



MATES in Mining
Final Report to Coal Services Health & Safety Trust

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Background Summary

MATES in Mining was created as an industry-based, bipartisan suicide prevention program for the mining industry.

Thanks to the generous financial support of the Coal Services Health and Safety Trust over the past four years since 2017, MATES in Mining has had the opportunity to assess and determine whether the MATES in Construction program has been effectively adapted and transferred to the mining industry.

The general findings of both Phase One (quantitative research) and the Phase Two (qualitative research), are outlined in this final report - more detailed information is contained in previous Progress Reports submitted to the Trust.

The findings of this two-phase evaluation project have been reviewed at length by MATES in Mining and have been used to adapt and strengthen the program so that it appropriately meets the needs of workers in the mining industry.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative research phase of the project investigated the possible impact of the program on self-reported levels of psychological distress, beliefs and attitudes regarding industry-based suicide interventions, and help seeking and help offering behaviours.

Volunteers from coal mining operations in New South Wales (Glendell, Wambo and Springvale) and Queensland (Clermont) participated in rollout. Prior to program rollout, baseline survey data was collected and during the course of program rollout - which involved the delivery of General Awareness Training (GAT), Connector and Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) – follow-up data collection was undertaken at six month and 18 months post-baseline.

The survey was created by an academic team at the University of Newcastle, and an identical survey was administered at all three waves. The instrument addressed self-reported experiences of distress, suicide awareness, attitudes to suicide intervention and prevention, willingness to seek help, and confidence in offering help.

While the initial plan was to collect and analyse longitudinal data, our research partners at the University of Newcastle were largely unable to match respondents across all three waves of data collection. As such, we are unable to determine if attitudinal and behavioural change has occurred at the level of the individual. The three waves of data collection were effectively cross sectional: they provided a 'snapshot' of what is occurring for the group of mine employees, at each wave of data collection, overall.

A summary of the finds is outlined below.

- Pushback against stigmatising attitudes and beliefs:
 - Encouragingly, there was overall a pushback against stigmatising statements. At baseline, more than half of the participants at each mine disagreed with the statement that 'people would be treated differently by colleagues if their mental illness were known about' and 'people would be treated poorly in this workplace if their mental illness were known about'. While this is encouraging, between 20% and 30% of participants at each site reported that they were unsure about how colleagues

with mental illness would be regarded, and this lack of certainty did not shift across the waves of data collection.

- Progressive views on workplace and industry responsibility:
 - Responses to the statements 'the mining industry must do something to reduce suicide rates' and 'poor mental health is a workplace health and safety issue' were strongly in the affirmative, and there were no significant changes in dis/agreement rates between baseline and follow-up data collection.
- Help seeking:
 - There were some gains in self-reported likelihood of seeking help across three of the mines. The increases were registered for willingness to seek help from non-professional sources, such as friends, colleagues, supervisors and Connectors or ASIST volunteers. Encouragingly, by the time of phase three data collection, nearly half of the participants at three of the mines reported that they would likely seek help from a Connector or ASIST volunteer. Greater gains were evident for help offering behaviours. Between one fifth and one third of respondents had indicated that they were 'unsure' about how their workplaces would respond, should it become known they were struggling. Somewhat modest changes in willingness to ask for help (from colleagues, supervisors, Connectors and ASIST volunteers) makes sense, given this context.
- Help offering:
 - Across the waves of data collection, there were clear gains made when it came to expressed confidence in offering help to colleagues. Overall, greater gains were evident for help-offering than help-seeking behaviours. Given that between one fifth and one third of respondents at each wave indicated that they were 'unsure' about how mines would respond if an employee's mental health struggles were made known, the modest gains in help-seeking behaviours relative to help-offering behaviours make sense. Seeking help is the more vulnerable and precarious of the two courses of action.
- No sustained, significant change in levels of psychological distress:
 - The follow-up results for all four mines demonstrated no change overall in moderate to high levels of self-reported psychological distress. It is important to note that this pertains to aggregate level change for mine sites overall. It is possible that some change occurred at the level of the individual, however due to the inability to match the data, within-individual change was not able to be determined with cross-sectional data.

Overall, the findings indicated that a peer-based program such as MATES in Mining can make a measurable difference to workplace dynamics around mental health and suicide prevention.

MATES in Mining is an outward-facing program that teaches participants skills in noticing others' suicidal distress, and how to respond clearly, proactively, and sensibly when a participant identifies that an individual is in distress. The program emphasis on help offering is mirrored in the research findings: stronger gains were evident in the area of confident help offering, while more modest gains were made in the area of help seeking. Furthermore, levels of self-reported psychological distress had not shifted at the four mines, and while participants overall disagree that people in distress would be treated poorly by colleagues and workplaces, nonetheless between a fifth and a third of participants

express persistent uncertainty about the likely response of colleagues and mines at each phase of data collection.

The experience of distress is influenced by a range of micro-level (e.g. interpersonal relationships) and macro-level (e.g. changes in the national political and economic climate) phenomena and as such, expecting the MATES in Mining program itself to have a significant impact on distress levels at a site is somewhat unrealistic.

Participants expressed faith in the roles of Connectors and ASIST volunteers, both from a help-seeking and help-offering standpoint, and this is positively validating for the program. Additionally, participants overall recorded their agreement with attitudinal and value statements that align with the ethos of the MATES in Mining program (e.g. 'poor mental health is a workplace health and safety issue' and 'the mining industry must do something to reduce suicide rates'), which indicates that the program values and priorities are acceptable to mine crews.

Qualitative Phase

The objective of the MATES in Mining Phase Two Qualitative research was to investigate the effectiveness of the MATES in Mining program across the following domains:

- Skills acquired and retained.
- Whether participants felt called to be proactive.
- Stigma reduction.
- Overall program effectiveness onsite.
- Impediments to effectiveness.

For the initial phase of data collection for the Phase Two Qualitative Research, four focus groups were conducted with managers and crew members of three coal mines in the NSW Hunter Valley region. Our aim was to investigate in detail participants' views on the outcomes and impact of the MATES in Mining program.

Focus group transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis. Through this analysis, it was determined that crew members who had trained as Connectors and/or ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) volunteers had retained the skills they initially acquired through training. Moreover, participants who had undergone Connector and ASIST training were still proactively using their skills to engage with colleagues who appeared to be in distress. However, there were mixed reports regarding the overall impact of the program on mine sites as outlined below:

- Management indicated that they received little information regarding Connector and ASIST volunteer activities and interventions onsite.
- Across management and crew focus groups, participants explained that they would benefit from more regular engagement with MATES in Mining Field Officers, and that refresher sessions were needed across all levels of the training.
- A desire for a more democratic selection process for Connectors was also expressed.

In response to the feedback received from this initial qualitative focus group, MATES in Mining proposed specific actions to respond to the focus group findings. These actions involved more regular site visits of both an informal (e.g. checking in with crew members) and formal (e.g. refresher training, meetings with management) nature. Additionally, more funding will be sought to support the appointment of an additional Field Officer in NSW. A data collection instrument was also designed to collate data on Connector and ASIST volunteer activity across NSW mine sites, so that aggregate-level

information on MATES in Mining activity could be shared with mine management. Finally, the MATES in Mining team considered a strategy for more democratic nomination and selection processes for the appointment of Connectors.

Following on from this initial focus group, in August and September 2020, the MATES National Research Manager conducted individual interviews and a small focus group with coal mine workers in the NSW Hunter Valley region who were engaged in the MATES in Mining program as Connectors and/or ASIST volunteers. This focus group was conducted virtually via Zoom, while interviews were carried out one on one over the phone, owing to travel and face-to-face meeting restrictions under the recent COVID-19 control measures. The aim of this was to discuss their experiences of the program, inform them of program changes and developments, and gauge their views on the viability and execution of the changes made in response to the initial focus group feedback.

Overall, the focus group session and individual interviews with Connector and ASIST volunteers was an invaluable opportunity to touch base with volunteers, regarding the ongoing evolution of the program. Findings from these discussions demonstrated that the strategic changes made as a result of the investigation 12 months earlier, were generally regarded as acceptable and reasonable developments for the program. While participants expressed that there may be some logistical challenges in the action areas detailed (e.g. mine workers adjusting to Zoom sessions due to COVID-19 restrictions; and an overall preference for face-to-face refresher training), the points raised for consideration were of a manageable and largely technical nature.

At no point in the various focus group discussions did participants raise concerns about the legitimacy or viability of the initiatives detailed above. Furthermore, it is apparent that some participants of the program remained enthusiastic about their help-offering roles, even in a time of wider social and economic upheaval (COVID-19), where the possibility of burnout could be expected. Participants' accounts and reflections suggest that they maintain an ongoing level of respect for the program, and the MATES in Mining staff who drive it.

Summary

Overall, the results of the research project funded by the Coal Services Health & Safety Trust, suggest that the MATES in Mining program has successfully transitioned into the mining industry and is having the desired effect on the mining workforce – increasing people's confidence & proactiveness in offering help to others experiencing suicide ideation; reducing stigma associated with suicide and mental health issues; and is being embraced and viewed positively by workers within the workplace.

MATES in Mining would like to extend our sincere appreciation to the Coal Services Health & Safety Trust for the financial support which has been provided to date, to allow us to successfully transition the MATES in Construction model of suicide prevention to the mining industry.

Through the support of the Coal Services Health & Safety Trust, MATES in Mining has been afforded the capacity to continuously improve and align our service offering and positively grow to meet the increasing demand for our services from mine sites across Australia. We have been able to actively strengthen the mining industry by helping to prevent suicide, because a life saved is one less family grieving, one less workplace impacted and one less community heartbroken.

Based on the various outcomes of the research carried out to date, MATES in Mining would welcome the opportunity to discuss future research priorities with the Coal Services Health & Safety Trust.