

Kindness: The Risk Management, Mental Health, and Suicide Prevention Strategy We've Been Ignoring

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At the age of 13, construction taught me a lesson: work/the workplace can quietly unravel a life.

THE DAY CONSTRUCTION TAUGHT ME A LESSON

One evening my mother walked into our home after a long day at the sheet metal business she and my dad had been building. She wasn't just carrying her own work belongings, she had my dad's briefcase, his uneaten lunch, and jacket. After she set everything down, she looked at me and said, "Your dad planned to take his life today. But instead, he drove himself to the hospital. He had a nervous breakdown."

For years, I believed his "nervous breakdown" (a mental health crisis) was the reason he wanted to take his life. Later I learned it was the result of high job demand, low control, poor support, and the relentless stress and anxiety from the business. His exact words were, "I was in over my head and didn't see a way out." I've been that overwhelmed. My gut tells me countless others have been too.

It's been almost 40 years since that "lesson," yet few workplaces discuss it. While resources like Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and awareness campaigns matter, they often imply the burden of getting better falls entirely on the individual. But the fact of the matter is this: there are risk factors inside our workplaces that contribute to, and worsen, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and suicides. The research is there to prove it.



THE RISK FACTORS WE OVERLOOK AND THE LOW-COST SOLUTION WE IGNORE

Many construction owners, leaders, and employees have experienced, or unintentionally contributed to, workplace conditions that increase mental and physical risk:

- » High job demand
- » Low job control
- » Lack of support
- » Incivility and bullying
- » Poor environmental conditions (heat)
- » Poor workplace relationships

And here's the reality: a lot of what makes construction difficult isn't going away. The work is demanding. Summers are unforgiving. Projects pull people away from their families. Fatigue is part of the job.

And while we can't change the nature of construction, we have the control, regardless of title, tenure, or trade, to change how we treat the people doing the work.

It's where kindness comes in. A tool we all have access to, costs nothing, and can reduce risk from injury, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and suicide. Here's why I believe in it:

- » According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the average person delays getting treatment for 11 years.
- » One or more of your employees may be silently living inside this 11-year gap, showing up to work anxious, depressed, or carrying suicidal thoughts.
- » And when someone is struggling, the stories on repeat in their mind are often, "I don't matter. I don't belong."

What kindness does is create a "moment of interruption," a brief mental break powerful enough to disrupt the isolation and hopelessness someone might be silently battling. A genuine hello, good morning, or thank you becomes a small but meaningful message of "You matter. You belong. I see you."

These tiny moments of human connection can even lower the body's stress response and strengthen a person's sense of belonging, protective factors for mental health. In addition to the research, suicide survivors have said it's changed the course of their day.

IT WORKS - IT'S MY HUSBAND'S MOST VALUABLE BUSINESS TOOL

My husband, a small construction business owner, grew up in environments where bullying, aggression, and disrespect were normalized. These behaviors didn't just increase his stress and anxiety, they contributed to turnover, risky decision-making, and low trust among crews. So, when he opened his industrial roofing company, he made a choice: He would lead with respect and kindness, every day and with every person.

He holds himself accountable to that standard and expects the same from his employees, vendors, and customers. His kindness tactics include:

- » Working alongside employees to understand their strengths and style
- » Using respectful language

- » Beginning every interaction with a greeting
- » Incorporating employee feedback into decisions
- » And when necessary, firing customers who treat his business and people poorly

The result is far from weak or ineffective. In fact, over the last 17 years he's had:

- » Zero reportable accidents
- » 0.81 Experience Modification Rate (EMR)
- » Strong retention
- » Consistent profitability
- » No employee suicides

MY CALL TO ACTION TO YOU

Far too often, we assume solutions for injuries, mental health, and suicide prevention must be complex, clinical, or expensive. But we haven't mastered the basics, the simplest form of human protection. Will kindness eliminate the physical demands of construction work or lower the summer heat? Nope. But it will lower risk. It will protect people. And it will shift the culture.

So, let's correct the course. Instead of normalizing bullying, burnout, or pushing people past their limits to meet unrealistic deadlines, let's normalize kindness. 

Information to support the facts in this article came from:

1. The National Alliance on Mental Illness: www.nami.org
2. Howard MC, Follmer KB, Smith MB, Tucker RP, Van Zandt EC. Work and suicide: an interdisciplinary systematic literature review. *J Organ Behav.* 2021; 43(2): 260-285.
3. Alexander, R., et al. The Neuroscience of Positive Emotions and Affect: Implications for Cultivating Happiness and Wellbeing. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 121 (2021): 220-249.



About the Author

Dr. Colleen Saringer, founder of [Dr. Colleen Saringer Speaks](#), is a blue-collar woman wrapped in a Ph.D. package. As a former organizational health leader, now professional speaker, she taps into her 40-plus years of experience inside two family-owned construction businesses to bring rare insights into how kindness, boundaries, and accountability can serve as mental health and suicide prevention “tools.” Her husband, Scott Satory, owner of Service First Roofing, often joins her on stage. She can be reached at colleen@colleensaringer.com.

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