

20 January 2023



CREATE CHANGE

Understanding and enhancing responses to distress in the construction industry: Preliminary findings from a nation-wide mixed methods study

A MATES in Construction and Queensland Mental Health Commission funded project.

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Acknowledgements

The University of Queensland (UQ) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which we meet. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country. We recognise their valuable contributions to Australian and global society.

We thank all individuals and agencies who contributed to and facilitated this research project, and we acknowledge those with lived and living experience of mental health, alcohol and other drug problems, and suicide, their families and carers.

Purpose

This report summarises preliminary findings from a nation-wide consultation with the aim to validate a definition of distress, and to further explore what distress and help-seeking means to the individuals working within the construction industry. The findings contained in this report will be further analysed and interpreted in the development of a manuscript and submitted to an international peer reviewed journal.

Key messages

- Findings presented in this report are based on a nation-wide mixed methods study with the aim to identify what distress means to individuals working within the construction industry and to validate a definition of distress.
- The definition '*An emotional state in which individuals feel that they are not in control, overwhelmed, or are unable to cope*' appears to have been confirmed as most accurately capturing what distress means to individuals working in the construction industry.
- Interviewees associated distress with changes in the way one thinks or can rationalise, feelings of anxiety and sadness, changes in behaviours, work related challenges and work culture.
- Interviewees identified a change in behaviour or demeanour as the main indicator that someone is distressed. This may result in changes in work performance, absenteeism, personality changes, aggression, and challenges with relationships outside the workplace.
- Interviewees identified several options to seek help when they are distressed, including MATES in Construction, helplines, sport clubs, health professional, work colleagues or supervisor, and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). However, it was also suggested that many individuals may not share that they are in distress and therefore may not seek or identify 'help' due to their distress, may self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs, or may not trust service provided through their workplace.
- Interviewees suggested that the proactive offering of help in a trusting environment may be important as individuals might not seek help themselves or maybe unable to 'see' help due to their distress. MATES in Construction was mentioned as an organisation that can help to create a trusting environment.
- It was recognised that there is no one-size-fits- all solution to support help-seeking and that some individuals might hide their distress and that it requires someone else to pick up on the signs.
- Interviewees identified that a shift in workplace culture within the construction industry is required to positively influence help-seeking behaviour to reduce distress. Specifically, a non-judgmental and supportive environment that respects individuals' privacy was identified as highly important. The promotion of (independent) services such as MATES or Lifeline by employers and providing adequate professional training so that employees can meet workplace demands, was identified as a necessity.

Background

About 9% of the Australian workforce is employed within the construction industry, making it the third largest workforce within Australia.^[1,2] Work within the construction industry is often characterised by variability in the security and frequency of work opportunities, long working hours and the requirement to work in remote locations, as well as variations in working conditions across different trades and contractors.

Workers in the construction industry have been identified as a group of heightened risk of suicide. Between 2001 and 2019, suicide deaths within the construction industry accounted for about a quarter of all deaths by intentional self-harm within Australia.^[3] However, the gap in suicides between males working within the construction industry and those who are employed outside the industry appears to have narrowed over the past 20 years, indicating that prevention strategies within the sector may have had a positive effect.^[3]

Within the context of suicide and suicide prevention, the term ‘distress’ is commonly used. For instance, in June 2021 the WHO released the ‘Live life’ guide that “enables countries to protect the lives of people who find themselves in severe distress and are at risk of suicide”,^[4] and the National Suicide Prevention Adviser 2020 references distress in the context of suicidal distress (factors influencing a person’s suicidal distress can be social, personal, financial or arise from other stressors in their lives early distress interventions social and economic drivers of distress supporting people earlier in distress reducing distress responding earlier to distress).^[5,6]

While the word ‘distress’ is commonly used, a variety of meanings are attached to it. For example, the Oxford English dictionary defines distress as “senses relating to the exertion of pressure or strain”,^[7] the Cambridge dictionary lists distress as “a feeling of extreme worry, sadness, or pain”,^[8] the Merriam-Webster dictionary describes distress as “pain or suffering affecting the body, a bodily part, or the mind”,^[9] and Kessler and colleagues have described psychological distress as “feeling so sad that nothing can cheer you up”.^[10] In the context of its use in fields relating to mental health interventions, some have argued that concepts like distress have become ‘broader, loose, and more benign’, creating a roadblock to the identification and treatment of mental health challenges.^[11]

Understanding the meaning of concepts like distress is important to facilitating the development of more comprehensive understanding of the concept and the development of tailored solutions.

What does distress mean to those working within the construction industry?

To specifically examine what distress means to those working in the construction industry, a workshop was hosted by MATES in construction QLD in June 2021. The findings from the workshop led to a provisional definition of distress, specific to those working within the construction industry. A common theme identified 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’ (core components of standard definitions). On the basis of responses, we suggest that distress for construction industry workers can be most adequately described as:

‘An emotional state in which individuals feel that they are not in control, overwhelmed, or are unable to cope’.

This definition and further findings from the 2021 QLD workshop are summarised in a report.^[12] The present report summarises and extends these findings. To this end, we conducted phone interviews and an online survey, with construction industry representatives in Australia in 2022, with the aim to validate the above definition of distress, and to further explore what distress and help-seeking means to those working within the construction industry.

Qualitative Interviews

To capture voices outside of Queensland, and test the generalisability of the above definition, we conducted phone interviews with construction industry workers from New South Wales, South Australia, and Western Australia. Through the networks of MATES in Construction Queensland, a total of 53 individuals were identified as potential participants.

The phone interview consisted of seven questions that were designed to be consistent with, while building on, those posed at the face-to-face workshop that was held in QLD in June 2021. The seven interview questions were:

1. ‘What does distress mean to you? Can you define it?’
2. ‘Off the top of your head, what concepts, or things, do you associate with distress, or being distressed?’
3. ‘In your place/association/organisation, what are the indicators that someone is in distress?’
4. ‘In your opinion, where do industry people turn up when they are distressed?’
5. ‘In light of our discussion about distress, what might help look like to someone in distress?’
6. ‘How might someone signal that they need help for distress?’
7. ‘What factors might positively influence someone to seek help for their distress?’.

Out of the total 53 individuals who were identified as potential participants, 21 individuals were available to participate in the phone interviews. All phone interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. This project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of The University of Queensland (2021/HE001047) and all participants provided verbal informed consent to participate in this research.

The following section summarises the answers given by the interviewees to each question, presented in clusters of topic or themes that were mentioned by the interviewees.

What does distress mean to you? Can you define it?

Heightened/elevated level of anxiety, constant state of alarm, escalation of stress.

Distress can be a physical as well as an emotional reaction.

Being out of control, things are happening beyond your control.

Discomfort, being out of your comfort zone.

Distress can be caused by workload/demands or personal circumstances.

Not feeling quite right, altered usual state of mind, change in behaviour.

Feeling of being under pressure, inability to cope or perform, unable to rationalise, being overwhelmed with emotion.

Interviewees identified that distress can be a physical as well as an emotional reaction which may be caused by personal as well as professional demands, is associated with anxiety and discomfort, a loss of control, an altered state of mind and change in behaviour, and can lead to feelings of overwhelm and pressure and an inability to cope, perform, or rationalise.

Off the top of your head, what concepts, or things, do you associate with distress, or being distressed?

Not being able to think clearly, not being able to work through and rationalise what is happening.

Being frightened/scared, heightened anxiety, sadness, depression.

Dog-eat-dog type culture.

Job security, job satisfaction, instability in work, long work hours, exposure to elements, complex changing work environment.

Differences in behaviour, quieter than normal, change in work performance, change in actions.

Interviewees associated distress with changes in the way one thinks or can rationalise, feelings of anxiety and sadness, changes in behaviours, work related challenges in work and work culture.

In your place/association/organisation, what are the indicators that someone is in distress?

Behaviour changes, change from the norm, not being themselves, behaving differently, being out of character, change in demeanour, changes in their character.

**Drop in work performance, making mistakes.
Absenteeism.**

Conversations become more terse, aggressive natur, tempus, raised voice, agitation, dramatic mood swings, a heightened way of talking.

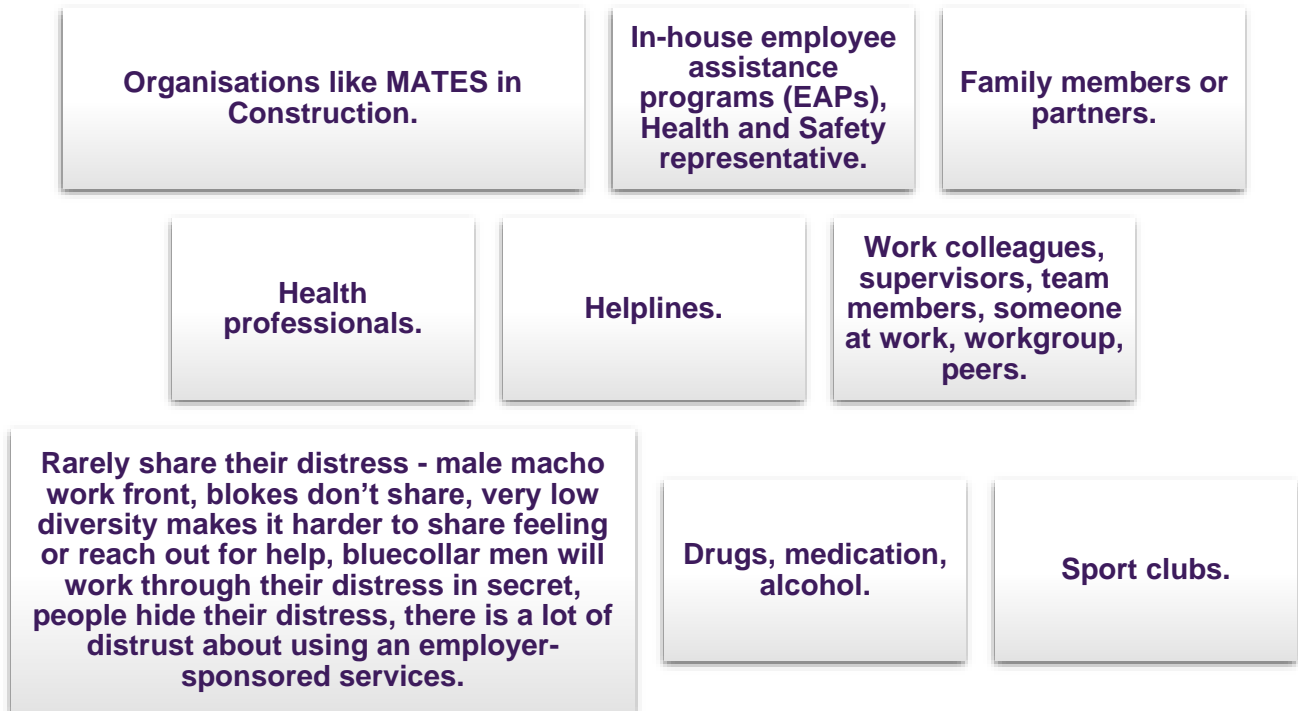
Being withdrawn, not as talkative, go quiet, flustered, body language, being distant.

Relationship breakdown, divorce.

Covering up, hiding, distress will be concealed.

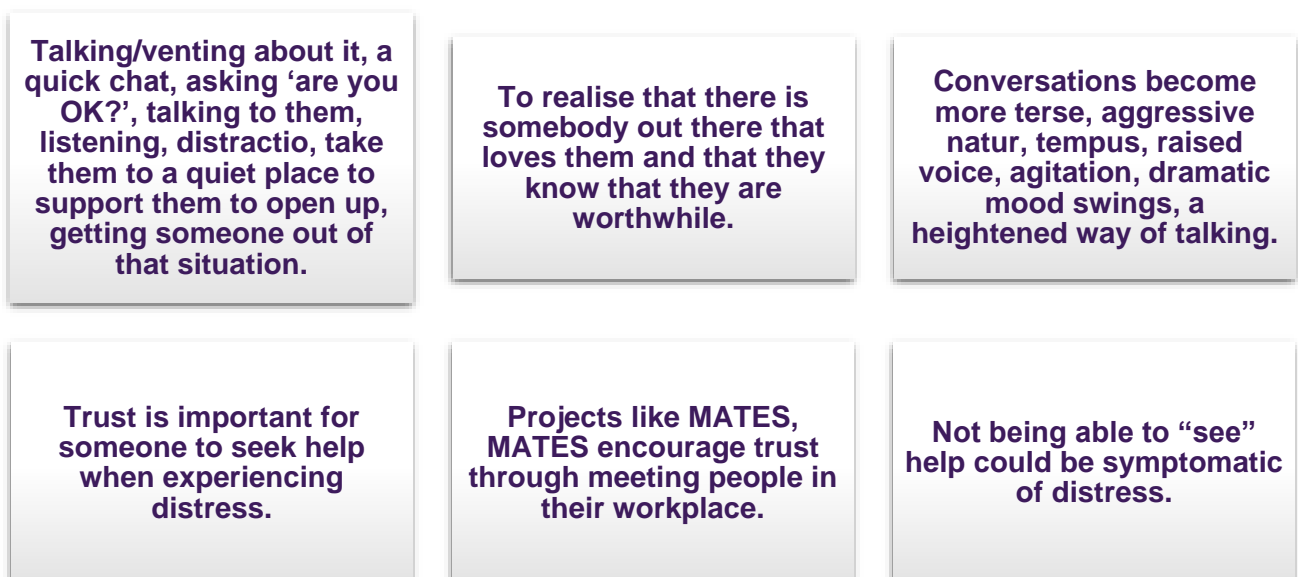
Interviewees identified a change in behaviour or demeanour as the main indicator that someone is distressed and may result in changes in work performance, absenteeism, personality changes, aggression, and challenges with relationships outside the workplace.

In your opinion, where do industry people turn up when they are distressed?



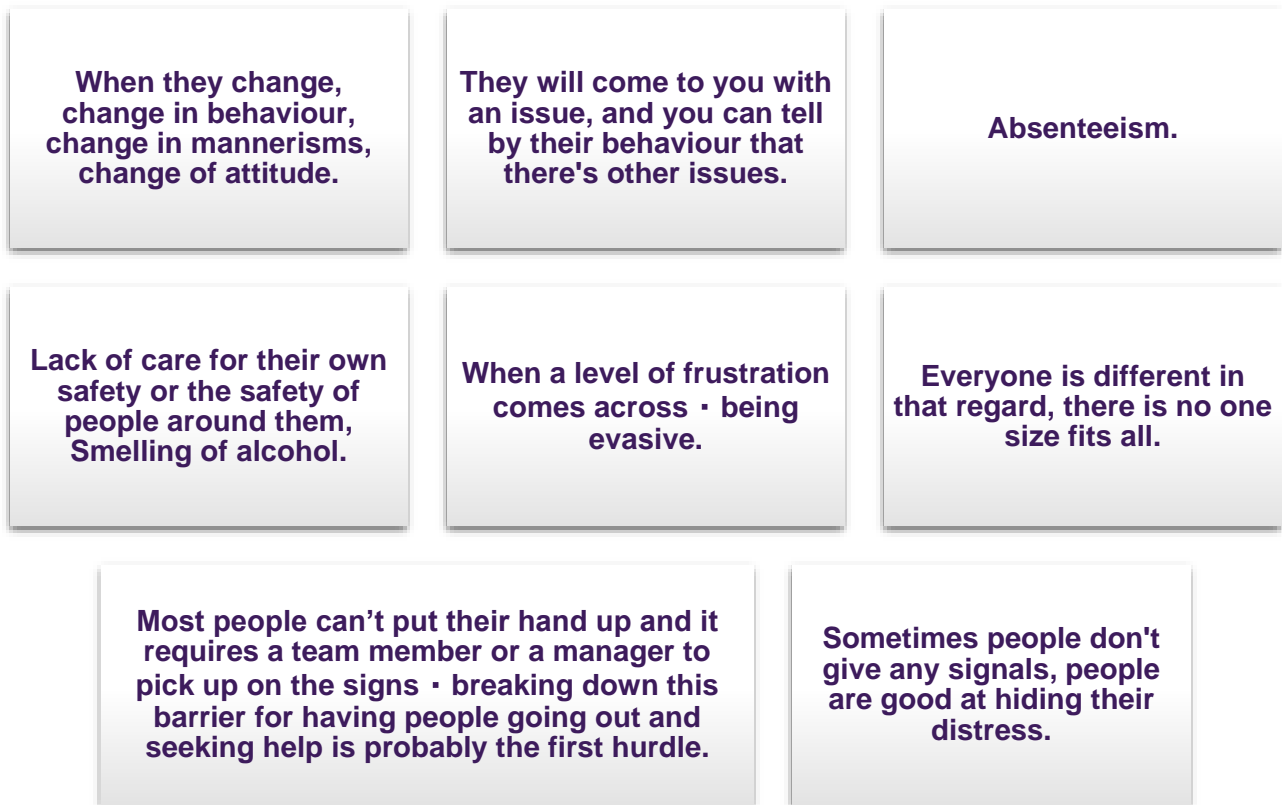
Interviewees identified several options to seek help when they are distressed, including MATES in Construction, helplines, sport clubs, health professional, work colleagues or supervisor, and EAPs. However, it was also suggested that many individuals may not share that they are in distress, may self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs, and may not trust service provided through their workplace.

What might help look like to someone in distress?



Interviewees suggested that the proactive offering of help in a trusting environment may be important as individuals might not be able to or want to seek help themselves. MATES in Construction was mentioned as an organisation that can help to create a trusting workplace environment.

How might someone signal that they need help for distress?



Interviewees identified changes in behaviour as a signal that someone maybe in distress. They identified that this may manifest in noticeable lack of care or attention to themselves and others, an increase in frustration, absenteeism, or reaching out for help for another issue. It was recognised that there is no one-size-fits- all solution to promote help-seeking behaviours, and that some individuals might hide their distress, requiring someone else to pick up on the signs and reach-out.

What factors might positively influence someone to seek help for their distress?

Bring groups of people together, social events getting people together for a morning or afternoon tea, sending people around to have those conversations and walk around the office with a cup of tea and have a chat to somebody, employers need to engage in the mental health space and actively create safe spaces.

Privacy, anonymity, stop that gossip, discretion, respect privacy, needs to be confidential, person has to be confident that their problems do not get broadcasted

Connect to services early, knowing where to go, make it freely & easily available and accessible, consistency from your workplace is really important, have offers in place within company, work advertising organizations like MATES in construction and Lifeline.

A question of awareness but also resourcing, people need to be adequately trained, independent services.

Removing stigma, being open and honest with each other, awareness often starts with someone having a personal experience, promote awareness.

A workplace culture and people with skills that can identify that someone is in distress and have the courage or the ability to open that conversation, level of trust, employers changing structural and cultural conditions at work, people should not be pigeonholed or seen as weak because they are seeking help, it requires quite some strength, change in the culture of the workforce (toxic environment for mental health), the construction industry is not a safe environment to open up.

Interviewees identified that a shift in the workplace culture within the construction industry is required to positively influence help-seeking behaviour. Specifically, a non-judgmental and supportive environment that respects individuals' privacy was identified as highly important, and trust was an especially pervasive theme throughout interviews. The promotion of (independent) services such as MATES or Lifeline by employers and providing adequate workplace training was identified as a necessity to promoting an enabling environment.

Online Survey

Following the phone interview, interviewees were invited to complete a short Qualtrics online survey to obtain a ranking of different definitions of distress. Out of the 21 individuals who participated in the phone interview, 16 individuals completed the online survey. The primary purpose of the survey was to further examine the validity of the provision definition of distress that had been developed, based on consultations within Queensland, in 2021.

Survey participants were ranked five definitions of distress, of which one was the aforementioned definition, developed through consultation with construction industry representatives in Queensland. Participants ranked the definitions of distress proposed, in the following order:

- 1) The definition "An emotional state in which individuals feel that they are not in control, overwhelmed, or are unable to cope", the bespoke definition developed based on the findings from the 2021 construction industry workshop was ranked as the definition most adequately describing distress.
- 2) The definition "A feeling of extreme worry, sadness, or pain" (Cambridge dictionary definition) was ranked second.
- 3) The Merriam-Webster dictionary definition "Pain or suffering affecting the body, a bodily part, or the mind", and Kessler's and colleagues' definition of "feeling so sad that nothing can cheer you up" were tied and ranked third.
- 4) The Oxford English dictionary definition "Senses relating to the exertion of pressure or strain" was overall ranked as the least applicable definition of distress.

Summary

Phone interviews undertaken with a number of construction industry representatives from WA, SA, and NSW confirmed that the definition of '*An emotional state in which individuals feel that they are not in control, overwhelmed, or are unable to cope*' appears to most adequately capture what distress means to individual working within the construction industry. This definition maybe useful to supporting the identification of distress among MATES clientele, as well as to informing developments of tailored interventions and optimal pathways to care for MATES clients.

Interviewees suggested that a shift in someone's behaviour is the main indicator that someone might experience distress and identified that a shift in the current workplace culture within the construction industry would be essential so that individuals would feel safe and supported to seek help.

Tailored improvements to the health and wellbeing of any workforce, and occupational groups with high rates of suicide in particular, may not only lead to increases in performance and productivity, but may also have a positive impact on the welfare of the wider community.

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