connect to resources
- Check-in consistently

Barriers to Support Seeking in Construction

1. Stigma
2. Fear of judgement
3. Fear of consequences
4. Not understanding how the organization can help
5. Not knowing how to access care

Common Barriers to Approaching

- “Not the time or place”
- “It is not my business”
- “They are not bothering anyone”
- “I do not know what to say”
- “They need space”
- “I don’t want to make it worse”

Offering Resources Is Not Enough...

- Know what **options** employees have for support
- Understand the **steps needed to access resources**
- **Share** when you utilize resources or seek support (e.g., “I want to remind you all of the peer coaching services that are available – I just connected with a coach last week because I was feeling overwhelmed and stressed due to the upcoming deadline and family issues”)
- Consistently **note the availability of resources**
- Ensure information is disseminated in variety of ways (e.g., email, flyers, presentations)

Preparing for Regular Check-Ins

- Ensure you are able to be engaged, patient, and present in the conversation
- Find a private place to approach
- Ask open-ended, probing questions that elicit description – demonstrate that you want to hear more
- Know what type of support resources are available and how to access them – focus on connection
- Determine what type of support might be needed (e.g., emotional, informational, tangible, esteem)
- Remembering is an important way to signal genuine care

Moving Forward: Resources & Wellness Programs

- Need to recognize diverse needs and desires for support
 - Conduct needs assessments and explore needs of employees when possible
- Ensure that resources are easily accessible for all (e.g., different age groups, cultures, education level, etc.)
- Explain HOW resources are confidential and how they are protected
- Leverage multiple engagement techniques (e.g., toolbox talks, training, wallet cards, stickers)

Key Next Steps

1 Spend time identifying the antecedents to chronic/cumulative stress

2 Focus time and energy on relationship building – develop those reserves

3 Practice clear, consistent, authentic communication about mental health

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Q & A



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