# Psychological First Aid for Loggers: An Urgent Conversation for Our Industry

*The following was provided by MLEP Executive Director Dave Nolle, previewing important LogSafe training offered in 2026.*

**By David Nolle, Executive Director, MLEP**

The logging profession has always demanded strength. To most that might mean physical strength, but often overlooked are mental and emotional strength. Every day, loggers work in environments that test the limits: unpredictable weather, long hours, dangerous conditions, tight production timelines, fluctuating markets, and the ever-present risk of injury. While mechanization has led to remarkable gains in physical safety, one area still needs open conversation: mental health.

Across rural America, mental health challenges are rising while resources shrink. Loggers often work in isolation, feel pressure to keep operations running smoothly, and face significant financial volatility. Stress, anxiety, depression, substance misuse, and burnout remain hidden too long. The culture of "toughing it out" in logging, agriculture, and the trades often keeps people silent.


David Nolle

But loggers are humans first, and protecting mental health is essential for everyone's well-being.

## What MLEP is Doing About Mental Health for Loggers

For three decades, LogSafe programming has helped reduce injuries and fatalities through First Aid and CPR training every other year. In the alternating years, loggers have attended half-day workshops covering safety topics related to OSHA 1910.266. Combined with increased mechanization, these efforts have contributed to Minnesota's significantly lower fatality rate compared to national averages. Based on nationwide numbers, Logging in Minnesota "should" have had five workplace fatalities during my five years in this role. We've had one.

Yet in the past two years, our community has lost at least two loggers to mental health crises. These losses are just as devastating as workplace fatalities, even though they don't count as workplace fatalities.

Several loggers approached me asking for Psychological First Aid training. That request mattered. We listened. Although the material may be uncomfortable for loggers, owners and me, I am confident that we are addressing an important topic for our community.

## New for 2026–2027: Psychological First Aid (PFA) Workshops

MLEP will contract with trained professionals who serve agriculture, construction, and forestry to deliver a 4-hour workshop during the time traditionally devoted to OSHA refreshers. With a theme of **Look. Listen. Think.** Psychological First Aid will cover topics such as:

- Recognizing stress and early warning signs
- Principles of Psychological First Aid
- How to support a coworker in crisis
- Practical coping tools
- How and when to seek professional help
- Resources for loggers and rural communities

This does not replace physical safety. It is expanding what safety means. Mental health is safety. Psychological First Aid (PFA) isn't about "fixing people". It is about showing up for your crew, having a right response, and making sure they're okay.

## Why Mental Health Needs Attention in Logging

**Isolation is part of the job -** Crews often work miles from town, disconnected from family and support systems. Solitude can be refreshing, but during stressful periods it can deepen loneliness and emotional fatigue.

**High-risk work increases mental load -** Logging is one of the most hazardous occupations in the United States. Near-misses and "oh crap" moments build stress that often goes unspoken and unrecognized.

**Financial instability adds pressure -** Equipment costs, weather delays, landowner expectations, fuel prices, and market swings create financial strain which is a major risk factor for anxiety, depression, and conflict.

**Physical strain affects emotional resilience -** Logging is physically demanding. Chronic pain, fatigue, and limited recovery time can worsen stress, irritability, and sleep problems.

**Stigma remains a barrier -** Many workers fear looking weak or letting others down. But strength includes knowing when to reach out.

## Recognizing Signs of Mental Health Strain

Watch for:

- Persistent fatigue and/or trouble sleeping
- Irritability or mood swings
- Increased alcohol or substance use
- Loss of interest in work or hobbies
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Difficulty concentrating

- Withdrawing from others
- Comments about being a burden or "better off gone"

Sometimes the signs are subtle. Knowing how and if to intervene can be challenging. We will learn about this from the professionals, and each other, during these workshops.

### What Employers, Supervisors, and Crews Can Do

- Normalize conversations about mental health during safety meetings
- Encourage a culture of checking in on one another
- Make sure workers know about available resources
- Support reasonable work hours and adequate rest
- Approach substance-use concerns with empathy, not judgment

### What Loggers Can Do for Themselves

- Stay connected with friends, family, and fellow loggers
- Prioritize physical health
- Maintain relationships
- Recognize that stress is not weakness

### Resources

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
- Local mental health services
- Rural clinics and healthcare providers
- Peer support programs in agriculture and forestry

### A Stronger Industry Starts with Healthy People

Logging depends on hardworking professionals who show up day after day. Supporting mental health is not separate from safety. It is safety. When we feel supported, connected, and valued, families, communities, and the entire industry benefit.

Opening the conversation is the first step. The next is making sure none of us ever has to struggle alone.

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