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THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

# Friend or foe? Reframing perception of road workers, for everyone's safety

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

*Imagine having eggs or bottles thrown at you, being the target of regular verbal abuse, or people literally trying to run you over – just for doing your job. Physical and mental abuse is an unfortunate reality for road workers, despite the fact they are responsible for maintaining safety while our road and other infrastructure is being built or repaired.*

Each year, an estimated 100 road workers in Australia face physical abuse and, on average, one will be killed while **doing their job**. Add constant verbal abuse, and the unacceptable behaviour of motorists towards road workers is causing them anxiety, stress and other mental health issues, to the point where many are reporting being reluctant to go to work or being in fear of their safety at work.

The result of this abuse is that road workers are more likely to make mistakes, meaning the people they are paid to protect – the motoring public – are jeopardising their own and road workers' safety at the same time.

The other irony, of course, is those venting their frustration are the ones who will benefit from new roads being built or infrastructure being repaired.



*“Good mental health and good wellbeing makes up our whole identity and sense of purpose. A lot of our purpose is about going to work, and knowing we will come home from work not only safe but satisfied.”*

## Ignorance is not bliss

For Dr Natalie Flatt, a psychologist who has researched the impact of abuse on road workers, the inappropriate behaviour of motorists is driven by a lack of understanding of how complex the role is and its primary purpose – to ensure the safety of road users.

“There is a lack of respect about their job and also the importance of their job,” the [Connect Psych Services](#) Director said.

“A lot of people think road workers are just standing there with a ‘lollipop’ or a stop sign, they’re not really earning the taxpayers’ money. They believe it is a job you don’t have to think about a lot and it’s unknown exactly what they’re doing to make our roads safe.

“So there’s a lot of cynicism or it’s classed as a lazy role, where in reality it requires a lot of coordination and skill.

“Road workers are keeping our roads safe. In the case of new infrastructure projects, they are helping to create faster and more efficient means of transport. And without road workers, and without being able to prevent or fix a pothole, we would have many more crashes each year.

“In Australia, we completely underestimate the quality and importance of our roads. What if we had roads like Bali? We’re so blessed and lucky to have that capacity and capability to allow us to safely get from A to B in the most efficient way possible.

“What many people don’t understand or fail to see is the road worker is helping them do that, they’re not actually trying to slow them down, but there is that perception that ‘here comes road work, this is going to be an inconvenience to me’. So they see it more as a setback than an important job and role that’s needed.”

## A devastating impact

Abuse of road workers is adding to a job that can already be stressful, particularly on larger projects where road workers have to be ‘switched on’, and is contributing to road workers reporting increasing levels of trauma.

[Dr Natalie Flatt](#) will explore the motivations and impacts of road worker abuse, plus what road workers and their organisations can do to minimise the impact (see ‘Making Improvements’ section below), as part of the June NRSPP webinar, “Understanding the Impact Road Users Have on Road Workers”.

The webinar is part of NRSPP’s annual organisational campaign, which in 2023 is aimed at increasing understanding of and empathy for the important role of road workers.

“We’re seeing a lot of trauma being reported by road workers,” Natalie explains, “from the abuse of just angry drivers who want to get to their destination quicker.

“So they’re taking all their frustration and their impatience out on these workers when it’s not their fault, they’re just a piece of the big puzzle. They are copping a lot of unnecessary blame and that’s causing them a lot of anxiety about going to work and about doing the job they need to do.

“There are some workers who are reporting their lives are threatened in a physical sense, from having bottles of urine thrown at them to drivers playing ‘scaredy cat’ and seeing how close they can get to a road worker, thinking it’s funny.

“That’s completely and utterly traumatising.

“Now, if their mind isn’t switched on to the job because they’re concerned about what drivers are going to do to them that day, then they’re more likely to make mistakes.”

## Signs to look for

“If abuse is happening to you or an incident has occurred, go home or to have that buddy system so you can reflect about the day. So rather than ‘how was your day?’ and ‘yeah good mate’, consider ‘how was I thinking today’, ‘what was I thinking about’ or ‘how was I feeling and how did I act?’

“These are some really quick questions so we can start to connect with our own wellbeing, and really it’s about a bit of a ‘check-in’. If instead we’re thinking ‘what if I get abused today?’ or ‘what if something happens to me today?’ – those ‘what if’ questions can really point to anxiety.

“If you are flinching or shying away, feel jittery or on edge, or are trying to take less risks in ways that are counterintuitive to your job, that can actually be a sign. So it’s about seeing if you can have a quick ‘check in’ with yourself, and that’s when you can take the next action.

“We all have bad days, and that’s okay, but the more we can talk about that and really start to articulate what we’re thinking, how we’re feeling and how we’re acting, that’s when the change comes.”

## Making improvements, all of us

Natalie encourages frustrated motorists to remember that road workers are also family members, and “their lives are just as important to someone as you or your family, so when we’re saying drive at 40kmh, there is a reason”.

If you are driving for your own work, plan ahead where possible and **factor in** delays in calculating the time required to reach your destination. Check government road or transport agency websites for up-to-date information on where road works are taking place.

Natalie also reminds road workers who face abuse that such behaviour is unacceptable and they do not have to – nor should – put up with it. She encourages road workers to ask for support from their manager or seek external support (see suggestions below).

In addition to organisations providing access to services like an Employee Assistance Program, managers should ensure workers are comfortable to and aware they can approach management to report and discuss incidents of abuse – just like any other workplace psychosocial or physical safety hazard. It’s also important managers are trained in looking for signs of mental health stress and how they can support their own and worker wellbeing.

“Training to break down the stigma so workers know they don’t have to deal with this abuse is really important – particularly in male-dominated industries like construction and transport and logistics where suicide rates are the highest – and to create some actions to allow workers to have an element of control and allies within the company who are going to support them.

“We know nowadays that you can’t split your work life from personal circumstances, so you bring what’s happening at work into your personal life. It can affect your day-to-day or personal life and we certainly don’t want mental health to be impacted.

“Mental health is not a dirty word. Good mental health and good wellbeing makes up our whole identity and sense of purpose. A lot of our purpose is about going to work, and knowing we will come home from work not only safe but satisfied.

“Where we start to see anxiety, depression or trauma, we often see people isolating. So you have workers coming to work who are just trying to get through the day and manage their anxiety and they won’t talk about it (see ‘Signs to look for’ breakout box).

“Again, that’s where mistakes can happen. That’s where angst and symptoms build up to the point where either they leave the job or something more sinister can start to simmer. So we really need to start making some noise at a preventative level to say, ‘you are just as if not more important than fixing the roads, because without you, without step A, we can’t even get to step B.’”

***Click [here](#) to register for the “Understanding the Impact Road Users Have on Road Workers” webinar.***

## Support agency contacts

### Industry

#### Connect Psych Services

Confidential support for workers and education for organisations  
1300 146 386 or [connect@connectpsychservices.com.au](mailto:connect@connectpsychservices.com.au)

#### OzHelp

Support programs for individuals and organisations  
24/7 support: Transport & Logistics – 1800 464 327;  
Building & Construction – 1300 694 357

#### Mates In Construction

Support and 24/7 helpline for individuals  
1300 642 111

### Community

#### Lifeline

131 114

#### Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467

#### MensLine Australia

1300 789 978

#### Police

131 444