

Construction industry culture hinders mental health support, study finds

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Construction workers can find it difficult to talk about mental health problems, and suicide among colleagues often comes as a shock. These are the findings of a study from the University of Gothenburg that also

links work-related pain to mental illness. The research is [published](#) in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

Previous research has shown that male [construction workers](#) in Sweden have up to a 50% increased risk of suicide. For countries like the U.K. and the U.S., the figure is even higher.

This study is based on interviews with 43 construction workers, trade union representatives and [managers](#) within the Swedish construction industry.

Managers were highlighted as having an important role in mental health. The interviews described empathetic and supportive managers, but also managers who, for example, did not pay attention to [mental health problems](#) of their employees.

One of the construction workers said, "I have signaled that I would not be feeling my best. The answer was 'let's deal with that later, we need to finish the project first.' Then the next project starts."

The study supports the image of the construction industry as demanding, where the work climate in some workplaces is characterized by a macho culture and stigmatization of [mental illness](#).

"Our interviews revealed that many construction workers do not report or seek help when they feel mentally unwell, and that some self-medicate with alcohol and painkillers. We also see that there is a need for better procedures on how to deal with mental illness and clearer [social support](#) in the workplace," says Kristina Aurelius, Associate Professor at Sahlgrenska Academy at the University of Gothenburg.

The study participants who had experienced suicide of a colleague described it as very unexpected. They had not noticed any signs that the

colleague was feeling low or suicidal. They described it as a shocking experience, and that it had been difficult to understand what had happened.

The working conditions in the [construction industry](#) were described as physically very demanding and stressful, which was perceived to have a negative effect on both physical and mental health. Study participants reported that the demanding working conditions often cause long-term pain, which in turn can lead to mental health problems and over consumption of alcohol and painkillers.

More information: Kristina Aurelius et al, Perceptions of mental health, suicide and working conditions in the construction industry—A qualitative study, *PLOS ONE* (2024). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0307433](#)

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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