Let's talk about mental safety

"Everyone (staff or contractor) deserves to go home from work mentally undamaged"

IChemE Aberdeen Member Group AGM

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- Graduated in 1976
- Process engineer with two engineering contractors in London.
- Shell Expro.
- BP.
- Independent consultant.
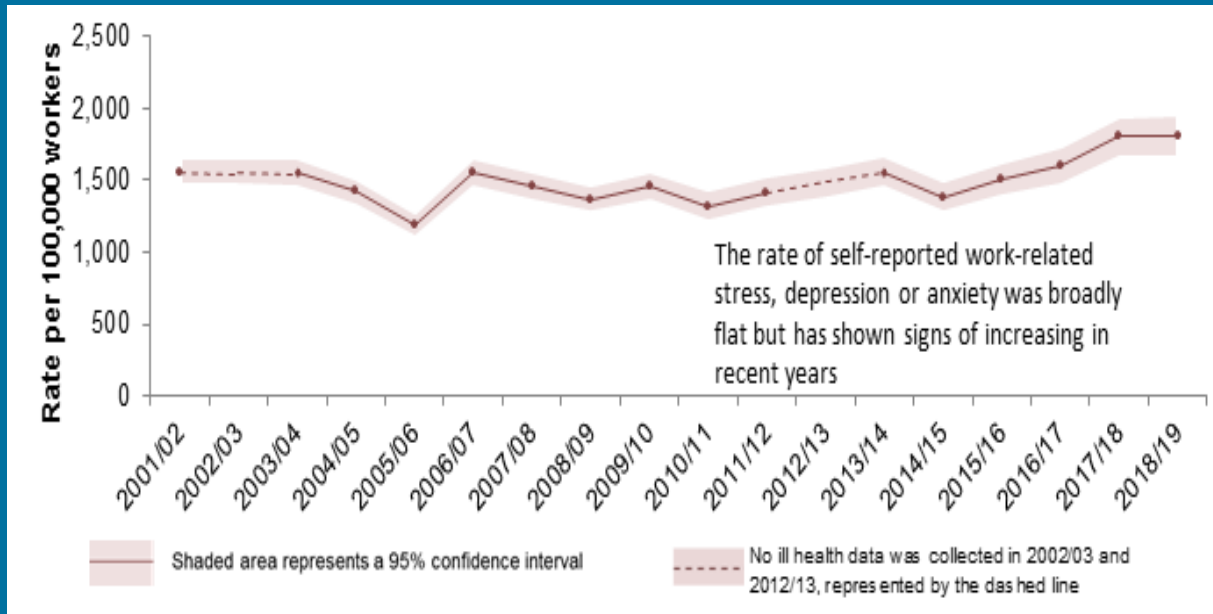- Chaired IChemE Aberdeen MG for three years.

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There's a disastrous epidemic out there

- **Not COVID-19**. No matter how you have been affected by it, COVID will soon be consigned to the history books.

- We have an **epidemic of mental issues and suicides**.

- Worldwide, a similar number of people die by suicide pa as have been killed by COVID-19 in total.
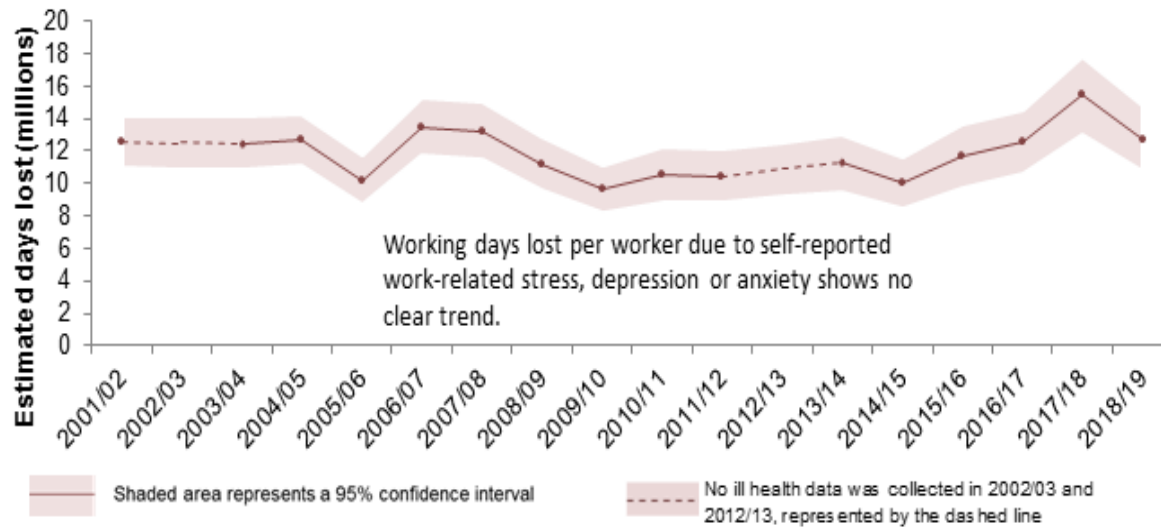
The problem

The rate of self-reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety was broadly flat but has shown signs of increasing in recent years

Shaded area represents a 95% confidence interval

No ill health data was collected in 2002/03 and 2012/13, represented by the dashed line

UK work-related stress, depression or anxiety.

Defined as as a harmful reaction people have to undue pressures and demands placed on them at work.
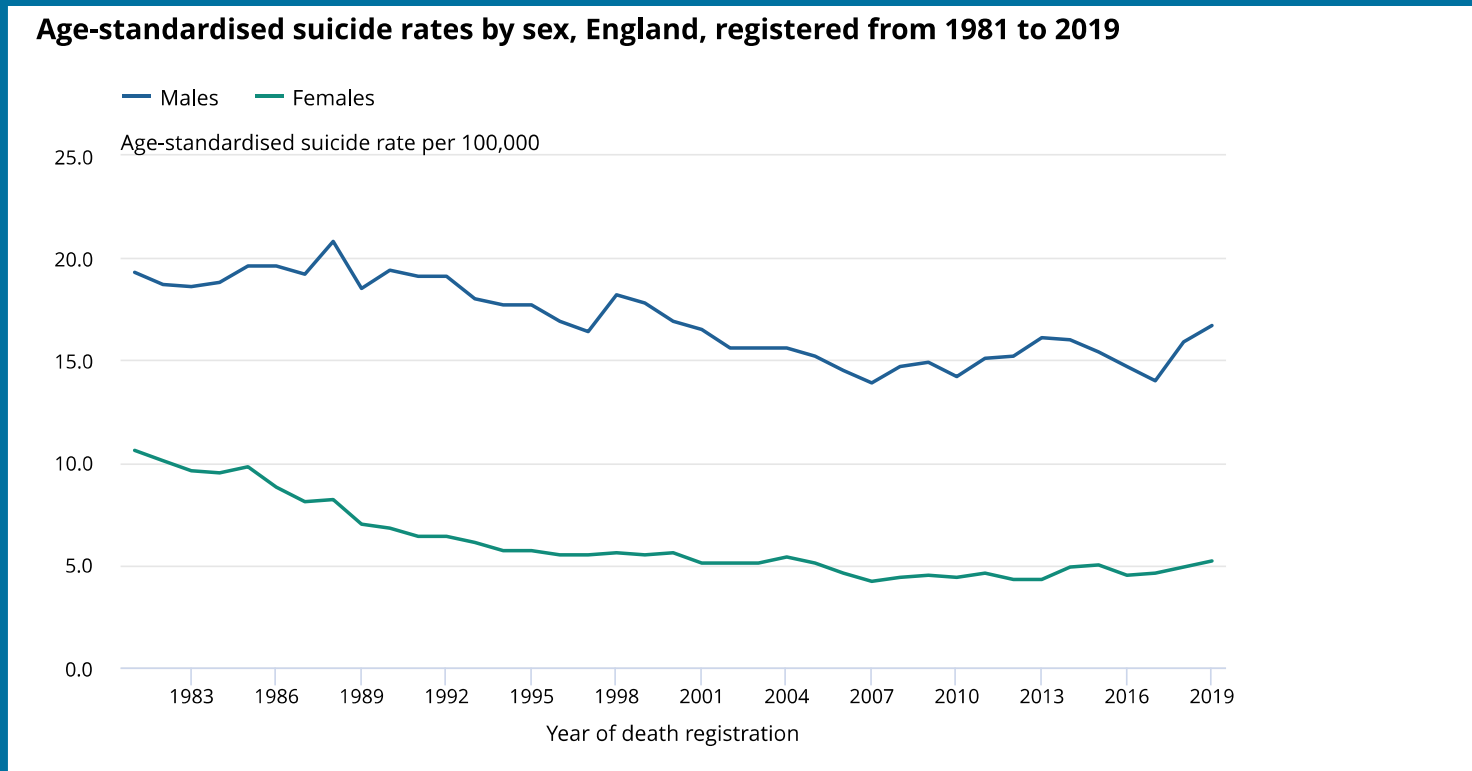
The problem

Estimated days lost (millions)

The problem

In the UK there is no data for work-related suicides.

Total suicide rates show a troubling increase for both sexes.

Age-standardised suicide rates by sex, England, registered from 1981 to 2019

The breadth

Great Ormond Street: Chief executive admits hospital 'got used to some bad behaviours'

'It's really worrying that so many staff have faced harassment, bullying or abuse at work,' says boss

RBS 'fostering culture of bullying'

The bank has launched an investigation following whistleblower claims that harassment is rife and staff are subjected to persistent intimidation

Boris Johnson's private WhatsApps LEAKED: PM tells MPs to protect Priti Patel at all costs

BORIS Johnson has ordered Tory MPs to "form a square around the prittster" in a steadfast defence of Priti Patel as pressure mounts on the Home Secretary after an official report concluded she had sworn and shouted at senior civil servants.

Amnesty International has toxic working culture, report finds

Bullying, public humiliation and discrimination threaten rights group's credibility

New CEO 'wrong person to help Samaritans recover from toxic culture', warns Unite

'Hundreds' faced bullying at NHS Highland

France Télécom bullying trial sheds light on spate of suicides

It's not about Snowflakes!

- As engineers we are used to thinking about how equipment can be damaged.
- In the matter of safety, we focus on the way in which people can be damaged.
- Stress and other events causes real damage in the brain.
    - How many people know that?
    - How often is this talked about in a meaningful way?
- It's not a matter of being strong or "manning up" or "seeking help".

What about the mental health agenda?

- Organisations proclaim their mental health credentials.

- However, sustainability reports provide an interesting insight.

- Mental health programmes are absolutely necessary but generally insufficiently broad or deep.

- In many (most?) cases, non-employees are exempt.

- When the chips are down, do organisations always stand up for what is right?

Another model

Fatal injuries to workers, Great Britain

1981 - 2019/2020

Source: HSE, RIDDOR, RIDHIST
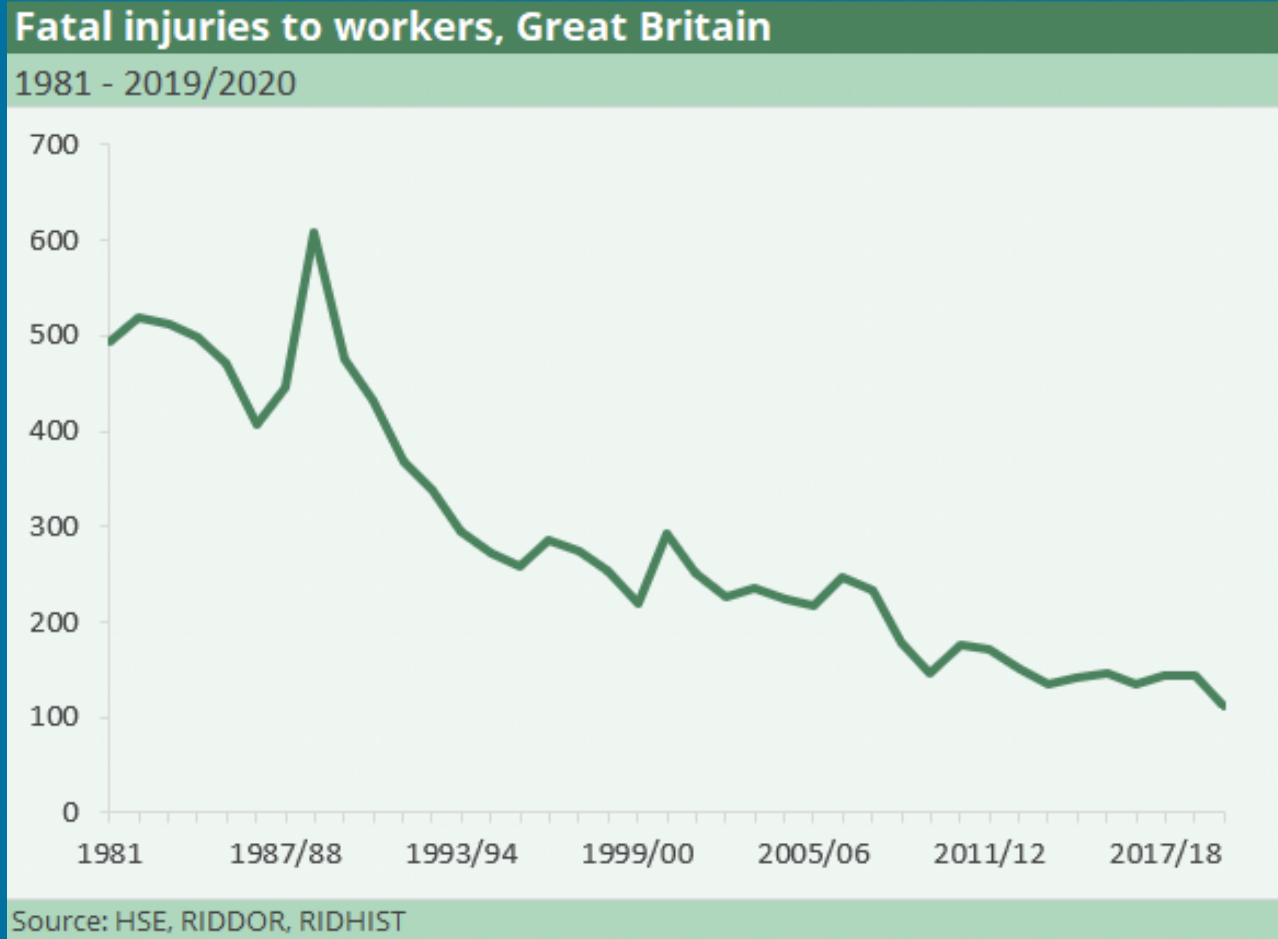
Wouldn't it be great if we could replicate this with mental issues and work-related suicides?

- Focus on equipment.
- Focus on procedures.
- Focus on behaviours.

- Relentlessness.

A tale of three bridges

Forth Bridge (late 19th century): 73 fatalities

Forth Road Bridge (mid 20th century):
7 fatalities.

Queensferry Crossing (early 21st Century):
1 fatality.

So let's talk about mental safety

Proposal

We should **use the language of mental safety** and address it the same way we have acted to improve personal and process safety.

Underlying this should be the realisation that **real damage can be done to the brain** by inappropriate behaviours.

We should **apply the huge arsenal of techniques** we have developed for "safety" to mental safety.

Two questions for you

Q1: Does your organisation have a commitment to physical safety? – what evidence can you provide?

Q2: Does your organisation have a commitment to mental safety? – what evidence can you provide?

Lenses

Personal health & safety

Process safety

Mental health

Shamrock model

What can we do?

Remember that you have a duty of care – not to mention a moral obligation – regarding mental safety towards EVERYONE.

Develop commitments that address mental health AND mental safety.

Build mental health and safety into the fibre of our corporate being as (hopefully) other forms of safety are.

Apply safety techniques to mental safety.

Specimen commitments

1. Mental health & safety equal in importance with personal safety & process safety.

2. We'll develop and enforce standards of conduct for protecting mental health & safety.

3. We'll train our management and workforce in mental health & safety.

4. We'll include mental health & safety targets in company and personal objectives.

5. We'll assess employees in their delivery of mental health & safety.

6. We won't differentiate between staff members, contractors and visitors regarding mental health & safety. Everyone deserves to go home undamaged mentally.

7. We'll have a system of reporting mental injuries.

8. We'll investigate mental injuries with the same rigour as physical injuries.

9. We will never engage in "trade offs" against mental health & safety.

10. We'll ensure that the victims of mental injury receive the same degree of medical care as the victims of physical injuries.

11. There will be no retribution against those who report mental injuries.

12. We'll impose similar requirements on our contractors.

The safety journey derived armoury

- Training.
- Cause-consequence awareness.
- Barrier model.
- Bowties.
- Investigation.
- Leading/ lagging indicators.
- Risk assessment.
- Management of change.

Etc.

How many of these are regularly **and fully** applied to mental health and safety?

A simple example

Person A works for Company B via Company C. An employee at Company B makes an allegation (which is false) about A to B. B thinks only about their contract with C and supports the allegation out of hand. Even when evidence is produced that the allegation is false both B and C refuse to recognise their shortcomings.

Is this right? If your only concern is for your own agenda, the answer is "yes", especially if you regard a contractor's H&S rights to be only the same as their employment rights.

If you believe that everyone – staff or contractor – has the right to go home mentally undamaged the answer is different.

Barrier model

No barriers. Allegation → Damage → Potential suicide.

With barriers.

Allegation → [Investigation by B] ➤ [Investigation by C] ➤ No damage.

Each investigation is a barrier with a PFD.   Achieving TMEL is difficult.

What is needed for this? A concern for the mental safety of EVERYONE.

Similar models can be built for bullying and every other cause of mental damage.

A call for action

- I would love chemical engineers to be at the vanguard of this!

- I am available to talk with passion about this at company and other events.

- If you like what you have heard and would like to collaborate with me in developing the principles of mental safety, please getting in touch.

Coming soon!