

Mental Health in Construction

WITH DR. SALLY SPENCER-THOMAS

BY ANGIE ELMENDORF, ADSC-IAFD EDITOR-IN-CHIEF





▲ Dr. Sally embracing her brother, Carson

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas is a clinical psychologist by training and works in the field of mental health and mental health awareness. She sees issues of suicide prevention and mental health promotion from a host of perspectives: clinical psychologist, mental health advocate, faculty member, researcher, and suicide loss survivor.

She has earned an international reputation as an entrepreneur and innovator in social change. ADSC had the privilege of hosting Dr. Sally at our Annual Meeting at the Broadmoor in January 2023. She gave a heart-wrenching and eye-opening seminar on mental health and suicide prevention in the construction industry. Mental health is a major platform that ADSC has committed to, along with other industry associations in an effort to decrease the alarming rate of suicide in our industry as well as foster better working conditions. We spoke with Dr. Sally about these important topics to bring awareness and education to our members.

Dr. Sally's motivation for mental health awareness and suicide prevention is personal. She had been in the field of mental health for about 16 years when she lost her brother to suicide on December 7, 2004. Like many people who have had dramatic

and life-changing experiences, this was her before and after moment. Her life before he died and her life after. Her brother, Carson, was a 34-year-old businessman, father of two, and he had been very successful in his career. He had tons of friends, was very handsome and athletic, and you would have thought he had it all. But right behind all that magic, Carson fought fierce depression that ultimately proved to be fatal. That was a wake-up call. Dr. Sally's family knew he had been in trouble for the six months leading up to his death. He had gotten help and utilized resources, but it wasn't enough to help him overcome the depression.

Dr. Sally refers to that tragedy as her wake-up call. She often shares that she learned a number of things after her brother's death that she did not know of before he passed away. One significant realization was that the majority of people who die by suicide are just like her brother: a working-aged man. In fact, about 75% to 80% of suicide victims are men of working age. Most of them make only one attempt, and sadly, it's fatal. A large portion of them have never sought help from any type of mental health facility. Recognizing this gap in support and awareness became a crucial area Dr. Sally aimed to address.

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How do you reach the people that need help?

The challenge lies in the fact that these individuals don't operate within easily monitored systems like education, and most aren't regularly accessing healthcare due to their work commitments. Recognizing this, I realized the need for workplace intervention.

In 2007, our team initiated a Workplace Suicide Prevention Program, but initially, there was apprehension. People were afraid of discussing mental health and suicide at work. Despite the hurdles, we persisted, and by 2013, some early adopters emerged. Among them was a contractor in the Denver Metro area who had personal experience with suicide loss. He was determined to make a change and requested all the support we could offer. This collaboration marked the beginning of our journey, and as we progressed, he discovered vital insights about his workforce - their struggles, worries, and the shortcomings of the employee assistance program.

Seeing the significance of this initiative, he envisioned taking it beyond his company and advocated for a national effort in the construction industry. At that time, data and awareness about mental health in construction were scarce. I really credit him for having the vision that this needed to happen industry-wide. We co-wrote the



construction industry blueprint and worked to disseminate information through trade publications, like Foundation Drilling Magazine.

This drive to increase awareness and support for mental health in the construction industry laid the foundation for positive change and continues to impact the lives of many workers today.

In 2016, we received the data we needed. The CDC ranked industries by suicide rates, and low and behold, three reports consistently ranked the construction industry as either number one or number two for having the highest suicide rates.

The data uncovered a startling reality - the rates of suicide among construction workers were not just high; they were accompanied by a significant number of fatalities due to the sheer size of the industry. The staggering truth was that over 5,000 construction workers succumbed to suicide every year, a figure that overwhelmed industry leaders who had

primarily focused on job site fatalities, which are undoubtedly critical. However, these job-related deaths had been averaging around 1,000 per year.

Then, in January of 2023, we received even more alarming data, indicating that over 14,000 construction workers die annually from overdose deaths. This means that as a construction worker, you are at a far higher risk of premature death due to mental health issues than from a job site accident. This realization fueled my commitment to addressing this issue. Each of these untimely deaths has a profound impact, often claiming lives in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s, depriving them of decades they should have lived. The aftermath creates a metaphorical tsunami, affecting not only their co-workers but also their families, friends, and communities. Processing and grieving such losses become immensely challenging, leaving those left behind vulnerable to trauma, depression, suicidal thoughts, and a heightened susceptibility

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to suicide themselves. The magnitude of this issue cannot be overlooked, and it demands urgent attention and action.

What are some practical steps construction companies and supervisors can take to create a culture of mental wellness and suicide prevention on a job site?

Before this data became public, mental health struggles, anxiety, depression, and addiction were not at the forefront of most construction leaders' or superintendents' minds, nor were they a primary concern for our field workers. As a result, we find ourselves needing to start from scratch, raising awareness about the reality of these issues.

Unlike physical injuries, which may be visibly apparent with casts or hair loss due to chemotherapy, mental health struggles can be easily masked and concealed. This makes it challenging to identify when someone is silently suffering. Workers often soldier on, putting on a brave face, and getting the

job done despite their internal struggles. Creating awareness and understanding around these hidden issues is crucial to foster a supportive and empathetic environment within the construction industry.

What did you do in the mental health session for ADSC?

We implemented an anonymous and confidential polling system, and the results were strikingly consistent. Surprisingly, between 90 and 100% of the audience, including even the toughest workers, admitted to being impacted by some form of mental health issue. Whether it was their own struggle with depression, anxiety, or addiction, or having lost someone to these issues, or being a primary support person for someone fighting through them, the impact was evident.

After the poll, we conducted small group discussions, and remarkably, individuals who had never spoken about these matters before began to open up to some degree. While not revealing their deepest,

darkest secrets, they shared how they had been affected by mental health issues. This pivotal moment initiated a culture change as they realized they were all in this together, not alone, and not the only ones facing such challenges. This understanding marked the significant beginning of the journey.

Creating awareness and reducing fears, biases, and prejudice surrounding mental health emerged as crucial first steps in the process. We ensured that everyone grasped the importance of this journey and tied it to the health and safety priorities of the organization. People often perceived mental health as a personnel or work-related issue, but it's clear that issues like addiction could severely impact a person's ability to make sound decisions, especially in roles involving heavy machinery. Recognizing and addressing mental health concerns as a significant aspect of overall health and safety is vital. It is indeed a big deal and demands the collective effort of everyone involved.



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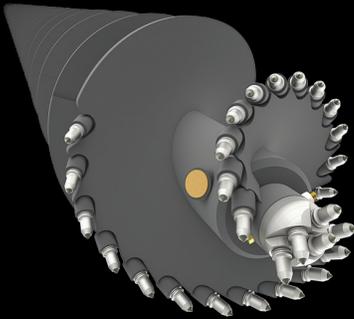
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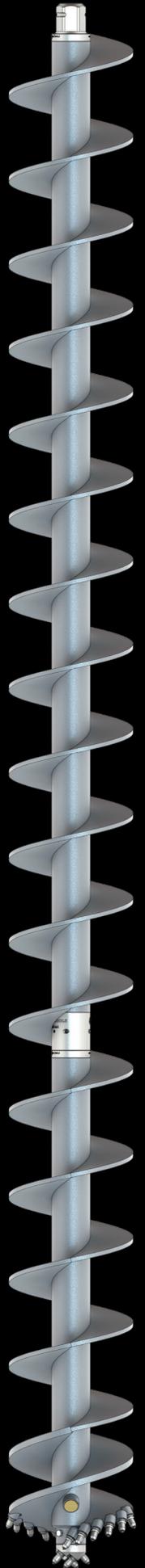


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Less obvious, are the issues of depression and anxiety. But for people who've lived through it like I have, you know, you're very distracted. When those racing thoughts are happening, it is very hard to concentrate. We can see this on brain scans; the brain starts to shut down in depression. Your brain literally isn't firing in the way it does when you are well, and you can't, no matter how hard you will yourself, generate a lot of ideas to solve problems or make decisions quickly. There's a lot of fatigue involved. So, without a doubt, these things are job site safety issues!

Depression and anxiety are also impacting jobs in many ways. They're impacting the

ability to keep really valuable employees and people. The number one thing that drives absenteeism is depression. People who frequently call in when they don't feel well, physically or mentally, can put their jobs at risk. However, if you recognize that some of these performance-related issues are treatable mental health conditions, you can intervene in a way that gets your employee support. By taking proactive measures, companies can help prevent major issues related to absenteeism and Disability Leave. Additionally, you're going to retain perfectly good employees who are going to be incredibly loyal. Positive word-of-mouth spreads when employers demonstrate care

and support during tough times. As an employer, this approach not only helps retain current employees, but also attracts top talents who want to work for a company that genuinely cares about its workforce.

| **What are some warning signs?**

When it comes to warning signs, in a population that is largely stoic, tough-minded, and may be reluctant to seek support, identifying warning signs may not be obvious. However, some personal issues may be more apparent, such as someone going through a difficult divorce, moving to a new location, dealing with custody arrangements, or openly discussing personal struggles at work. In these



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situations, it is essential to recognize that these challenges can impact their mental health, and having an open conversation about what they might need to get through this tough time is entirely acceptable. Building a culture that encourages open communication and sharing creates an environment where difficult conversations become easier. Some workplaces do this very well when it comes to something like a natural disaster or a family death. People show up with their casseroles, but not for something that is not quite so obvious. That is why it is so important to build a culture where we've got each other's backs.

Other types of warning signs related to mental health often go

unnoticed. Take, for instance, significant changes in anger or stress tolerance should be noted. Pay attention to employees who exhibit excessive reactions to minor issues, conflicts, and stressors, as their responses might be disproportionate to the situation. Usually, these behaviors indicate that the individual is not in a good mental state. They may have previously been capable of multitasking but now feel overwhelmed even by minor tasks. Recognizing such signs allows you to express your concern in a more subtle manner, like saying, "You don't seem like yourself lately. We've noticed that certain things appear to upset or overwhelm you." By addressing the issue in this way, you create an opportunity for them to talk

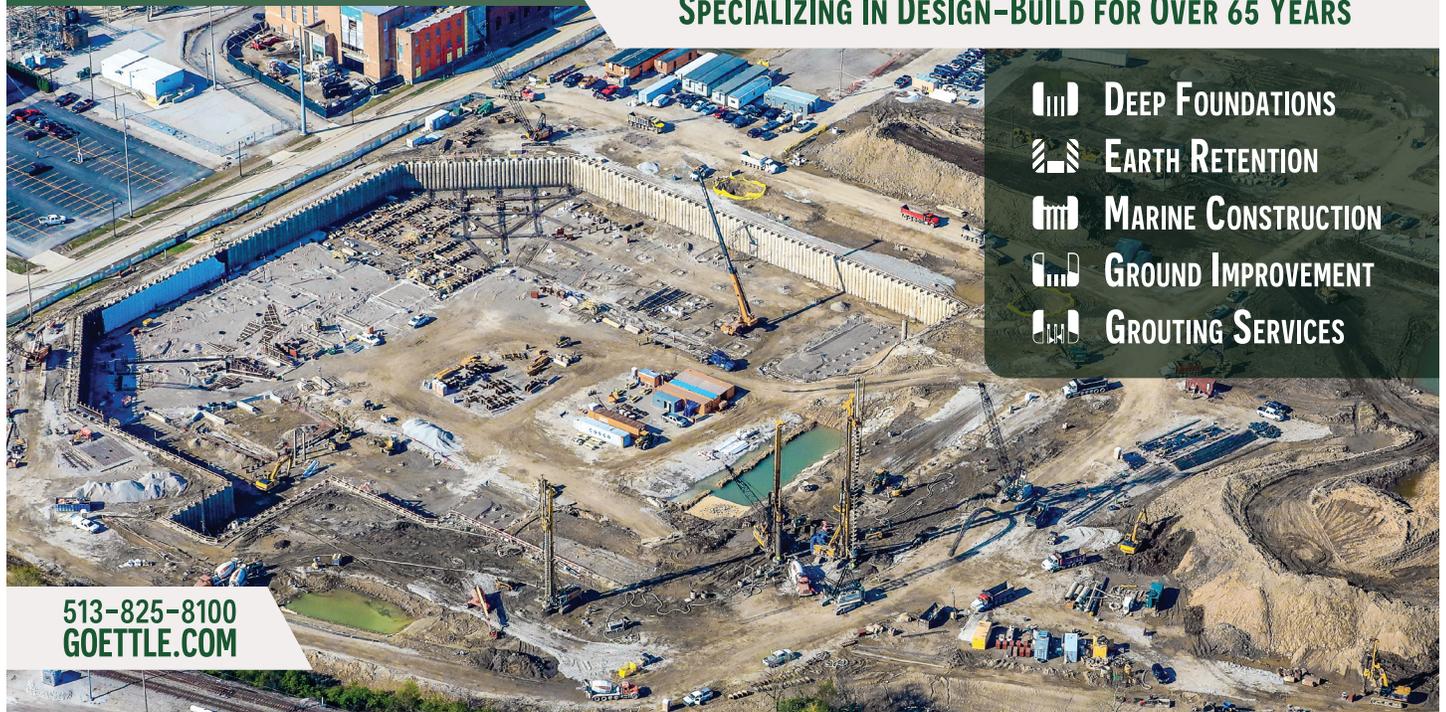
about what might be bothering them, without necessarily labeling it as depression or anxiety. Simply asking, "Are you okay?" can go a long way in showing your support and concern.

One of the more universal warning signs is changes in sleep patterns. Unlike other aspects of mental health, discussing sleep-related issues doesn't carry the same stigma, making it easier to address. Using this topic, you can open a doorway with your employee by expressing empathy, such as acknowledging that difficulty sleeping often accompanies tough times. You can ask if they can relate to this experience as well, and it's as simple as that. Depending on their response,



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you can gauge their particular situation because disruptions in sleep often indicate a more intense mental health situation. These factors usually go hand in hand, initiating a potential downward spiral.

Another significant warning sign to watch out for is substance abuse. Employees who are experiencing mental health complications often resort to using substances as a way to numb their pain and emotions. This goes beyond occasional relaxation after work and indicates a deeper issue. When substance abuse is combined with other factors like sleep deprivation, it becomes another opportunity to check in and offer support. The high rates of suicide within the construction worker community make it crucial to address warning signs promptly. In a study conducted, we asked workers about suicidal thoughts throughout their careers, and a shocking 40% of the sampled workforce admitted to having had such thoughts at some point. Although we didn't delve into the severity of these thoughts for this specific population, it underscores the importance of recognizing the potential risks. It might seem awkward, but asking the question and being wrong is far better than missing an opportunity to offer help and support.

In most cases, people appreciate and are grateful for your caring approach. However, if someone seems offended or upset, it is likely due to their fear of rejection or judgment. In handling such situations, maintaining compassion is key, and any initial awkwardness will

eventually subside. When you correctly identify someone in need, it presents an opportunity to show empathy and support. Offering compassion and connection becomes crucial in alleviating feelings of isolation. Above all, be the bridge that leads them to resources and helps pave the way for their recovery and getting back on their feet.

For individuals who are naturally stoic and resilient, expressing emotions may not come easily. Therefore, it becomes crucial to offer them training in conversational skills. Often, during this training, they come to the realization that mentioning the word "suicide" is more challenging than they initially perceived, while other aspects of the conversation are not as difficult as imagined. Once the training is completed, we've noticed that they quickly apply their learnings in real-world situations, and the results are positively impactful. People attest to successfully guiding others

to access resources, and they acknowledge the effectiveness of these techniques.

In conclusion, suicide prevention requires a collective effort from individuals, communities, and organizations. By educating ourselves and others, reducing stigma, promoting positive mental health, providing mental health care, and supporting those at risk, we can make a difference and save lives.

If you are interested in suicide prevention training or consulting, please contact Dr. Sally. to provide customized training and consulting services to individuals, organizations, and communities. Together, we can prevent suicide and promote mental health and well-being. ▀

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