

JUNE 2019

An evaluation of the effectiveness of the MATES in Energy program

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Suicide Research and Prevention**



Suggested citation: Ross, V. & Caton, N. (2019) An evaluation of the effectiveness of the MATES in Energy program. Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention: Brisbane.

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Introduction

The MATES in Energy program was established in 2018 to extend the MATES in Construction workplace suicide prevention program to promote better mental health and reduce suicide within the energy sector. To date, under the MATES in Energy program, General Awareness Training (GAT) has been delivered to 7422 workers, Connector training to 1133, ASIST training to 99, and 89 workers have received case management.

In order to ensure the program had successfully transitioned from the construction to the energy sector, the Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention (AISRAP) was commissioned in 2019 by MATES in Construction to undertake an evaluation of the effectiveness of the MATES in Energy GAT training.

Method

A short survey was provided to a total of 4887 participants immediately prior to, and immediately after GAT training sessions. The core component of the survey consisted of eight items measuring suicide awareness and knowledge, attitudes to help-seeking and help giving, and emotional well-being. The first question, I am familiar with MATES in Construction and the work that they do was included in the pre-training survey only. The help-seeking item: If I was going through a difficult time, feeling upset, or was thinking about suicide, I would be willing to seek help was followed by a list of response options (e.g., intimate partner, friend, doctor). All of the items in the survey required responses on a five-point likert scale from 1=strongly agree, to 5= strongly disagree.

The post-training component of the survey included a set of items about exposure to suicide and experiences of suicidality (i.e., whether participants had known someone who has attempted suicide, had known someone who has died by suicide, or whether they themselves had experiences suicidal thoughts in the last week or currently). MATES staff administered the pre-and-post surveys, collected and entered the data and provided the de-identified data file to AISRAP researchers for data cleaning and analysis.

At the end of the post-training component, participants were asked whether they believed GAT training was relevant for them, and whether they would recommend GAT training to others. Finally, participants were asked to rate their overall impression of their GAT training (on a 5-point response scale from 'very bad' to 'very good').

Results

All statistical analyses were conducted using the SPSS 25 package. Paired-sample *t*-tests were conducted on each of the pre-post items (suicide awareness and knowledge, help-seeking and help giving, and emotional well-being) with pairwise deletion employed for cases that did not provide data for both the pre- and post-GAT measures. The results are presented in Table 1. Compared to baseline, paired sample *t*-tests found significant increases in agreement from participants on six suicide awareness questions, and a significant decrease in agreement on whether asking a workmate about having suicidal thoughts can increase his/her risk of suicide. Paired sample *t*-tests also showed a significant improvement in how participants felt emotionally/mentally after the training (Table 1).

Table 1

Suicide awareness: pre and post training

| Question | N | Pre-GAT | | Post-GAT | | t | p |
|--|------|---------|------|----------|------|--------|--------|
| | | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Suicide Awareness | | | | | | | |
| “Asking a workmate if they are having suicidal thoughts can increase his/her risk of suicide” | 4754 | 2.44 | 0.81 | 2.12 | 0.88 | 26.16 | < .001 |
| “People considering suicide often send out warning signs or invitations” | 4758 | 3.04 | 1.03 | 3.84 | 0.90 | -53.85 | < .001 |
| “Suicide is a serious problem in the energy industry” | 4763 | 3.45 | 0.73 | 3.91 | 0.72 | -44.72 | < .001 |
| “If I was struggling with mental health issues, I would be willing to ask for help” | 4772 | 3.59 | 0.87 | 3.96 | 0.70 | -35.23 | < .001 |
| “If I was struggling with mental health issues I would know who i would talk to, in order to get help” | 4755 | 3.80 | 0.77 | 4.22 | 0.56 | -38.78 | < .001 |
| “I would notice if a workmate was having a tough time and ask how he/she was doing” | 4743 | 3.88 | 0.67 | 4.11 | 0.56 | -24.89 | < .001 |
| “If I knew a workmate was struggling then I would be willing to offer help” | 4766 | 4.29 | 0.57 | 4.39 | 0.55 | -14.15 | < .001 |
| Well-Being | | | | | | | |
| “So far today, the best way to describe how I’m feeling emotionally/mentally is...” | 4747 | 3.79 | 0.75 | 3.83 | 0.73 | -6.89 | < .001 |

To examine the effectiveness of GAT training on help-seeking intentions, McNemar's test with listwise deletion was conducted to determine if there was a difference in the proportion of those who intended to seek help pre- and post-training. As can be seen in Table 2, the proportion of those who did intend to seek help significantly increased from pre-training to post-training for intentions to seek help from one’s close family, friend, workmate, supervisor, doctor, psychologist, counsellor, helpline, and other. In addition, the proportion of those who did not intend to seek help from anyone significantly decreased from pre- to post-training.

Table 2

Help-seeking intentions: pre and post connectors' training

| Question | N | Pre-GAT | | Post-GAT | | χ^2 | p ^c |
|--------------|------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------|----------------|
| | | No ^b No ^a | No ^b Yes ^a | Yes ^b No ^a | Yes ^b Yes ^a | | |
| Close Family | 4887 | 1510 | 350 | 108 | 2919 | 126.81 | < .001 |
| Friend | 4887 | 1944 | 485 | 152 | 2306 | 173.03 | < .001 |
| Workmate | 4887 | 3076 | 752 | 93 | 966 | 512.38 | < .001 |
| A Supervisor | 4887 | 3777 | 432 | 59 | 619 | 281.84 | < .001 |
| My Doctor | 4887 | 2326 | 308 | 173 | 2080 | 37.33 | < .001 |
| Psychologist | 4887 | 3101 | 372 | 89 | 1325 | 172.50 | < .001 |
| Counsellor | 4887 | 2799 | 699 | 128 | 1261 | 392.86 | < .001 |
| A Helpline | 4887 | 2881 | 1059 | 99 | 848 | 794.19 | < .001 |
| No One | 4887 | 4542 | 28 | 171 | 146 | 101.32 | < .001 |
| Other | 4887 | 4630 | 117 | 29 | 111 | 51.84 | < .001 |

Note. "No" indicates that the individual did not intend to seek help. "Yes" indicates that the individual did intend to seek help. ^b = "before" the training, whereas ^a = "after" the training. ^c = asymptotic significance.

Analysis of descriptive statistics for the MATES in Energy participants revealed that 3,137 (65.4%) participants had known someone who has attempted suicide, and 3,346 (69.4%) participants indicated that they had known someone who has died by suicide. Of the total participants, 4,691 (98.0%) reported that they have not had suicidal thoughts in the past week (or currently).

Results revealed that 4,500 (94.0%) participants felt that the GAT training was relevant for them. A total of 4,728 (98.5%) participants reported that they would recommend GAT training to others. In response to being asked to rate their overall impression of their GAT training; 2,076 (43.1%) participants rating the training as "very good", 2,320 (48.2%) as "good", 409 (8.5%) as "okay", 6 (0.1%) as "bad", and 4 (0.1%) as "very bad". Overall, the average rating for participants' overall impression of GAT was 4.34 (*SD* = .64), indicating that most participants found the GAT training "good" or "very good."

Discussion

A large proportion of MATES in Energy participants (65.4%) had known someone who has attempted suicide, and had known someone who has died by suicide (69.4%), indicating that the introduction of the MATES in Energy program has been very timely. A positive finding was that reported levels of suicidal ideation were low amongst energy sector participants.

The results of this evaluation of MATES in Energy GAT training are very positive. Statistically significant improvements were found on all of the suicide awareness measures and on emotional well-being post-training. In addition, the proportion of those who intended to seek help significantly increased from pre- to post-training for each of the options provided, while the proportion of those who did not intend to seek help 'from anyone' significantly decreased from pre- to post-training. Moreover, most participants reported the thought the GAT training was relevant, they would recommend it to others, and highly rated the training.

These findings are consistent with those of Gullestrup, Lequertier and Martin (2011) who showed significant increases in suicide prevention awareness in GAT participants compared to a comparison group, and more recently, King et al (2018) who found that GAT training was effective in shifting beliefs regarding suicide and mental health in construction industry workers. At this stage the results indicate that the MATES in Energy program is successfully transitioning from the construction sector to the energy sector.

References

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