

Tackling mental health issues

Mental health affects crew of all ages, nationalities and ranks. A recent analysis of crew mental health revealed anxiety, social isolation, pressure of work and disturbed sleep can affect crew, all of which can negatively influence their mental health.

Captains and Chief Officers have an important role to play in leading by example, to encourage and actively protect good mental health onboard. A supportive and organised environment with open dialogue, respect and recognition for all ranks is essential.

Mental Health is the mental and emotional state in which we feel able to cope with the normal stresses of everyday life. This includes our psychological, emotional and social well-being. Mental Health can also control how we think, feel, work, and influences our relationships with others.

Mental health conditions may appear suddenly as a result of a specific event or incident, or gradually, over a period of time when the condition may worsen or improve.

Spotting the signs

Recognising mental health issues is the first step in accessing the support needed to recover. Mental health can affect anyone and can feel just as bad, or worse, as physical illness – only you cannot see it.

If you think that your crew might be displaying mental health signs, reach out to them. Many of the remedies for minor problems are often in the hands of those who create the working conditions under which seafarers work and live. Colleagues and friends are often able to form an impression of a person's mental state much more easily than a doctor. Seafarers can therefore help each other.

Encourage and stimulate your crew members and draw their attention to

the prevention of mental health issues in meetings. It can take time to implement a prevention programme onboard and it can be difficult to measure the benefits. Identify what you want to achieve, set timeframes and involve key personnel. Organise an event to celebrate and announce the plan to your crew.

Do your crew show signs of any of the following?

Physical symptoms

- Suffering from frequent minor illnesses, headaches or stomach upsets
- Difficulty sleeping or constant tiredness or feeling of fatigue
- Feeling run down
- Lack of care over appearance
- Sudden weight loss or gain
- Minor physical ailments

Emotional/behavioural symptoms

- Irritability, aggression or tearfulness
- Loss of humour
- Indecision, inability to concentrate on tasks, increased errors, missing deadlines or forgetting tasks
- Increased consumption of caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes and/or sedatives
- Loss of confidence
- Difficulty remembering things
- Becoming withdrawn, not participating in conversations or social activities and spending increasing amounts of time alone in cabins
- Disruptive behaviour
- Poor job performance
- An employee who is normally punctual frequently arriving late



Common triggers

Be aware of the common triggers. It is not always easy to identify what causes mental health issues, and there are numerous possible factors that may influence and affect mental well-being. This in turn can reinforce the feeling of stress, depression, isolation and fatigue.

Remember, if someone seems out of sorts, there is usually a reason for it.

At work onboard or at sea

- Stress of being away from home for extended periods of time
- Family pressure to remain at sea to continue sending funds home and not let family down
- Severity of environmental conditions and the dangers of being at sea

- Coping with an increased workload or a promotion
- Manning levels and related issues: the qualifications and experience of crew
- Increasing monotony of working and living onboard causing boredom, frustration and social isolation
- Fear of job security
- Shift patterns of work and disruptions to that system in ports
- The quality of rest periods both in relation to environmental conditions like noise, vibrations and movements of the ship and adequate time for uninterrupted rest
- Greater commercial pressures from ashore
- Pressure of more frequent inspections and administrative tasks

- Reduced common language and/or culture due to multinational crews with reduced ability to communicate with each other in a meaningful way

Personal life changes

- Bereavement or illness of a close family member/friend
- Divorce or relationship breakdown
- Health scares or physical illness

Where to find help

If you notice a fellow colleague or crewmember experiencing any one or more of these signs, on a regular basis, or constantly over a two week period, or if you are concerned about your own mental health, please talk to someone. Tell the Master or a senior officer and get help.

Further support is available from ISWAN's SeafarerHelp and the Sailors' Society Wellness at Sea App.

SeafarerHelp is the free multilingual helpline for seafarers and their families available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Contact SeafarerHelp by:

SMS: +44 (0)762 481 8405
 Skype: info-seafarerhelp.org
 Live chat: www.seafarerhelp.org
 Email: help@seafarerhelp.org
 Call collect on +44 (0) 207 323 2737

The Sailors' Society free Wellness at Sea App provides interactive challenges on each of the five elements of Wellness at Sea: Social, Emotional, Physical, Intellectual and Spiritual. Users receive daily feedback enabling them to monitor their progress. Android and iPhone compatible. For more information, visit www.sailors-society.org/wellness.



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