

# Shaping Shipping for People

## Mental health at sea

### Introduction

Good mental health is important for both personal wellbeing and work performance. However, the mental health among seafarers has become an area of increased concern. Reports of mental health issues at sea have become commonplace, and data indicates that seafaring is an occupation with increased risk of suicide<sup>1,2</sup>.

Social isolation, long working hours, commercial and regulatory pressures are some factors that may contribute to seafarers' poor mental health.

In this issue we discuss possible risk factors and findings from some of the most current studies on seafarers' mental health — including suggestions on how to support good mental health at sea.



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## What is mental health?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is:

*'...a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.'*

Good mental health is important to both personal wellbeing and to work performance. In contrast, poor mental health can lead to illness and reduced productivity. WHO estimates that depression and anxiety cost the global economy US\$1 trillion each year in lost productivity. WHO also estimates that there is a fourfold return in improved health and productivity for every dollar put into increasing the treatment for common mental disorders.

## Seafarers' mental health

In 2015, the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) conducted a study with more than 600 seafarers from a range of different countries<sup>3</sup>. It was found that a considerable number of seafarers often or sometimes feel anxious, hopeless, or depressed while onboard. It was also found that a noteworthy number of seafarers know work mates who are depressed or have considered suicide (table 1). These results are a cause for serious concern.

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Often feel anxious, hopeless, depressed while onboard     | 14% |
| Sometimes feel anxious, hopeless, depressed while onboard | 50% |
| Know work mates who are depressed                         | 52% |
| Know work mates who have considered suicide               | 23% |

Table 1 – percentage of agreement with each statement among seafarers included in the study (adapted from ITF<sup>3</sup>)

Information from employee assistance provider Hunterlink reinforces these findings. Between 1 July 2016 and 30 June 2017, Hunterlink provided more than 13,000 counselling sessions to international and domestic seafarers in Australia.

The most frequently presented issues in these counselling sessions were:

- depression
- workplace issues
- anxiety
- substance use
- stress.

According to Hunterlink, these issues often overlap. For example, a seafarer may experience depression due to work-related issues and use alcohol as a way of self-medicating.

## Risk factors at sea

Working at sea is challenging and seafarers may experience factors that negatively impact their mental health. The International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) identifies some risk factors that may contribute to poor mental health, including for example:

- high work pressures on board
- increasingly repetitive and boring tasks
- difficulty in getting sufficient high quality sleep and rest
- worry about the consequences of making a mistake
- being away from home for long periods of time
- pressure from more frequent inspections and administrative tasks
- greater commercial pressure from ashore.

(Adapted from ISWAN<sup>4</sup>)

While these factors are believed to be related to poor mental health, the link is not entirely clear.<sup>5</sup> A number of recent studies have sought to increase the knowledge and understanding of seafarers' mental health.



## Seafarers visiting Australian ports

Together with two leading universities, AMSA recently surveyed 1026 seafarers visiting Australian ports. More than 20 per cent reported that they felt strain due to being away from their family, and a considerable number of respondents reported that they work more than 69 hours per week (figure 1).

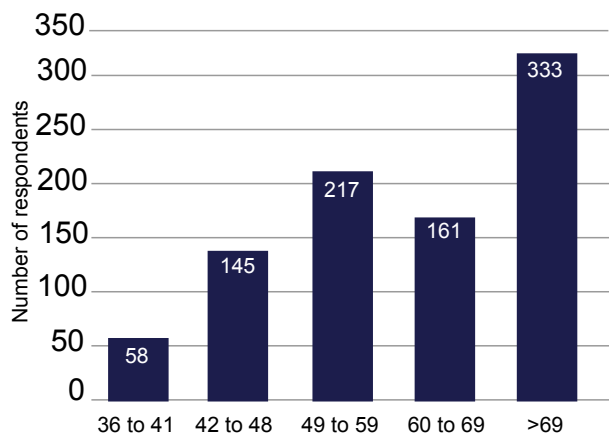


Figure 1 – hours of work per week among seafarers in the study

The reported hours of work per week is alarming given results indicate that seafarers who experience high work pressures or suffer from fatigue and sleep problems are more likely to experience symptoms of poor mental health, such as depression and anxiety (figure 2).

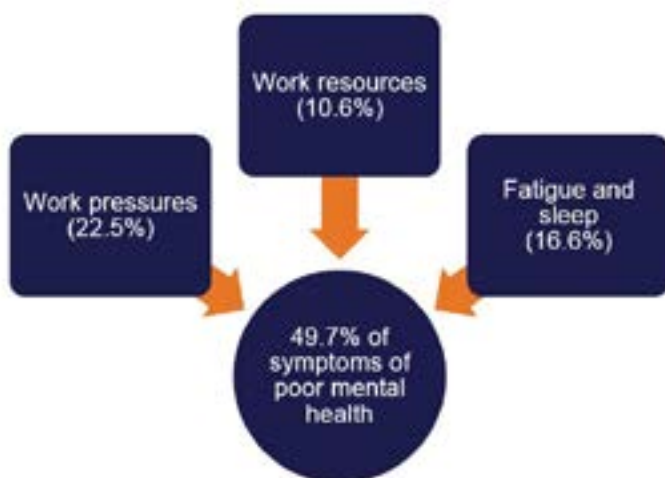


Figure 2 – work pressures, work resources (including trust in supervisor, crew stability, and safety leadership), and fatigue and sleep combined was found to explain 49.7 per cent of the symptoms of poor mental health

## What has been suggested to support good mental health?

Ensuring good mental health is not merely a matter for the individual. It is a matter for society as a whole. The model in figure 3 highlights different levels which can play a role in ensuring good mental health—individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, and policy.



Figure 3 – different levels which play a role in ensuring good mental health (adapted from ITF Seafarer's Trust<sup>6</sup>)

### Individual

According to the Australian Department of Health, eating healthy food, engaging in regular physical activity, getting enough sleep, and being able to relax the mind and body are key to ensuring both physical and mental health. Connecting with family, friends, and colleagues can also have a positive impact on mental health. Online resources such as self-assessment tools and health and wellbeing trackers can be useful. Sometimes these are available as free smartphone applications. Where serious mental health concerns exist, online resources should be used as a complementary tool only. They are not a substitute for meeting with a health professional. If you feel affected by poor mental health, seek professional support as soon as possible.

### Interpersonal

We spend a lot of time with our colleagues. This can put us in a good position to observe whether a work mate appears well or unwell. Reaching out and making colleagues feel valued and accepted can help create a more supportive environment. Gathering relevant information and resources, or assisting in making an appointment with a health professional, are useful ways in which colleagues can provide support.

## Look after your mental health

- Talk about your feelings
- Try and get enough sleep
- Keep active
- Eat well and drink sensibly
- Stay in touch with friends and family
- Seek help and support

## Organisation

The Seafarers International Research Centre<sup>7</sup> recommends that vessel operators take steps to reduce fatigue by ensuring appropriate sleeping arrangements on board. This can be done by screening out daylight, minimising disturbances, and placing a sufficient number of crew on board. Operators are also encouraged to provide healthy meal options and access to amenities such as communal areas, internet, and shore leave. Issue 5 of AMSA's Maritime Safety Awareness Bulletin provides more information on managing fatigue at sea.

## Community

A healthy family is better placed to support a seafaring family member. It is important to recognise that a family with a seafaring member can also suffer. By supporting each other, seafarers, their families, and communities are best placed to improve their wellbeing. Research has also shown how social media provides an important platform, not only for seafarers to connect with their partners ashore, but for family members of different seafarers to connect and support each other<sup>8</sup>.

## Policy

Regulatory frameworks such as the Maritime Labour Convention support the rights of seafarers to health protection, medical care, welfare measures, and other forms of social protection.

## Take-away message

Good mental health is important for both personal wellbeing and work performance. In contrast, poor mental health can lead to illness and reduced productivity. It is therefore essential to support good mental health among seafarers. In doing so, it should be recognised that individuals, families, communities, employers, work mates, and regulators can all make a difference.



## Useful resources

**The International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network** ([seafarerswelfare.org](http://seafarerswelfare.org)) is a charity dedicated to the relief of need, hardship or distress amongst seafarers of all nationalities.

**SANE Australia** ([sane.org](http://sane.org)) is a charity working to support Australians affected by complex mental illness. SANE's work includes mental health awareness, online peer support and information, stigma reduction, specialist helpline support, research and advocacy.

**Hunterlink** ([hunterlink.org.au](http://hunterlink.org.au)) is an employee assistance provider in Australia that specialises in early intervention programs, psychological and behavioural counselling with individual and organisational coaching.

**The Black Dog Institute** ([blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://blackdoginstitute.org.au)) is a research institute that aims to reduce the incidence of mental illness and the stigma around it — to actively reduce suicide rates and empower everyone to live the most mentally healthy lives possible.

**Beyondblue** ([beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au)) provides information and support to help everyone in Australia achieve their best possible mental health, whatever their age and wherever they live.

**Lifeline** ([lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au)) is a charity providing all Australians experiencing a personal crisis with access to 24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention services.

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