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This issue focuses on managing mental health at sea. This includes:

- how crew can be supported
- crew awareness
- signs of possible mental health problems
- managing crew reactions.



## Managing mental health at sea

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted seafarer mental health and wellbeing around the globe. This requires us to be even more alert to potential signs of mental health issues among crew and to proactively manage these circumstances. Maintaining a fair, just and supportive crew environment is critical in these difficult times.

The supply of goods by sea continues throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the current situation is making working conditions for seafarers extremely challenging<sup>1</sup>.

Trends in maritime safety data and research highlight a critical need for seafarer mental health and wellbeing to be managed more effectively, so as to achieve better outcomes.

The Maritime Labour Convention requires flag States to implement laws that provide for the occupational safety and health of seafarers. This includes implementing programs for the prevention of occupational

accidents, injuries and disease and should ensure the mental health and wellbeing of seafarers is supported.

Stress can lead to mental health issues. This bulletin provides information and guidance to provide ship owners' and masters with strategies to help alleviate the effects of stress.

It also talks about the importance of educating crew about mental health, in order to create a culture in which crew are able to identify when their fellow crew members are experiencing poor mental health and support one another.



## Trends in the data

Alarming trends in maritime safety data and research highlights the critical need for effective management of seafarer mental health and wellbeing.

AMSA's safety data has identified an emerging trend since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes an increase in person overboard incidents, and a significant increase in the number of Maritime Labour Convention complaints (about 40%).

Furthermore, the Seafarer Happiness Index<sup>1</sup> has shown an overall decline in the Q1 2020 results. Below is an extract from the report

*'Respondents reported feeling trapped, concerned for their own health, but also struggling to comprehend what is happening in their home countries and to loved ones. As nations across the globe*

*go into lockdown, many seafarers reported feeling utterly helpless and sadly useless to their families as the distance between them is felt more acutely than ever.'*

COVID-19 is a recent global occurrence, these indicators collectively suggest the pandemic is having a significant impact on seafarer mental health and wellbeing.

Added to this, we know that increased psychological distress from worry, isolation, and significantly prolonged sea time can have tragic consequences if not appropriately managed.



Findings of a 2019 global study of 1,572 seafarers has shown<sup>2</sup>:

- **25%** of seafarers had scores suggesting depression
- **17%** of seafarers were defined as experiencing anxiety
- Over the 2 weeks prior to the survey, **20% of seafarers** had suicidal thoughts, either:
  - over several days (12.5%)
  - more than half the days (5%)
  - nearly every day (2%).

## Case studies

### Case study 1: Mental health first-aid program

Following a review of their health and safety strategy, an offshore marine company recognised the benefit of seafarer mental health and wellbeing, both from a health and safety, and commercial perspective.

The company also acknowledged that the very nature of seafaring can pose challenges to mental health and wellbeing. Hence, they partnered with a leading health provider to develop a tailored mental health first-aid training program for the maritime environment.

Both seafarers and key shore staff received training in the provision of mental health first-aid at sea, with the support of shore-based management.

Preventative and first-aid support could be provided at sea, while also supported by shore-based management.

It was ensured that each vessel swing had a trained mental health first aid officer on board. The organisation took steps to break down the stigma of mental health, both at sea and ashore, and ensured that mental health issues were treated no differently than any other illness or injury.

The program improved safety and operational reliability, and this success encouraged other offshore marine operators to adopt a similar approach.

### Case study 2: Managing mental health at sea

A bulk carrier was headed for Australia when one of the crew approached the master to say that he had been experiencing some degree of psychological distress and was having difficulty coping with his work and life on the vessel. The master

listened carefully to the crew member, before obtaining advice from mental health professionals.

The master arranged for the crew member to perform light duties to minimise stress, and ensured the crew member's wellbeing was closely monitored. The crew member was able to attend regular therapy sessions with mental health professionals via video.

The crew member disembarked the vessel in Australia, and continued to receive mental health treatment while repatriation flights were arranged. The crew member returned home and continued to improve, having received prompt care and attention at sea.



# Strategies for managing mental health at sea

There are practical strategies that can reduce the impact of psychological stress and proactively manage mental health at sea.

The *Guidelines for implementing the occupational safety and health provisions of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006*, requires flag states to provide shipowners with effective advice on measures to minimize the adverse effects of work-related factors on seafarer mental health. This also includes organizational arrangements in place that enable seafarers to raise issues about mental stressors and promote wellbeing<sup>3</sup>.

## Educating crew

It is important that masters and senior crew receive adequate education on the psychological impact of stress and mental health issues. Masters and senior crew need to:

- have a good knowledge of both the short and long-term consequences of stress
- ensure crew in their charge have appropriate information and awareness
- establish prevention and minimisation programs
- be able to identify seafarers having problems
- initiate the necessary assistance if required—this may include masters and senior crew being instructed in mental health first aid.

## Recognise the signs of possible mental health problems

If a seafarer displays any of the following behaviours, they may be experiencing mental health problems:

- appears to withdraw, isolates themselves, or seems quieter than usual
- appears distressed
- agitated or irritable
- difficulty managing work or workload
- more argumentative, aggressive or gets into conflicts
- confused, unusually forgetful or has trouble concentrating
- behaving in a way that is out of character.

The following are some suggestions which can be used to assist crew suffering from mental health difficulties:

- spend time with the person
- offer your assistance and a listening ear, but do not intrude on that person's privacy. Be mindful that there may sometimes be deeper problems that underlie the initial problem they mention
- help them with any practical arrangements they require
- do not take their emotions personally, as this is probably a part of their reaction

- do not downplay or dismiss their problems. Do not tell them they are 'lucky the situation isn't worse'—they probably don't feel lucky
- help them to re-establish a normal schedule as quickly as possible. If possible, include them in the activities of others
- encourage them to be active and involved
- encourage them to look at what they can manage, rather than just thinking about what they want to avoid.

## Managing crew reactions

After a mental health-related or other stressful event, seafarers are often very sensitive to:

- how others react to them
- how others may describe the event and the role of the seafarer involved, particularly in terms of their reactions to their colleagues.

The extent to which the work/social network validates or invalidates the experience has a very important effect upon the seafarer's psychological adaptation or recovery<sup>5</sup>. If all crew are aware of the stressors and their potential impact, the experience of seafarers having a mental health issue is more likely to be recognised and validated. If senior crew are aware of the principles of mental health first aid, crew are more likely to receive appropriate support following a mental health issue.



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Crews with low morale typically exhibit the highest risk for psychological injuries. This is because strong morale acts as a buffer or protective layer against the effects of mental health issues and other stressors<sup>1</sup>. This should be factored into decisions that may affect the management of mental health risk<sup>6</sup>.

At regular intervals, the master or senior crew should schedule the following:

- An informal debrief—this provides crew with the ability to say how they are going and allows for the reiteration of mental health

information and awareness

- recognition by a valued authority—have someone, like the master, acknowledge the crew and the efforts they have made
- follow up contact with seafarers who may have been identified as likely to suffer mental health issues to see how they are travelling.

Ship owners and operators need to ensure that the conditions in which their seafarers work and live do not exacerbate mental health problems. A seafarer's ability to access mental health services at sea is limited, hence the incorporation of strategies for mental health interventions in a

resource poor environment is even more important.

Specific attention is needed in higher-risk periods of the seafarer work-life cycle, such as during periods of contract extension and inability to take shore leave.

Emphasis should be given to training seafarers for mental health awareness and resilience. Designated senior crew and masters should be trained in mental health first aid.



*Seafarers delivering essential services. Image supplied.*

## Key messages

- Consider training key staff on mental health first aid.
- Break down the stigma, both on board and ashore, regarding mental health issues. It should be no different than any other injury or illness.
- Be alert for potential signs of mental health issues among crew.
- Proactively manage cases of mental health issues, including repatriation if appropriate.
- Maintain a fair, just and supportive crew environment, as part of a positive safety culture.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> The Mission to Seafarers, 2020, *Seafarer Happiness Index*, Quarter 1 / 2020: Special COVID-19 Edition.
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- <sup>4</sup> Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA), 2018, 'Mental health at sea', *Maritime Safety Awareness Bulletin*, Issue 7.
- <sup>5</sup> Iversen, R.T.B. (2012), The Mental Health of Seafarers. *International Maritime Health*, 63(2), 78–89.
- <sup>6</sup> Andrei, D., Grech, M., Crous, R., Ho, J., McLroy, T., Griffin, M., & Neal, A., 2018 *Assessing the determinants and consequences of safety culture in the maritime industry*. Australian Linkage Council (ARC) project LP1301002015.

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