

Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Construction Industry

A Case Study on Best Practice

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It's ok not to feel ok; and it's absolutely ok to ask for help.



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“What is the bravest thing you’ve ever said?” asked the boy. “Help,” said the horse.’

–Charley Mackesy, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse*

Introduction

It's ok not to feel ok; and it's absolutely ok to ask for help.

The above statement is the bedrock on which this paper is based. It is the foundation on which this Case Study is grounded.

We will come back to this statement repeatedly because if **it's ok not to feel ok and it's absolutely ok to ask for help**, then why are so many workers in the construction industry not asking for help when needed?

There is no doubt: The construction industry is facing a serious mental health and wellbeing crisis.

In some cases, when a person's mental health and wellbeing are at serious risk, suicide becomes a significant public health concern. Each year, suicide is estimated to cause around 703,000 deaths worldwide, accounting for approximately 1.3% of all global deaths in 2019 alone. Men are disproportionately affected by suicide, with the global male suicide rate at twice the female rate [1]. Elevated suicide rates have been reported in the male-dominated construction industry in countries such as the United States (US) [2], the United Kingdom (UK) [3], Australia [4] and Ireland [5]. Previous meta-analyses have indicated that construction workers have a 25–80% increased relative risk of suicide compared to the general working age population [6, 7].

These are bleak statistics.

The primary concern regarding this crisis in the construction industry is the associated cost to human life.

In 2021, construction workers, who make up only 7.4% of the workforce, accounted for 17.9% of all suicide deaths, with 97.8% of these being male [8]. The estimated number of construction worker suicides was around 4,800. With approximately 6,000 construction workers dying by suicide in 2022, this represents an increase of about 25% from the previous year [9]. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that construction occupations have the highest suicide rate and number of suicides among all US occupational groups, with more than

5,000 deaths annually—five times more than nonsuicidal jobsite fatalities [10, 11].

This is a crisis.

In addition to the profound human toll of suicide and mental ill health, there is also a considerable financial impact. The UK construction industry, for instance, incurs annual losses of £1.2 billion due to mental health-related issues [12].

Beyond monetary costs, businesses suffer as productivity gets affected, morale takes a hit, and workplaces get impacted by mental ill health. Families have to exist with both the torment of living without their loved one and, with some, losing a substantial source of their household income [13].

The conversation around mental health and wellbeing in the construction sector needs to be brought out of the shadows and propelled to the spotlight. Safeguards need to be applied to mental health and wellbeing with the same intensity as they are applied to physical health and safety.

Evidence-based preventative measures are needed, rather than hasty, reactive ones.

A 2020 report from the Construction Industry Federation (CIF) in Ireland called *Mental Health in the Construction Sector* revealed that 98% of surveyed companies acknowledged the importance of mental health to be on par with physical health and safety. Additionally, 94% of these companies agreed that it is critically important for the Irish construction industry to improve how it manages employee mental health and wellbeing. However, the report also highlighted the challenges involved in doing so, with 81% of employers reporting that addressing employee mental health and wellbeing is a sensitive and difficult topic [14].

The evidence is clear. The best way that we can begin to turn the tide is by significantly improving help-seeking and help-offering behaviours. We do this by creating a culture where **it's ok not to feel ok; and it's absolutely ok to ask for help**.



‘At **I Am Here**, we change beliefs and behaviours. We change cultures. People begin to believe that **it’s ok not to feel ok**. People begin to behave in a way where **it’s absolutely ok to ask for help**. When this change happens, something magical occurs.

‘At MSD Global Engineering Solutions (GES), 84% of the workers confirmed that they would ask for help and support when faced with a mental health and wellbeing challenge. In addition, 89% were confident to guide others to help and support. This is a massive improvement from the World Health Organization (WHO) data which states that only 30% of people would do so from a standard population’ [15].

-Jim Breen, Founder of **I Am Here**

Purpose of the Case Study

The purpose of this Case Study is to share data from one particular construction site that applied an evidence-based approach to address the mental health and wellbeing needs of its workers.

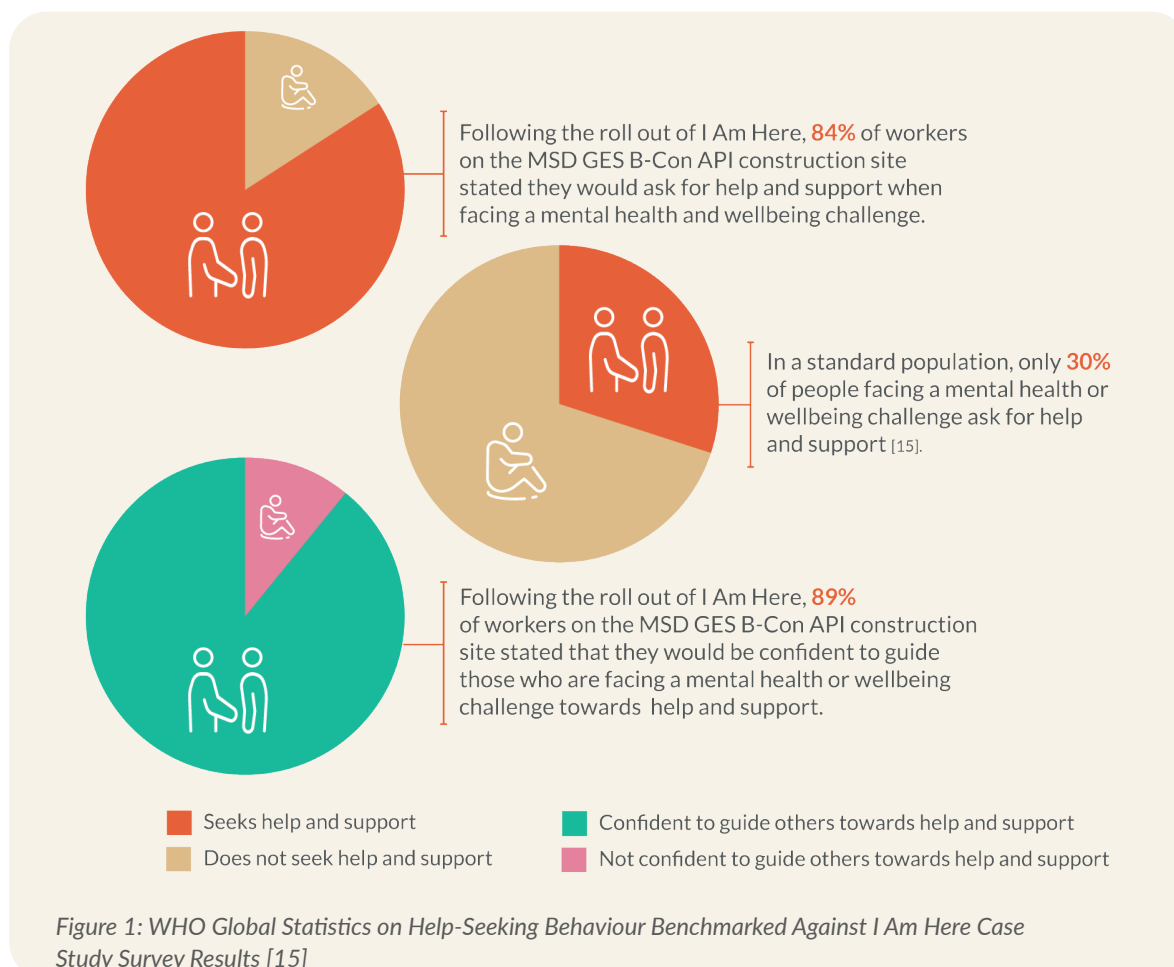
The Case Study will demonstrate the powerful and transformational impact of a positive preventative methodology combined with a sustainable support system. The focus will be on workers' increased willingness to seek help and support as and when needed.

I Am Here (www.iamheretribe.com) is the mental health and wellbeing division of **PulseLearning** (www.pulselearning.com). **PulseLearning** is an award-winning organisation with 25 years of experience in facilitating organisational, cultural and behavioural change.

I Am Here formulated the methodology and created the solution that lies at the core of this Case Study.

Presented here is a Case Study of a partnership between MSD GES and **I Am Here** concerning the Ballydine-Containment (B-Con) API project. The B-Con API project was a two-year, planned construction project to expand the MSD GES Ballydine site in Tipperary, Ireland.

The Case Study will demonstrate how the core belief system in the message **it's ok not to feel ok; and it's absolutely ok to ask for help** was fostered and cultivated throughout the workforce. This, in turn, generated night-and-day transformational results as evidenced by the B-Con API internal partnership survey (Figure 1).



The Partners



MSD Ballydine
DELIVERING THE PIPELINE

MSD GES

with

I Am Here

on

**B-Con API
Expansion Project**

MSD GES

MSD develops and supplies the active ingredients and final formulated product for a range of innovative medicines. MSD's first site in Ireland, the Ballydine site, operates as a European hub for quality, manufacturing and engineering. It exports to more than 25 countries around the world.

In 2022, MSD embarked on the B-Con API project, a planned two-year construction project to expand the MSD Ballydine site

in Tipperary, Ireland. For this project, MSD collaborated with **I Am Here** as it's mental health and wellbeing partner.

This collaboration was tasked with actively safeguarding the mental health and wellbeing of each and every one of MSD's workers, contractors and subcontractors for the duration of the project.

I Am Here

I Am Here (www.iamheretribes.com) is at the forefront in formulating and developing comprehensive and holistic approaches to improving mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.

I Am Here offers expertise in designing and delivering effective solutions to provide individuals and organisations with the tools, resources and strategies to enhance mental

health and wellbeing in the workplace and wider community.

The approach is all-inclusive and all-encompassing. Everyone is invited to be an **I Am Here** Ambassador for better mental health and wellbeing.

As of August 2024, **I Am Here** has expanded its reach to more than 850,000 people across 94 countries and 6 continents.

Purpose of the Partnership

The key message underlining the collaboration is that **it's ok not to feel ok; and it's absolutely ok to ask for help.**

The goal of achieving better mental health and wellbeing in the workplace is complex and difficult to define.

Given the ambiguity and uncertainty related to mental health and wellbeing, MSD GES and **I Am Here** set one simple goal, which was to increase the level of help-seeking and help-offering behaviours. Could we give people the courage, confidence and skills to ask for help and support when needed and to encourage others to do likewise?

I Am Here's certified courseware, delivered on-site and online enabled workers build the courage, confidence and skills to behave in a way that supports the idea that **it's ok not to**

feel ok; and it's absolutely ok to ask for help.

I Am Here's professional activation drove adoption and engagement. Instilling a commitment among the workers to make the message a living reality and a best practice behaviour.

I Am Here's measurement and evaluation methodology, formed through 25 years of working with leading Global 500 organisations (Figure 2), demonstrated the impact of the activation. Following the roll out of **I Am Here**, 84% of respondents stated that they would be confident to ask for help and support when needed. Additionally, 89% of the respondents stated that they would be confident to guide others towards help and support. This is a stark contrast to only 30% of the general population, who would do the same (Figure 1) [15].

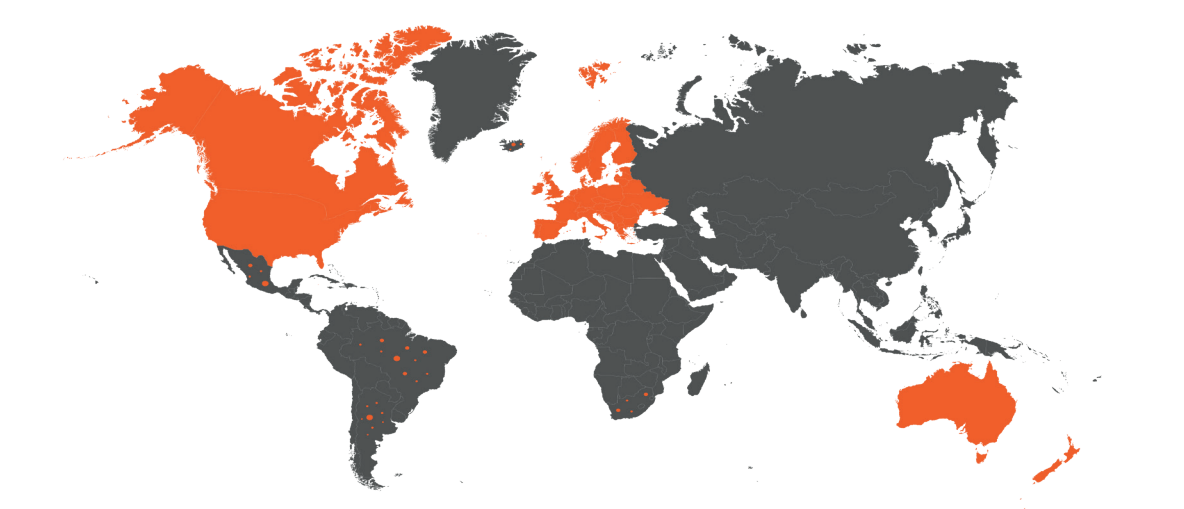


Figure 2: Locations of organisations that partner with I Am Here.

'When you work in construction, you have lots of pressure and much to do. As a result, we sometimes forget about ourselves and our own mental health and wellbeing. I learned from my involvement in **I Am Here** that it's ok to seek help and support. I also gained the courage, confidence and skills to safely signpost others to help and support when needed. Both were lessons I used at work and outside of it'.

–Thays Brito, Safety, Health, Environment and Quality (SHEQ) Lead at Ardmac and certified **I Am Here** Tribe Member

Participant Profile

The partnership between MSD GES and **I Am Here** commenced in January 2022 and finished in December 2023. Central to the partnership was the pledge that every worker of every contractor and subcontractor on-site had access to the support services of **I Am Here** for their mental health and wellbeing.

The age profile of the workers was generally between 18 and 54, with more than 95% being male.

During the 2 years of the partnership, on any given day, approximately 200 workers were on-site. A total of 380 workers became certified **I Am Here** Tribe Members and 58 became certified **I Am Here** Ambassadors. A stated goal for the partnership was to achieve adoption rates of at least 20% for Tribe Members and 5% for Ambassadors. In fact, adoption rates of 69% for Tribe Members and 11% for Ambassadors were achieved.

for Ambassadors were achieved. These high adoption rates were a clear sign of the overall trust built within the partnership and across the entire workforce.

The survey was conducted during the second year of the partnership. The purpose of the survey was to determine the willingness of workers to seek or offer help and support when needed. The WHO states that only 30% of people will seek help and support when needed [15]. Working from this baseline, we wanted to see, as a result of the **I Am Here** initiative, how many workers would be confident in seeking or offering help and support.

The study results demonstrate that **I Am Here's** solution was harnessed effectively to support the mental health and wellbeing of workers engaged in the B-Con API project.

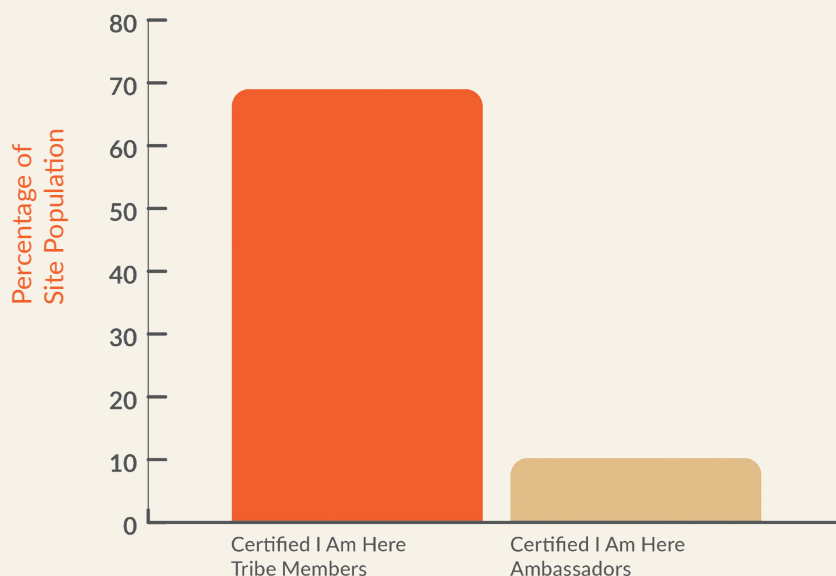


Figure 3: Rate of Adoption for Certified I Am Here Tribe Members and I Am Here Ambassadors.

'It's all a part of health and safety now. It's not just about physical health and safety, it's your mental health. They are connected'.

—Michael Browne, Former Project Manager, Radley Engineering and certified **I Am Here** Ambassador

Roles and Responsibilities

With **I Am Here**, everybody, regardless of hierarchy or job title, can champion best practice mental health and wellbeing support for others.

I Am Here supports and aids people in their journey to be proactive in managing their own mental health and wellbeing.

Everyone has the opportunity to become a certified **I Am Here** Tribe Member or a certified **I Am Here** Ambassador.

Tribe Members: Tribe Members focus on building the courage, confidence and skills to display care, compassion and empathy when supporting colleagues.

Core to being a Tribe Member is a dedication to the ethos of Show you care and building trust.

Ambassadors: Ambassadors receive additional support to Ask the question and if needed, Call for help. Ambassadors signpost their fellow workers to help and support.



'I Am Here has been invaluable to so many people here on-site. It has also helped our team in their relationships at home with partners, children, extended family and friends. We will never truly know how far reaching and how much of an impact **I Am Here** had. We do know that even for those who had never had a conversation around mental health, with the benefit of **I Am Here**, they felt comfortable to Show you care, Ask the question, and Call for help.'

–Laura Kay, Site Support Specialist at Jacobs and certified **I Am Here** Ambassador

The Approach

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: I Am Here delivered a comprehensive approach that addressed the six pillars of mental health and wellbeing. These six pillars are Emotional Wellbeing, Physical Health, Spiritual Wellbeing, Social Wellbeing, Financial Wellbeing and Work and Career.

The approach is not based on hierarchy, job title or job status. This served the B-Con API site well, where all workers, including site workers, craft workers and office workers, were reached, accommodated and supported equally.

Cultural Transformation: I Am Here placed a strong emphasis on fostering best practices related to help-seeking and help-offering behaviours. **I Am Here** focused on changing beliefs and behaviours. This in turn drove cultural and organisational change and empowered workers to seek and offer help and support when needed.

A Holistic Approach: The approach of **I Am Here** provided bespoke solutions that aligned with the workers' mental health and wellbeing needs. This approach was the same for all contractors and subcontractors on-site. **I Am Here** tailored each mental health and wellbeing solution to the wellness journey of each of the different roles and organisations on-site. In all its applications, **I Am Here** focuses on maintenance, prevention, early intervention, intervention and postvention supports.

High Adoption and Engagement: The approach of **I Am Here** delivered a very high adoption and engagement rate among both contractors and subcontractors. Engagement rates of more than 80% were achieved.

Return on Investment (ROI): While investing in and improving the mental health and wellbeing of workers was the primary goal of the initiative, it is worth noting that the investment also yielded a significant positive financial return.

By conservative estimates, organisations can achieve an ROI of 5:1 by implementing a holistic, evidence-based approach like **I Am Here** that benefits the entire workforce.

Proven Results: The survey on which this Case Study is based displays clearly how targeted investments in the mental health and wellbeing of a workforce can yield significant positive changes in beliefs, behaviours and workplace culture.

I Am Here has a proven track record of tangible improvements in employee mental health and wellbeing, including reductions in absenteeism, presenteeism and staff turnover, along with increased productivity. **I Am Here** clients have reported a 300% increase in employee assistance programme (EAP) utilisation, as seen with the Woolworths Group in Australia.

'With **I Am Here**, I feel that I can talk to anyone now, not just on the construction site. I have friends going through tough times and it's just good to know the steps to take and how to approach things'.

—Andrew McCarthy, Project Manager at B-Con API and certified **I Am Here** Tribe Member

Challenges

The partnership encountered numerous challenges, many of which were met and successfully overcome.

One challenge on-site was the lack of available technology. For example, phones and communication devices cannot be held on a worker's person while on-site. To address this challenge all communication, training and information shared while on-site was delivered on a face-to-face basis and through effective physical signage.

Another challenge was presented by the workers' irregular shift patterns and necessary overtime. This sometimes resulted in up to 70 hours being worked by individuals over a seven-day period. The workers faced significant stress due to this heavy workload assignment.

The workers experienced further stress due to holding positions involving a high risk of physical injury.

The demographic of workers, mostly men aged

18 to 54 years old, was another consideration in the project. A macho culture associated with a reluctance to talk about feelings, stress and anxieties often exists within this demographic. This can be a setting where masculinity must be proven everyday, discouraging openness and honesty about vulnerability, fears or personal pressures.

Furthermore, English was either a second language or not spoken at all for a significant portion of the cohort. Interpreters and content localisation was required to ensure that all workers had equal access to the available information and learning.

There was an initial and understandable scepticism among some workers, including senior site personnel. Trust needed to be established before everyone was willing to fully engage with the partnership.

As the partnership progressed, its authenticity was recognised, and any initial doubts were set aside. This is evident from the levels of adoption and the resulting increase in help-

'Mental health in Ireland, and especially within the construction industry, is not something that's addressed or actually understood as well as it could be including with ourselves. At MSD, we're not the experts in this field, but we identified that we need to support everyone working in our facilities, everyone working on our projects and actually just support one another. We chose **I Am Here** as our expert partner to achieve this goal'.

–Steve McCarthy, EHS Manager at MSD and certified **I Am Here** Ambassador

The Four Cornerstones of I Am Here



Continuous Experiential Learning

Continuous experiential learning is significantly more effective in generating lasting behavioural change when compared to one-off or ad-hoc training sessions.



Measurement and Evaluation

Measurement and evaluation is used to monitor progress. It informs decision-making around proactive measures designed to increase help-seeking and help-offering behaviours.



Professional Activation Measurement

A dedicated **I Am Here** Client Success Manager is responsible for ensuring the ongoing adoption and engagement of **I Am Here** within the entire workforce. The Client Success Manager works in collaboration with the on-site senior leadership team and steering committee.



Expert Help and Support

Once help-seeking and help-offering behaviours have been established, the next crucial step is to ensure high-quality and frictionless access to the help and support that is needed.

‘Thanks to **I Am Here**, I have gone from being ashamed of my mental health and wellbeing battles to openly discussing them. Bottling things up just doesn’t work. Recognising the availability of help and support, through the likes of **I Am Here**, can prevent us from going further into that darkness’.

–Clive Doody, EHS Advisor at Radley Engineering and **I Am Here** Ambassador

Survey Results

Results are critical to any initiative and innovation. The internal survey that was conducted during the partnership yielded results that demonstrated a definite and transformational shift in attitude and behavioural patterns.

The survey comprised of three main questions:

1. How confident are you asking for help and support for your mental health and wellbeing when needed?

Number of Respondents

Very Confident	40
Confident	102
Not Confident	29

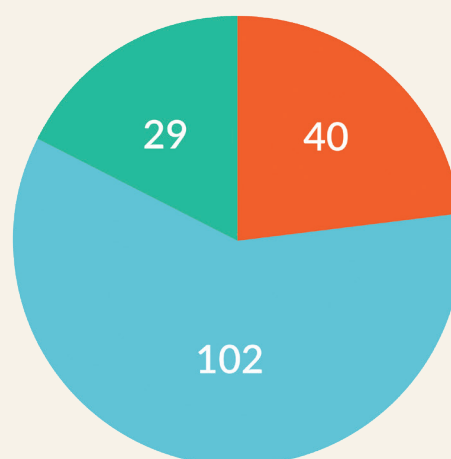


Figure 4: Survey Question 1 and Results.

2. How confident are you to guide others to help and support when you believe they are not feeling ok?

Number of Respondents

Very Confident	37
Confident	115
Not Confident	19

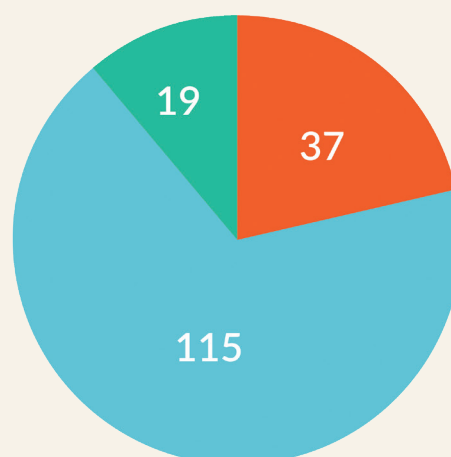


Figure 5: Survey Question 2 and Results.

3. Which pillars of mental health and wellbeing would you like to see more support with on the project?

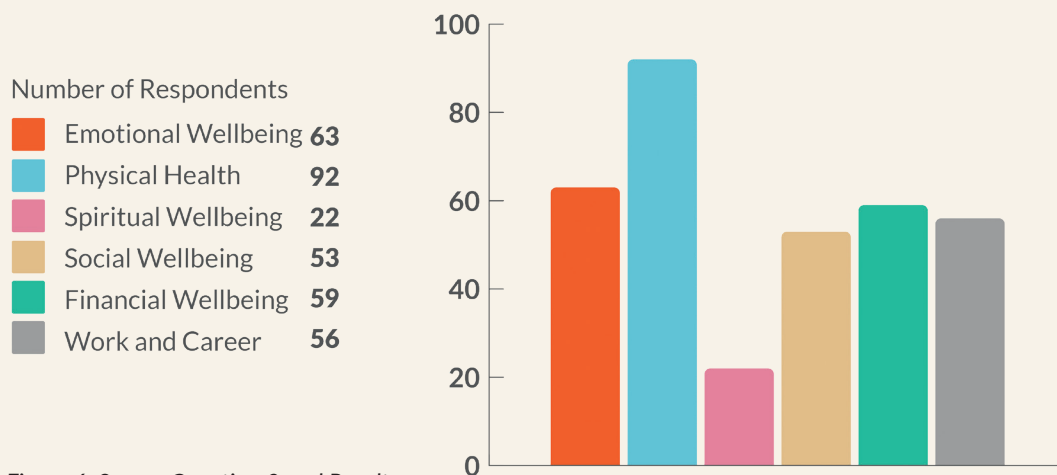


Figure 6: Survey Question 3 and Results.

‘As the medic on B-Con API, I have seen an increase in the number of people who come to me with questions about early intervention and prevention. It’s night-and-day from other sites I have worked on and a direct result of the partnership with **I Am Here**.

‘I took the **I Am Here: Ambassadors** course myself, and it changed the way I respond to people who are struggling with mental health issues. Just last week, a friend confided in me about feeling suicidal. Thanks to what I learned, I was able to remain calm and supportive, giving my friend the time and space to open up and be heard. The experience was very powerful, and I know that my friend appreciated having someone to talk to in that moment’.

‘I highly recommend the Ambassadors course to anyone who wants to make a difference in their workplace and community. It has given me the confidence and tools I need to be there for people in need, and I know it can do the same for you’.

–Brian O’Sullivan, Site Medic at B-Con API and **I Am Here** Ambassador

Summary

Following the roll out of I Am Here, 84% of respondents stated that they would be confident to ask for help and support when needed. In addition, 89% of the respondents stated that they would be confident to guide others towards help and support. This contrasts with only 30% of a standard population who would do so according to the World Health Organization.

There is a mental health crisis in the construction industry. There are too many workers not feeling ok and not seeking help and support when needed.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), men working in construction have one of the highest suicide rates compared to other industries, with 49.4 out of every 100,000 workers in the construction industry dying by suicide each year [16].

These are difficult statistics to absorb but absorb them we must; and address them we can.

Several factors can suppress the important call for help by construction workers. These factors include the nature of the work, the harsh weather conditions, the lack of job security, a macho culture, and the embedded stigma that persists around mental health and wellbeing in this sector.

It's ok not to feel ok; and it's absolutely ok to ask for help is not just a statement, it is a living practice that must be instilled and enacted in order to stop people leaving us through suicide.

The collaboration between MSD GES and **I Am Here** proved to be an important success.

The primary objective of the collaboration was to drive change in beliefs and behaviours around seeking and offering help. The results showcase a transformational shift in both domains.

This Case Study demonstrates the impact

an evidence-based, preventative approach to mental health and wellbeing can have. Empowering individuals with specific roles can yield extraordinary dividends to a company's workforce, culture and environment.

I Am Here has conclusively shown that, with the right blend of courage, confidence and skills, remarkable advances are possible. This is true, even in a sector that traditionally struggles with issues surrounding mental health and wellbeing.

We are all responsible, from the individual worker to company leadership. The signs are so clear that they might as well be the neon signs we often see above large construction projects. The culture of the construction industry must change if lives are to be saved and lived. Change in beliefs and behaviours must be encouraged for every worker, from the boardroom to the workers' yard.

Reactive measures often come too late, while preventative actions allow us to take control. By providing sustained support to workers, we empower and equip people to seek and guide others to help when it's needed—and it is needed. Preventative initiatives, such as those highlighted in this Case Study, show how we can work together to reduce the incidence of suicides and other mental health and wellbeing challenges in the construction industry and beyond.

The numbers speak, and the silent call for help is deafening. Let us share again:

It's ok not to feel ok; and it's absolutely ok to ask for help.

'With I Am Here, we are now able to help and support each other'.

—Michelle Cleary, Sr. Spclst, Engineering at MSD and certified **I Am Here** Tribe Member



Acknowledgements

We are grateful for all the support we received during this partnership. While **I Am Here** is not designed to add extra capacity to people's workloads, some people went above and beyond the call of duty. Their contribution should not be understated, and we would like to recognise them below:

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List of contractors and subcontractors on the B-Con API project:

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Murphy Facility Solutions

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Radley Engineering

Rockwell

Suir Engineering

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'One of the greatest gifts that you can receive from someone is for them to show you how they feel when they are not feeling ok'

–Jim Breen, Founder of **I Am Here**



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