

Human Rights at Sea Briefing Note

Mindfulness for The Maritime Industry

World Mental Health Day
10 October 2019
Focus on Suicide Prevention

Human Rights at Sea

BRIEFING NOTE ON MINDFULNESS FOR THE MARITIME INDUSTRY



“Every 40 seconds someone loses their life to suicide”.

A report earlier this year identified that seafarers are amongst occupational groups with the highest risk of stress, a factor known to impact on mental health including the tragedy of seafarer suicide which has been highlighted as the ‘top cause of seafarer deaths’.¹ This has driven the development of a number of maritime industry programmes aimed at addressing and raising the profile of seafarer well-being.² Faster turnaround schedules in ports, increased technology use causing higher levels of isolation onboard vessels and decreased crew numbers on ships are putting serious pressure on seafarers who may spend months or even years away from home.³ So what can be done to support the maritime industry in caring for its mental health on this World Mental Health Day 2019 with a focus on suicide prevention?

In this Briefing Note, Gillian Higgins, an international criminal barrister, mediator, mindfulness teacher and member of the legal team which advised on the 100 Series Rules for the Use of Force at Sea explains how mindfulness can help. She shares what inspired her to start practising, some of the benefits that may be reaped and how to get started.

Key Facts and Figures



Suicides are preventable



One person dies by suicide every 40 seconds



A prior suicide attempt is an important risk factor for suicide



Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-29 year-olds



Suicide affects people of all age groups and all countries



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PERSONAL BACKGROUND

As an international criminal lawyer, I have represented heads of state, former presidents, military leaders and politicians. In the process, I've analysed corridors of evidence of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. Working on cases involving the genocide in Rwanda, the Balkan wars and post-election violence in Kenya has been a unique experience, but it has also involved prolonged periods of stress, which have periodically spilled over into my private life.

It was however, the prospect of becoming a mother to my adopted daughter five years ago that made me pause and consider how to deal with my accumulated stress and how to be present as a parent. I wanted to be able to respond more sensitively to situations at work and home. I wasn't sure how to bring about these changes but I knew from my limited experience of meditation some years ago, that it had helped me to feel a sense of calm. Over the past few years, interest in mindfulness had grown significantly and I was keen to learn more. I joined a local class, read as many books as I could and practised at home, even when I didn't want to.

After a few months, I started to feel a subtle difference. At work I became more able to cope with stressful situations, less reactively. I interpreted the outcomes of difficult conversations less personally and found rejection and disappointment somehow easier to handle. It was hard to explain this to others, but I felt slight positive shifts in my ability to manage people and difficult conversations. It even made my commute to London more manageable as it became a time of practice, rather than a source of irritation. The benefits were real. I managed to avoid or stop arguments at home by becoming aware of the tone of my voice – and changing it slightly. I paused and breathed deeply before responding to the inexplicable rage of my young daughter. I became aware of the physical rising of my own anger and frustration when things went wrong. I discerned more readily when to rest rather than 'push on through' and became more compassionate towards myself when I didn't live up to my own high expectations.

As a new parent, I got better at carving out much-needed breathing space and enjoying the moment, whatever it ended up looking like. I was able to drop, or at least amend, unrealistic expectations of how it was to raise a child. I used mindfulness to bring a moment of calm to the busyness of the school run, the chaos of play dates and the challenge of connecting with new parents without judgment. I realised that I could choose to breathe and refrain from losing my temper when my daughter threw yet another tantrum, and saw the wisdom of bringing her in close. While I didn't necessarily become visibly calmer, I began to recognise when I was at risk of being hijacked by an overwhelming emotion. Practising mindfulness empowered me to pause long enough to decide whether to be washed away by the emotion or allow it to wash over me, knowing that it would move on, if I let it.

¹ <https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/news/asia/suicide-the-top-cause-of-seafarer-deaths/>

² https://www.ukpandi.com/fileadmin/uploads/uk-pi/Documents/2018/Risk_Focus_Mental_Health.pdf

³ McVeigh J, MacLachlan M, Vallières F, et al. Identifying Predictors of Stress and Job Satisfaction in a Sample of Merchant Seafarers Using Structural Equation Modeling. *Front Psychol.* 2019;10:70. Published 2019 Feb 5. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00070

Human Rights at Sea

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WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

By now, most of us have heard about mindfulness, but what is it and how can you get started? It's all about paying attention to moments of everyday life with curiosity and openness, on purpose. It involves dropping into our present moment experience and being aware of what we're doing, while we're doing it, with a non-judgemental attitude. It sounds easy, but increasingly it's hard to find time to pause and take stock. Mindfulness invites us to experience the 'here and now', rather than hankering after how we would like life to be.

Research shows that our minds wander 46.9 per cent of the time, and that a wandering mind is for the most part, an unhappy one. We may find ourselves staggering around our mental 'To Do' list trying to remember to call home, file a report, deal with a difficult colleague and somehow get more sleep. The fact that our brains are burdened by a negativity bias doesn't help as it means that we tend to remember the bad, the difficult and the ugly. Mindfulness encourages us to witness the essence of the moment, just as it is, so we don't miss out on what's going on, right now.

Although mindfulness is simple, the hard bit is remembering to do it. It can be practised anywhere - on land or sea, at any time of the day or night. One way is to learn mindfulness meditation, by using a point of focus, such as the passage of your breath. When your mind gets distracted and wanders off into thinking, worrying, or planning, simply notice where it has wandered to and gently guide it back to following the physical sensation of the in-breath and the out-breath. Do this every time the mind wanders - with kindness to yourself. With practice, you recognise that thoughts are not facts and will come and go of their own accord, if you allow them to do so.

Another way is to use 'daily mindfulness practices'. These are instances during the day where you pause, breathe and bring moment-to-moment awareness to something as simple as the brewing of your tea or the taking of your morning shower. By pausing and staying present with the moment, you might notice the aroma of your drink or the sensation of the water as you take in your experience fully. So often, the uniqueness of the moment is lost as our focus shifts to simply getting through the day.



MINDFULNESS IS GOOD FOR US

Mindfulness is good for us as it takes us out of stress mode ('fight-flight-freeze') and engages what's known as our parasympathetic nervous system ('rest and digest'). This reduces harmful levels of stress hormones released into the body when the fight-flight-freeze response is activated. Engaging this half of the nervous system is a reliable way of regulating the impact of negative stress. Knowing that we can 'rest and digest' at any moment during the day by practising mindfulness encourages us to take breaks, breathe deeply and look after our needs - as well as those of others. Over 4,500 scientifically peer-reviewed reports support the benefits that mindfulness can bring. Research shows that regular mindfulness meditation practice improves concentration, decision-making and working memory. It reduces stress, lowers your heart rate and blood pressure, strengthens the immune system, alleviates insomnia and reduces anxiety and depression. Mindfulness also encourages emotional stability by enabling you to observe your feelings rather than getting caught up in the drama of how you perceive life to be.

In my work as a war crimes barrister, it has helped me to handle the narratives of witnesses I hear in court. Just as the practice teaches us how to allow thoughts to pass, we learn to apply the same approach to difficult or troubling things we see or hear that may otherwise disturb our peace of mind and ability to focus. In this way, we reduce the chance of being high-jacked by strong emotions or negative thoughts. As a mediator, mindfulness has helped me to refrain from pre-judging individuals who find themselves in difficult, emotional conflict. It has also helped me to handle more sensitively the interviewing of gang members and the debriefing of whistle-blowers. I have practised mindfulness in meetings, courtrooms, the office, at home and during my commute. I use mindfulness at different times throughout the day - when the train is late, when I forget to hit save on a document or when an angry email lands in my inbox. It can be practised anywhere, by anyone at any time of the day or night.

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IT HELPS US TO REPAIR SITUATIONS WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

Mindfulness also encourages us to be kind to ourselves - to have self-compassion, so that we don't beat ourselves up or become a victim of our own perfectionism. We hear more clearly the tone of our voice as we embark upon conflict. We notice the speed at which an argument escalates when things go wrong. In short, we're more able and willing to listen, repair and move on. Mindfulness grows our self-awareness, which gives us a better sense of what's actually going on and reminds us that we can choose how to respond, rather than simply react out of habit. We become more aware of what we need to do to look after ourselves - whether it's more sleep, time alone, or taking a walk with a friend.

Personally, it reminds me to schedule time between cases, to ring-fence family events, consider my own levels of tiredness and plan accordingly. The practice has helped me to navigate family arguments, listen and respond to complaints in meetings and decide whether or not to have a difficult conversation or to simply 'let it go'. It helps me to step back, give the benefit of the doubt and apologise when I'm wrong. It has gently infiltrated my daily life. This doesn't mean however that I no longer get angry or lose my temper. Rather, it gives me the pause I need to work out how I should respond. This moment of reflection can mean the difference between an angry row and a robust exchange of views.

MINDFULNESS HELPS US TO TACKLE OUR INNER CRITICAL VOICE

The bald truth is that we all have one, whether we like it or not. The inner critical voice is perhaps best described as the familiar negative tune the mind starts to hum to remind us of how inadequate it deems us to be. It's the voice of disgust or disappointment that appears almost audibly like a soundtrack on repeat. It's the judgemental way we speak to ourselves in a tone we would never use with a friend. We live alongside it and end up depleted or exhausted by its content. It is often a symptom of stress or exhaustion.

In the workplace, the critical voice might try to convince us that we're not popular or that we will never attain the professional heights we seek. It might whisper to us that 'life is elsewhere' or that we're simply not good enough. Some people view it as a necessary evil to drive them on to achieve better results, but in reality, it serves only to reinforce a sense of unworthiness and impacts our ability to make rational decisions.

So how can we tame it? The first step is to notice its arrival, which is easier said than done as we rarely question its existence. This is where mindfulness can help. Rather than automatically believing its content, we begin to recognise that our inner critic may be unhelpful, hurtful or even inhibit our progress if we pay too much attention to it. The practice helps us to develop a greater awareness of what we tell ourselves and whether or not it's true - or fair. So, the next time your inner critical voice appears, whether it's at work or home, see if you can hear what it says, notice how often it visits and how it makes you feel. You might want to label it in some way, such as 'negative voice telling me I'm not good enough' or 'self-defeating voice of doom before I've even started.' In response, choose to acknowledge its presence and gently invite it to leave. Noticing how vicious your own commentary can be often provides a much needed moment for reflection. Ultimately, by befriending your mind and understanding its habits, you become less vulnerable to its impact and less prone to being trampled by the demands of your own perfectionism.



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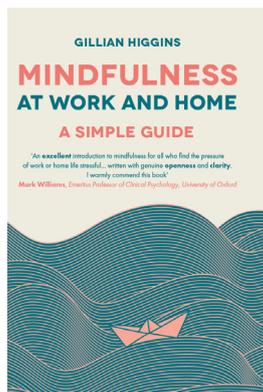
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A MINDFULNESS PRACTICE: THE MINDFUL PAUSE

Setting aside time to meditate daily can be hard to accomplish when you're confronted with thoughts about what else you should or could be doing, particularly when you're at work. The Mindful Pause is a simple and effective practice that can be used anywhere, by anyone. It's about finding a few minutes during the day to pause, breathe, notice your experience and then return to the task in hand. It's not a moment of no activity, or an immediate escape from the chaos that may surround you. Rather, it's an intentional interruption to the flow of what you're doing, wherever you are. It allows you to step outside your train of thought and take a break from demands. For me, it's a game-changer as a mini-practice that helps to relieve stress and reduce tension.

The Practice: To introduce a mindful pause into your working day, choose a time when you will not be disturbed for just a few minutes. It might be when you first arrive at the dock, at lunchtime or just before you finish your shift. Simply lower your gaze or close your eyes and tune in to the passage of your breath. When your mind starts to wander into planning, worrying or thinking mode, notice where it wanders to and then gently guide it back to the breath. Do this every time it wanders. Practise for just a few moments, at intervals during the day, whenever you feel the need to de-stress or take time out for yourself. Notice the difference it makes.



Mindfulness at Work and Home by Gillian Higgins, published in September 2019 by RedDoor Press.

The book is available at: www.practicalmeditation.co.uk, Waterstones, Foyles, Amazon and other bookshops online worldwide.

Gillian Higgins is an international criminal barrister at the Chambers of 9 Bedford Row. She is also the founder of Practical Meditation: www.practicalmeditation.co.uk.

Gillian designs in-house workshops on mindfulness for companies and individuals.

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RedDoor Press. <https://reddoorpress.co.uk/>

PR: The Book Publicist and Practical Meditation

For articles, blog posts and contributions to features, contact Gillian Higgins at www.practicalmeditation.co.uk

World Mental Health Day, 10 October 2019

Is a day for us to unite in our efforts to improve the mental health of people around the world. The theme selected for this year's day is suicide prevention. We will begin our efforts to raise awareness of the scale of suicide around the world and the role that each of us can play to help prevent it on 10 September, World Suicide Prevention Day (#WorldSuicidePreventionDay), which has been observed for more than 15 years. Our efforts will continue throughout the following month, until 10 October.

Every 40 seconds someone loses their life to suicide.

#40second

Who We Are

BACKGROUND

Human Rights at Sea was established in April 2014. It was founded as an initiative to explore issues of maritime human rights development, review associated policies and legislation, and to undertake independent investigation of abuses at sea. It rapidly grew beyond all expectations and for reasons of governance it became a registered charity under the UK Charity Commission in 2015.

Today, the charity is an established, regulated and independent registered non-profit organisation based on the south coast of the United Kingdom. It undertakes **R**esearch, **E**ducation, **A**dvocacy and **L**obbying specifically for human rights issues in the maritime environment, including contributing to support for the human element that underpins the global maritime and fishing industries.

The charity works internationally with all individuals, commercial and maritime community organisations that have similar objectives as ourselves, including all the principal maritime welfare organisations.

OUR MISSION

To explicitly raise awareness, implementation and accountability of human rights provisions throughout the maritime environment, especially where they are currently absent, ignored or being abused.



STAY IN CONTACT



We welcome any questions, comments or suggestions. Please send your feedback to:
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WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY 10 OCTOBER, 2019

WORKING TOGETHER TO PREVENT SUICIDE

HELP US:

- Improve awareness of the significance of suicide as a global public health problem
- Improve knowledge of what can be done to prevent suicide
- Reduce the stigma associated with suicide
- Let people who are struggling know that they are not alone

A DAY FOR "40 SECONDS OF ACTION"

- If you are struggling, take 40 seconds to kickstart a conversation with someone you trust about how you are feeling.
- If you know someone who has lost a loved one to suicide, take 40 seconds to start a conversation and ask them how they are doing.
- If you are an employer or manager, take 40 seconds to formulate a positive message of support to your employees about resources available to them in the workplace or local community in times of mental distress.
- If you hold political office, communicate publicly about action you are taking to promote mental health and prevent suicide, highlighting the 40-second statistic.

Every 40 seconds someone loses their life to suicide. #40second

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