

Safety, Mental Health, and Peak Performance

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The construction industry has always been stressful, but according to a recent global study compiled by the International Metal Worker's Federation, stress and burnout are on the rise around the world.

Our workers are being asked to do more with less. The physical, emotional, and mental demands are tremendous. Many employees are working 60, 80, even 100-hour weeks, sometimes for extended periods of time.

Think about some of the people you know who have been in the industry for a while. Do they look older than they are? Do they appear to be beaten down, worn out, and exhausted? Who do you know in the industry who is overweight and out of shape? How many folks do you know who have developed stress related illnesses such as autoimmune maladies, heart disease, high blood pressure, or diabetes?

Many of the people I coach use nicotine and caffeine in the morning to get started and alcohol and recreational or prescription drugs at night to calm down and be able to sleep. They tend to use both prescription and over the counter medications to control many of the physical symptoms of stress such as headaches and other pains, stomach and digestive problems, allergies, fatigue, anxiety, and irritability. The need to control pain is a contributing factor to the opioid crisis. These folks tend to avoid addressing the underlying stress, which, much of the time, is the root cause of many of these physical symptoms.

The World Health Organization projects that by 2030, depression will cause more premature deaths and years of disability than cancer, stroke, heart disease, war, or accidents.



In the United States in 2021, we spent over \$535.3 billion on prescription drugs. In 2019, 4.22 billion prescriptions were written (14 for every man, woman, and child in the U.S.). We had 275 overdose deaths per day in 2021, many of these from opioids. We spent almost \$38 billion for over-the-counter medications in 2021. The point is that we take a lot of drugs and medications to treat sickness and disease and function in the world. Despite the use of these drugs, our life expectancy has dropped from 79 to 76 over the last three years.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, per capita spending on healthcare in the US (2018) was \$11,172 per person, which is the highest in the world. We spend double what the next highest country spends. And yet, compared to all other countries, we have the highest rate of obesity, and we have seen a recent increase in mental health issues. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that of the five leading

causes of death (heart disease, cancer, COVID, accidents, stroke, and chronic respiratory issues), 40% are caused by lifestyle choices and could be prevented. The World Health Organization says that 80% of all illnesses are caused by or made worse by stress.

The construction industry has the second highest suicide rate of any industry according to the Centers for Disease Control. Suicide kills five times the number of people who die from construction related accidents. Nearly 70% of all suicides are white males of working age.

So, what is going on here and how do we fix it?

The first root cause is societal. We are a nation built on strong work ethic and self-sacrifice. This glorious, traditional way of being is now starting to take its toll. We've become a nation of stressed-out folks who work way too much and don't take enough time off. We don't manage our stress well, we tend to make poor lifestyle choices, and this way of being and working is negatively affecting our mental, physical, and emotional health and well-being. In order to cope with these stressors, we have a tendency to self-medicate in order to function and keep going with a variety of drugs (recreational, prescription and over-the-counter) and alcohol.

There are also socioeconomic inequities that prevent access to healthy lifestyle choices and preventive healthcare. Those at the low end of the socioeconomic scale don't have as much access to high quality, nutritious foods. These food deserts limit their choices. Access to quality healthcare is also an issue for low-income families. Without access to good healthcare and other preventive measures, there is a greater tendency toward poor health and disease that could have been prevented.

When you are worried about paying your bills, these good lifestyle choices are put on the back burner. When you are only surviving, it's hard to thrive. Limited access to adequate, affordable housing can impact vital health choices like sleep, and with the added stress of living paycheck to paycheck in a low wage job, it can be overwhelming. Good lifestyle choices are not on the radar. One recent study showed that folks on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale aren't poor because they make bad, short-term decisions. They tend to make bad, short-term decisions because they are poor. Many of these decisions, out of necessity, are short term and immediate, and are not conducive to a long-term, productive, healthy life.

We are the only industrialized nation on the planet without a

paid leave law. If you work at a McDonald's in most first world countries, the government guarantees you at least three weeks paid vacation. Many of my Swedish friends have more than nine weeks of paid vacation and 17 bank holidays. I get it. We value hard work. But hard work and stress are now officially killing us. We should offer all our field folks ample vacation time and encourage all employees to take their vacations without checking in at the office or project.

We must change the way we think about our time off or face these dire health consequences. Europeans we interviewed said that they need at least three weeks of vacation because during the first and last weeks, they are thinking about work. With three or more weeks of vacation, they can have at least one week of total decompression. We just can't get there with a mere two weeks per year. And for many field folks, no vacation is offered. If we do have vacation, we usually take those two weeks in installments of three and four-day weekends. It just isn't enough. With these diminished vacation times, we very rarely reach a true state of decompression, especially when we are constantly on our phones and checking our emails each day. According to a study in the book, *Work to Live: The Guide for Getting a Life* by Joe Robinson, a yearly vacation without checking in was found to reduce the risk of heart attack by 30% in men and 50% in women.

What if companies started offering more vacation time, more flextime, and more ways for their employees to recover from stress? Even on projects, there are some work processes that can be accomplished from anywhere. What if companies incorporated a ROWE (Results Oriented Work Environment) where employees were responsible for the results, but not the methods, location, or time.

Could many of our employees take a day per week or a day per month and accomplish these tasks from somewhere other than the jobsite? We know from the work shifts during the pandemic that they answer is an emphatic YES! This would also address employees' need to set their own work schedules and be autonomous in how they accomplish their work.

Most people we interviewed said they would take a substantial cut in pay to be able to have more time off. By investing a little bit into our people, we would have happier, less stressed, more loyal, more productive employees. even at the craft level. If we were clever on how we managed projects, we could implement some of these ideas our skilled trades as well. Do you think there are craft workers who are "night owls" and would rather start later and work later? Would they be more productive?

Could you manage the work to accommodate them? It's certainly worth a try.

The other aspect to this issue is cultural. Our industry not only values hard work, but it tends to draw folks who are highly independent and assertive. This is reflected in the typical emotional profile for most construction folks. We call it the "alpha" profile.

They tend to have lower emotional self-awareness, lower empathy, and lower emotional expression along with higher assertiveness and independence. This profile ensures that most folks aren't aware of their emotions and even if they were, they would likely not express them. They are highly independent and assertive and don't have great empathy, so they don't understand others well. Couple this with a hypermasculine work environment where you can't be vulnerable, can't ask for help, can't be struggling and it is a recipe for disaster in terms of mental health and suicide.

We must teach our workers about mental health and remove the stigma around it. I want to give a shout out to Cal Beyer at Holmes, Murphy and Associates and Sally Spencer-Thomas, whose Guts, Grit, and the Grind series of books on men's mental health, are making a huge difference in opening up this discussion in the construction industry. They are making great strides in removing the stigma around men's mental health, and are, in fact, saving lives.

We must also teach our workers about good nutrition, the effects of alcohol and drugs (prescription and over the counter), adequate sleep, stress management techniques, and exercise and how all these areas affect their mental, physical, and emotional health, safety, and longevity.

Think about this story. One of your workers wakes up late and only had two hours of sleep. He is hung over and perhaps still a little drunk. He has a horrible fight with his wife. He has a flat tire on the way to work. He is very angry. He arrives at the trailer and grabs a couple of donuts and downs two energy drinks, then he takes some cold medication because he can't breathe through his nose. Then he climbs up the tower crane and goes to work as your operator. This scenario likely happens far more than you realize.

We have created two evaluations, emotional and physical, and from the results, we can tell if you are approaching burnout. *See the link at the end of the article to access these evaluations.*

The typical burnout profile is low self-regard (beating yourself

up), low interpersonal relationships (relationships take energy), low stress tolerance (inability to deal with stress), low self-actualization (finding little purpose and meaning), low happiness, and low optimism. On the physical side, we see many folks with nutritional deficiencies that are in fight or flight and exhaustion. We call it "wired and tired".

By looking at these two evaluations, we can determine if stress and burnout are problems and address them before they manifest themselves in the form of sickness, low productivity, absenteeism, and disease, and in the long term, mental health issues.

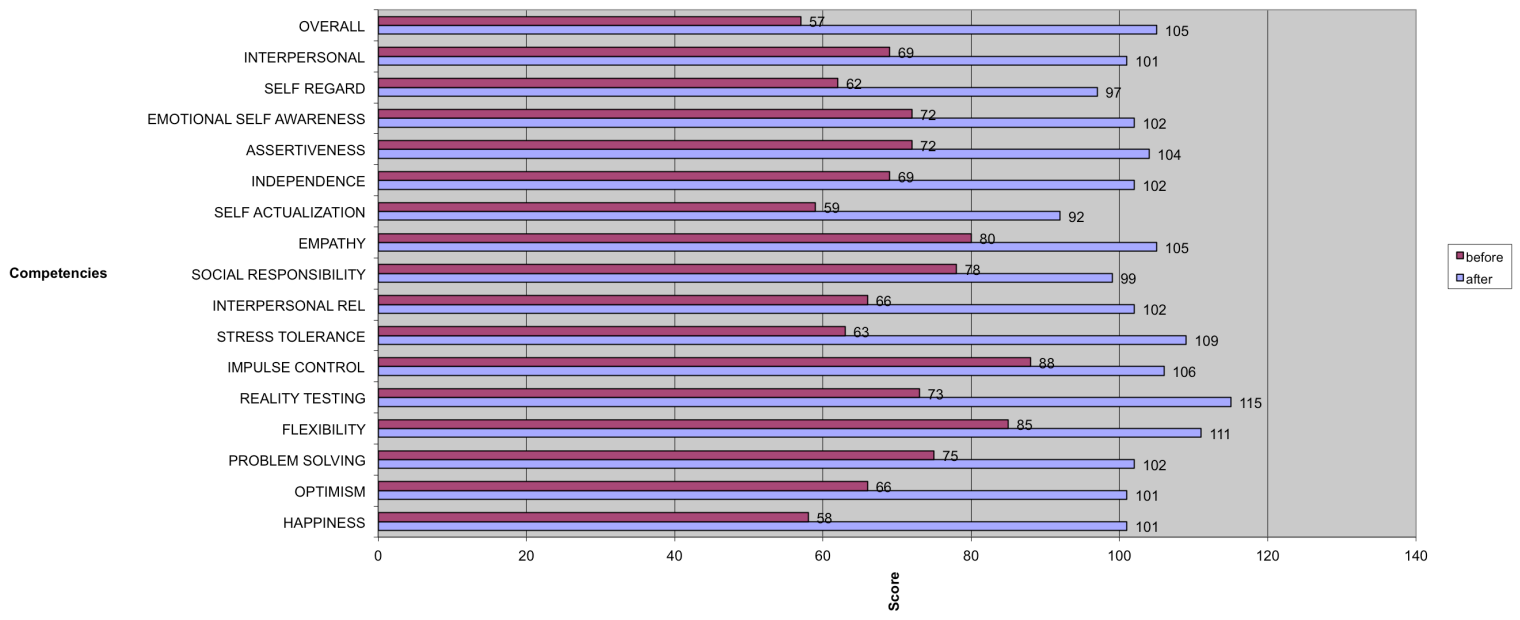
We have created a program called Primal Safety that focuses on three main areas: Cognition, Judgment, and Connection (emotional intelligence).

Think of all the things that affect cognitive ability and judgment: lack of sleep, stress (fight or flight), nutrition, what you put in your body (alcohol, drugs, and medications) and exercise. There are many studies about lack of sleep and accidents. It has been determined that poor sleep contributed to the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl nuclear disasters, as well as the Exxon Valdez oil spill. The ASCE did a study on sleep and safety and found that poor sleep contributes to higher accident rates. By teaching our workers about sleep, nutrition, exercise, lifestyle choices, and how to handle stress, they are better cognitively, they think more clearly and solve problems more readily, and they have better judgement. This can lead to a safer work environment.

I am a certified yoga instructor, and we teach basic breathing, meditation, and mindfulness techniques to better handle stress. Over one third of the managers who have been exposed to yoga and meditation in our courses have continued with these practices afterwards because of their tremendous benefits. As one program participant said, "Currently my job situation is extremely hectic (again) and I have had some problems sleeping. Last night, however, I was able to calm down and relax using your meditation CD."

Another program participant put it this way, "Without question, the most helpful skill which I have implemented from my emotional intelligence training is how to better handle and reduce stress. By better controlling stress, I have seen positive results both at work and in my private life."

The following participant came to us in total burnout. He was in a highly stressful work situation. He said he had no personal life. There was just enough time to go home, eat, and go to bed.



He was overweight and smoking two packs of cigarettes per day. on his project, they were working a lot of long hours and there were a lot of unhappy people. His initial reaction to the program was negative. He didn't think the course would help him, and he had a difficult job to complete. Look at his before and after EQi in the chart above.

Keep in mind that 100 is the mean, or average, similar to an IQ test. This person had self-actualization (having purpose and meaning) of 59. Imagine a person with an IQ of 59.

Look at the six indicators of burnout (self-regard, self-actualization, interpersonal relationship, stress tolerance, happiness, and optimism). The before scores are all extremely low. Now look at the after scores. The change in this participant was amazing. A change in five points is statistically significant and indicates a shift in behavior. This is a new human being. In his words: "Without the program I would have never known where I was and how to get me out of the hole that I was in. Look at these techniques and no matter how ridiculous you may think they are, just try them and see what happens to you. Because it does work." He lost 20 pounds, quit smoking, and was much happier with his life and work. The project was a big success and led to a promotion for this participant.

The moral of this story is that everyone can turn this dynamic around with some focus on their emotional and physical profiles and learning about mental, physical, and emotional wellness and peak performance. We CAN create an industry that supports and takes care of our people! We also have a great tool called the Body Battery Inventory that measures stressors versus recovery activities. *See the link at the end to download.*

As important as these areas are for better safety, performance, and well-being, the third component to the Primal Safety Program is human connection and emotional intelligence. When you connect people as humans, they work safer naturally. We have created 52 Primal Safety Toolbox Topics that focus on human connection and relationships. *See the link at the end to download.*

When we connect with each other, it's much easier to be vulnerable, open up and talk about any issues that you are having. Even mental health issues start with connecting to resources that can help.

There was an article in the July/August 2008 Harvard Business Review called Unmasking Manly Men by Robin J. Ely and Debra Meyerson. The article focuses on how roughnecks and roustabouts on oil rigs improved their safety by softening their approach and focusing on the safety and well-being of the workers. According to Ely and Meyerson, "over the 15-year period these changes in work practices, norms, perceptions, and behaviors were implemented company-wide. The company's accident rate declined by 84% while productivity (number of barrels produced), efficiency (cost per barrel), and reliability (production 'up' time) increased beyond the industry's previous benchmark." We must wonder if this approach was ignored on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, the site of the worst oil disaster in the history of the industry.

They further state, "if men in the hyper-masculine environment of the oil rigs can let go of the macho ideal and improve their performance, then men in corporate America might be able to do likewise. Numerous studies have examined the cost of macho displays in contexts ranging from aeronautics to

manufacturing to high tech to the law. They show that men's attempts to prove their masculinity interfere with the training of recruits, compromise decision quality, marginalize women workers, lead to civil and human rights violations, and alienate men from their health, feelings, and relationships with others. The price of men striving to demonstrate their masculinity is high, and both individuals and organizations pay for it."

We have also created the Primal Safety Coloring book. It's in Spanish and English and it tells the story of a kid whose



entire family works in the construction business. They leave him with grandpa and go off to work in the morning. Each page shows how they stay safe throughout their workday with PPE and good safety practices. We have also added some pages on nutrition, sleep, and mental health. All the profits from

this coloring book goes to the Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention in my dad's name.

Companies are starting to realize the importance of addressing these health issues for their workers not only to make them more productive, but also to curb high healthcare costs. In an ENR article titled, "Wellness Program Cures Rising Health Care Costs", Cianbro Corporation, a large heavy civil and industrial contractor, addressed rising healthcare costs head-on. In 2001, they paid \$11.5 million in healthcare costs, but these costs were projected to reach \$20 million by 2004. So, in 2001, they started a voluntary wellness program for their employees.

They reduced the percentage of smokers from 46% to 20%. Also, 34% of their employees are exercising on a regular basis, and there has been a 20% reduction in hypertension and a 25% reduction in high cholesterol. Since 2001, instead of almost doubling, their healthcare costs have remained flat. In 2014, Cianbro not only reports that their employees and spouses have better quality of life, but they estimate that the company saved \$2.4 million because of their wellness initiatives. This money goes straight to the bottom line.

There are no easy answers or quick fixes for these issues in our industry and in our society. The important thing is that we have begun. We are starting to have discussions about mental, physical, and emotional health and well-being and provide the necessary resources to our workers. We are having discussions about performance and longevity and letting our folks know that we care about them as human beings and want the best for them.

For a moment, look to the future and see a vision where the AEC industry is not only a safe industry, but it becomes restorative. Imagine people working in this industry for years and retiring not only free from disabilities, but healthy and full of vigor. That is the next step in this process. Some say it is impossible to achieve. Some use the excuse that "this is a tough, dangerous, and stressful industry". Although there is no doubt that the work is tough and dangerous, I firmly believe that we can reach that level of health and safety through this emotionally intelligent approach and a true focus on people and their health and well-being. This will also help to address our poor industry image, workforce development, and diversity and inclusion issues.

What can you do right now? Start the discussion with your folks. Find the resources and make them available. You can download my Tough Guy Survival Kit and read the chapter on stress management. *See the link at the end to download.* Try mantherapy.org. It's a great website that uses humor to talk to men about mental health and well-being.

At every meeting, try this: Ask everyone where they are with their well-being on a scale of 1-10. "1" is poor sleep, poor nutrition, poor stress management, little or no exercise, feeling wiped out or depressed, etc. "10" is great sleep, eating well, managing stress, great life balance, exercising regularly, feeling great, etc. For each person, ask "What one thing could you do in the coming week to increase your score?" This will start the discussion and help each other know that they are not alone and there are some simple things to do to be better with their mental, physical, and emotional health and well-being. 🖋️



About the Author

Brent Darnell is the owner and president of [Brent Darnell International](#) and a mechanical engineer and a graduate of Georgia Tech. He is a leading authority on emotional intelligence and a pioneer in its use in the construction industry to improve social competence and leadership skill among managers and executives. He is an adjunct professor at Auburn and Penn State universities and author of the well-received book, *The People-Profit Connection* and the Tough Guy series. His programs, books, and online courses, including [CMAA's Leadership Library](#), are helping to transform the industry.

To download the free resources listed in this article, visit brentdarnell.com/resources:

- » El Test and Symptom Survey
- » Body Battery Inventory
- » Primal Safety Toolbox Topics
- » Tough Guy Survival Kit

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