

What is distress? Summary of a construction industry consultation breakfast



Key Messages

- On 1 June, 2021, MATES in Construction (Queensland) hosted an industry consultation breakfast and workshop, at which invited representatives of construction industry agencies came together to examine what distress means to people in the construction industry.
- The workshop was attended by 35 construction industry representatives, including employers, employees and individuals with lived experience of suicide (28 males) arranged into six groups.
- Several important elements of distress and distress responses were highlighted.
- A definition of distress suited to the construction industry was developed. In this definition, distress is *'an emotional state in which individuals feel that they are not in control, overwhelmed, or are unable to cope'*. This differs in important respects from standard definitions, particularly the absence of emotionally laden words like 'sadness' and 'worry', and its emphasis on lack of control.
- Several indicators of individual distress were identified. However, a strong cross-cutting theme to these was the importance of others recognising change in a distressed individual, i.e., 'knowing your mate' and 'knowing about your mate'. Knowing your mate was considered key to identifying changes in behaviour that might signal that a person was in distress.
- Participants identified a wealth of potential people and places to which a person may turn when distressed, including many 'atypical' outlets: places outside of the mainstream health or crisis care sector, and included service industries, such as hairdressing, but also finance and related industries, if the source of distress is financial.
- It was noted that individuals may not seek help or may not be able to find help when distressed. This could have both positive and negative elements, as it encompassed both self-care practices, such as spending time alone in nature, but also potentially harmful activities such as substance abuse.
- Trust and approachability were important elements in determining where a person go to seek help if distressed.
- As participants described it, the positive impacts of offering help to a person in distress appeared to have little to do with 'solving the problem' or providing practical specific suggestions or strategies. Rather, the benefits of 'offering help' were about solidarity, strengthening relationships, fostering connection, and building communication channels that could provide hope and safety to a person experiencing distress.
- Workshop findings suggest that key elements of interventions to reduce distress and suicide in the construction industry should be a combination of those that offer coping strategies and actions that support an individual to regain a sense of agency, while also fostering connection, trust and belonging within the construction industry community.
- These findings confirm the value of quantifying distress-related contacts with atypical construction industry agencies, and further examining how to optimize connections to help.
- The definition of distress that has been developed will inform a framework for developing search algorithms, including keyword searches, to identify distress-related contacts in construction industry agency databases.

Background and Purpose

MATES in Construction (MATES) developed as a response to landmark studies on the high rates of suicide in the construction industry. Yet, to date, there has been no study examining the incidence of suicide crises among this population. Examining the incidence of suicide crises can provide valuable information regarding the touch points between individuals in distress and atypical agencies (agencies whose core business is not to provide health or social care), and thus the extent of need for services, such as MATES, the current and potential cost-savings to the health systems and the wider economy of non-clinical interventions such as MATES, and how these services can best be positioned to provide care to those in need, when they need it.

In 2020, MATES (Queensland) and the Queensland Mental Health Commission commissioned a two-year data linkage project to examine distress-related contacts between individuals in the construction industry and construction industry agencies.

The concept of 'distress', though a commonly used and understood term, and a widely known risk factor for suicide, is often not well defined, or indeed, defined at all. Prior to embarking on the data linkage study, the project team identified the need to develop a definition of distress that was of relevance to the construction industry. MATES hosted an industry consultation breakfast, at which invited stakeholders, representing a broad range of construction industry agencies, came together to examine what distress means to people in the construction industry. This report outlines the approach used, and key findings arising.

Approach

The project received ethical clearance from The University of Queensland's Faculty of Medicine LNR committee (2021/HE001047).

The data linkage project team and MATES hosted a workshop that was attended by 35 construction industry representatives (28 males) arranged into six groups. Prior to commencing group discussion, individuals were invited to click on a QR code to provide an individual response to the question "what do you associate with distress?" Following from this, attendees worked in groups to brainstorm responses to the following four questions:

1. What is distress? Come up with a common definition of distress
2. In your place/association/organization, what is the indication that someone is distressed?
3. In your opinion, where do industry people turn up when they are distressed? List all options
4. How does help offered impact lives?

Responses to these questions were recorded on butcher's paper and transcribed into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Responses to the answer provided via QR code were analysed alongside group answers to question 1, to formulate a definition of distress suited to the construction industry. Responses to questions 2-4 were summarised.

Findings

What is distress?

A common theme identified to question one – “what is distress?” was a sense of **loss of control**, the **feeling of being overwhelmed**, and the **inability to cope**. Workshop attendees recognized that **distress is an emotional state, that may be transient and reversible**. There was a notable absence of emotionally loaded words like ‘sadness’ or ‘worry’ in the definitions that participants put forward. Rather, definitions were action-orientated and situational.

On the basis of responses, we developed a definition of distress for construction industry workers as:

an emotional state in which individuals feel that they are not in control, overwhelmed, or are unable to cope

What is an indication that someone is distressed?

Workshop participants identified a range of ways that they might identify that someone in their workplace, association or organization might be distressed, including that an individual:

- appears **withdrawn**, is **less communicative** or **reclusive**
- displays a notable **change in demeanour**, **out of character behaviour**, or **negativity in body language**
- appears **unsettled**, **short tempered**, **emotional**, **irrational**, **irritable**, **angry**, **displays heightened frustration** or is **argumentative**
- displays a **change in physical appearance**, for example in grooming or weight. They **‘let themselves go’** or show **other physical changes**
- appears **fatigued** or is suffering from **lack of sleep**
- has other **health issues**
- **is unable to perform tasks as usual**, for example, there is a noticeable drop in performance (presenteeism), a change in attitude or work ethic, and lack of focus. This could include “not turning up” (**absenteeism**) and is particularly significant if this differs from a person’s usual reliability. Alternatively, changes in work patterns could include someone exhibiting **work-alcoholic** tendencies or “erratic time keeping”
- shows **lack of interest** or **indifference**
- **increases alcohol use or any substance misuse** (“self-medication”)
- uses language that **expresses worthlessness**, **takes steps to reach out and talk about their situation**, or comments to the effect of “I’ve had enough” or “I’m over it”
- has experienced **“loss”**, **“compounding misery”** or appears **unable to “fix their problems”**

In addition to the above list, participants noted the importance of “knowing your fellow workmate”, including their homelife and work life, in order to identify if someone was in distress.

Some participants identified that age could impact on the way participants communicated distress, with some identifying that younger individuals might be more willing to disclose information about distress, or mental health problems than older individuals. Similarly, individuals identified that there could be gender differences in how distress was articulated, but also that gender inequality (towards women in particular) in the construction industry and on sites could be a source of distress.

Where do people in the construction industry turn up when they are distressed?

Participants identified a broad range of people and places to which construction industry workers might turn when distressed. While some noted that people might turn to **“those closest to them”**, others identified that individuals might instead turn to **“someone who cares”**, whether or not that person was known to them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, **MATES in Construction** was identified as a key source of support.

Participants also noted that **individuals might not always seek help from others**. This was described in both positive and negative terms. In a positive sense, participants highlighted that some may prioritise solitary forms of **individual self-care**, including activities such as “going bush”, fishing or hiking. In a negative sense, participants identified that individuals in the construction industry might turn to **“no-one”** when in distress, or turn to substance abuse, gambling or excessive exercise, as a means to cope.

Several potential sources of support in **an individual’s social-environment were identified:**

- **Friends, family and partners, but also pets**, were commonly identified as sources of support
- For those who were religious, **faith, church or religious leaders** were identified as potential supports
- **Community groups** were also a place that individuals might turn to, if distressed.
- Support at **pubs or clubs**, or the support of **publicans** was identified, as were the support of individuals in the service industry, such as **barbers**.
- **Other professions and professionals** that individuals in the construction industry might turn to included **Doctors and GPs**, but also **financial advisors**, and **redundancy or superannuation funds**.

Within the **professional environment, work colleagues, work ‘mates’, supervisors, and health and safety representatives** were all identified as potential sources of support. However, **trust and approachability were identified as key qualifiers**. For example, participants noted the importance of “colleagues who you trust”, “going to a supervisor who you trust” and/or turning to “approachable management”. **Unions and/or union delegates** were also identified as potential supports, as were **employee assistance programs**.

Finally, participants highlighted that individuals in crisis might contact **crisis care services**, including placing a **triple zero call to police or ambulance services**, or accessing helplines such as **beyondblue** or **LifeLine**.

How does help offered impact lives?

Participants highlighted a broad range of ways in which offering help could be impactful for individuals in distress. Participants recognised that offering help was an important **early intervention** and can be **“the difference between life and death”**. As listed below, offering help was described as serving to:

- provide **validation** for the person’s distress, **normalise their experiences and potentially de-escalate situations**.
- help an individual see that they are **not alone**, and that **other people care**. Being heard can **“lift the spirits and get things off their chest (venting)”**.
- **share the problem**. When someone notices your distress, it **‘shares the load’**.
- can **‘knock you into action’** and **‘start a process’**, it **‘creates options in the person’s mind’** and **helps them realise that help is available**.

- **help an individual see that their distress affects the collective. Offering help can help the community, and foster connection, belonging and mateship.**
- can **'break the legacy of hopelessness'** and **creates hope and 'brightness'** for the person in distress.
- can be a **relief** and **reinforce the relationship between the person offering help and the person in need.** This can help **build shared awareness** and **encourage receptiveness to having 'heavy discussions'**.
- Can help **bring clarity, perspective and insight** to the person in need.

Summary

Important elements of distress and distress responses were highlighted through this workshop.

1. The definition of distress we developed: *'an emotional state in which individuals feel that they are not in control, overwhelmed, or are unable to cope'* differed in important respects from standard definitions. Consistent with the emphasis in this definition on lack of control, it is possible that initiatives aimed at reducing distress among individuals in the construction industry may be achieved by offering appropriate coping strategies and actions that facilitate an individual to regain a sense of agency.
2. Several indicators of distress were identified. However, a strong cross-cutting theme that was identified was the importance of recognising change. 'Knowing your mate' was considered key to identifying changes in behaviour that might signal that a person was in distress.
3. While participants identified a wealth of potential people and places that a person may turn, it is notable that many "atypical" outlets were identified. These are places outside of the health or crisis care sector, and included service industries, such as hairdressing, but also finance and related industries. It was noted that individuals may not seek the help of others, or may not be able to find help. This could be positive (the individual pursues solitary self-care activities) or negative (the individual turns to substance use). Trust and approachability were important elements in determining where a person go to seek help if distressed.
4. As participants described it, the positive impacts of offering help appeared to have little to do with 'solving the problem' or providing practical specific suggestions. Rather, offering help appeared to be viewed as being about solidarity, strengthening relationships, fostering connection, and facilitating access to communication channels that could provide hope and safety to a person experiencing distress.
5. These findings confirm the value of quantifying distress-related contacts with atypical construction industry agencies, and further examining how to optimize connections to help.
6. The definition of distress that has been developed will inform a framework for developing search algorithms, including keyword searches, to identify distress-related contacts in construction industry agency databases.

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