

*It's time to clear the air about mental health. Let's start by talking about it.*

# The Struggle Inside

## How are you feeling?

When somebody asks you that question, your most likely response is probably "Fine." If you're in a particularly sharing mood, you might mention you're fighting off a bit of a cold, or have a stiff back, or that your head's still thumping from the weekend.

But you'd probably never answer "Lonely," or "Anxious," or "Depressed."

Tradespeople have an image of being a pretty tough bunch. Operating Engineers run really big machines all day—surely you've got a grip on your emotions.

But the very nature of our work can contribute to mental health issues. Some of us spend long stretches in camp, far from home with limited contact with loved ones. Shift work can mess with your sleep patterns, and might mean rarely seeing the sun, especially during the winter months. We've all seen how a turbulent economy can wreak havoc with your job security, creating financial pressures, which can be magnified around the holiday season.

For all these reasons, or for completely different ones, mental health issues can affect any of us, at any time. But there's still a stigma attached to them that can make them difficult to talk about.

**So let's start right now.**

## Breaking Down Barriers

When it comes to physical ailments, there's usually a pretty straight line from problem to treatment. If you have a headache, you take medicine. If you get hurt, you treat the injury. If you develop a chronic condition, you take steps to live with it.

Perhaps it's because mental health issues have been poorly understood for so long, but many people find themselves reluctant to seek help. Society pressures people—especially men—to keep their feelings to themselves. To "suck it up."

Why is it perfectly acceptable to seek help for physical problems, but when it comes to mental health, we're expected to go it alone?

We need to change the perception that mental illness equals weakness. To remove the stigma. To encourage one another to seek help for any ailment, physical or mental. Because really, there's no difference.

Not unlike the equipment you run on the job, a person is a biochemical machine, and the human brain is the most complex engine on the planet. Sometimes, things can misfire. There is no more shame in developing a mental illness than there is in developing an allergy.

When the machine you work on breaks down, you don't "suck it up," you call a mechanic. When the one you live in has trouble, it just makes sense to go to a professional. It's your best chance of getting it fixed.

## Your Union Is Here For You

Rainer Semler, Director of the Local 955 Health and Wellness Trust Fund, says that out of all the claims his department receives every year, about 10-15% relate to psychological conditions. Among the most common are struggles with substance abuse. This is not surprising. People dealing with mental health concerns often attempt to self-medicate with alcohol or drugs. But this “relief” is only temporary, does nothing to deal with any underlying issues, and can in fact lead to further mental and physical problems (not the least of which being death due to impaired driving).

Most of our Health and Wellness benefits packages include coverage for counselling services. And your prescription drug coverage does not distinguish between physical and psychiatric treatments.

Reaching out for help is not a sign of weakness. It might be one of the hardest things you ever have to do, and that shows tremendous strength and courage.

Help is readily available. Your first step might be talking to your Job Steward. They are trained to deal with sensitive issues with tact and with complete confidentiality.

If you're uncomfortable speaking to someone you work alongside every day, you can call your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) provided through your employer (most

companies offer this type of program to their employees). Also, if you are working under the CLR or Crane Rental Collective Agreements, the Construction Employee and Family Assistance Program (CEFAP) is available to you. These programs can assist members with a wide range of issues, including but not limited to addictions (alcohol, drugs, gambling, etc.), marital and family problems, financial or legal difficulties, work-related difficulties (including harassment and sexual harassment), and many other personal problems.

Part of our Union's strength is our solidarity. When we succeed, we do it together. No matter what you're feeling, chances are you're not the first. No matter what challenges you're facing, you don't have to do it alone. You have the support of 15,000 brothers and sisters who want you to be well.

How are you feeling now? 🧐

## Talk to someone.

Call your Employee and Family Assistance Program, your health-care professional, or in the case of an emergency go directly to the Emergency Unit of your local hospital.