



Mental and physical wellness of ships' crews is critical to the safety of all ships at sea. Ensuring a safe and team-oriented work environment are key objectives for both those employed at sea and the staff that support them based ashore, argues Dr. William Moore.

# KNOWING THE ROPES OF MENTAL HEALTH AT SEA



**William H. Moore, Dr. Eng.**  
Global Loss Prevention Director  
& Senior Vice-President  
Shipowners Claims Bureau, Inc., Managers  
The American P&I Club

**U**nder the best of circumstances, identifying and helping others with mental health challenges can be daunting. The physically and mentally demanding occupation of working at sea has additional mental and physical stressors that can adversely impact mental health. Knowing and applying the proper response to assist a seafarer while at sea may be a difficult task given a ship's location.

With these challenges for seafarers in mind, the American P&I Club, in cooperation with the Seamen's Church Institute (SCI) recently released Ad-

ressing and Managing Seafarer Mental Health Challenges. The objective of the guidance is to help seafarers and ship operators better understand the factors that contribute to mental health challenges for seafarers and what can be done to prevent and mitigate such effects on crews.

In particular, extreme stresses can negatively impact mental wellbeing. Research has shown that seafarers suffer higher rates of mental health-related problems than do the general population and other working occupations.

If we know what contributes to mental health-related challenges, we can better prevent and mitigate their effects on our colleagues and crews. This guide examines some of the common contributors to poor mental health among seafarers and proposes various measures that can be taken to combat them. It is also intended to help seafarers and ship owners recognize if a crew member is undergoing a mental health crisis while aboard ship, offering initial recommendations for steps that senior officers may consider taking to manage the situation in cooperation with shore-based management and qualified medical personnel.

## Stressors

We take into account that there are certain stressors that are distinctive to life and work aboard ship and can potentially produce acute responses for seafarers contributed to by social, workplace, personal, environmental and occasional episodic trauma related factors. Those stressors can be exacerbated by, and lead to, fatigue and poor sleep.

Mental health concerns can surface to a greater or lesser degree even in situations where acute stress or trauma are not present. The daily challenges of life at sea can at times make it difficult for a seafarer to maintain good mental health. Much can be done, however, to manage the causes and the symptoms, if help is sought and provided in a timely manner.

## Breaking the stigma barrier

The stigma associated with mental health care is a serious barrier to people seeking, providing, and receiving interventions and professional care at any time. This is not limited to seafarers: however, the perception that seafarers are resilient can lead them to conceal emotional suffering, believing that it

demonstrates a sign of weakness. Maritime stakeholders—such as ship owners, ship operators, shipmates, manning agents— should promote an environment where seafarers can safely disclose potential mental health concerns. The primary objective is for seafarers to reach out and be open to getting the mental health assistance that they need without fear of losing their jobs.

### Importance of intervention

Research has shown that it is also important to directly ask, “Are you thinking about suicide?” if you suspect that there may be even a slight chance that suicide is being considered. Although it may be a difficult question to ask someone, if they are considering suicide, they may feel relief that someone has brought up the subject and is willing to engage with them about it.

### Some effective preventative measures

- Good internet access allows seafarers not only to communicate with their support network of friends and family at home but could also enable communications with mental health resources and professionals.
- Adding support structures amongst the crew, such as a buddy system or mentorship program whereby crew members are encouraged to actively support and check in with each other.
- Port chaplains visit many ships every day and quickly sense the individual and crew morale aboard ship. Even on the ships with the best morale, an individual seafarer can be preoccupied by a personal or back-home distraction

and find it helpful to talk it through with a neutral third-party.

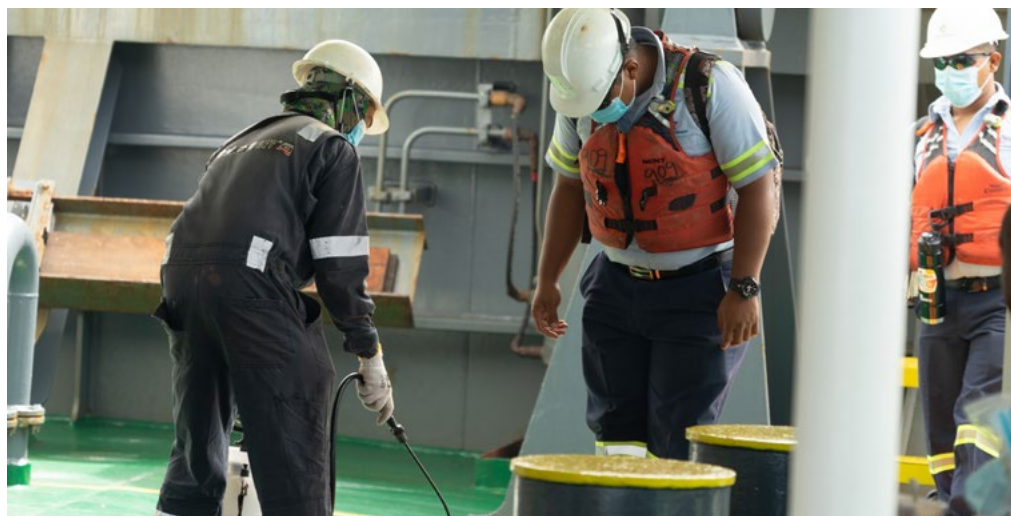
- Quality of food, opportunities for rest, hygiene, regular exercise, and positive team spirit strengthen the overall ship morale.
- Shore leave allows respite from the worksite, personal errands, and opportunity to “see the world.” Often, it can be difficult to take advantage of this due to short turnaround times in port or maritime security-related restrictions.
- Drills and skills—from fire drills to anti-piracy and harassment prevention training— equip crew and empower them to respond to acute stressors.
- Recognition and appreciation from shipowners and ship operators of the work their ship Masters and seafarers are doing. Recognition for service well done could be considered to boost morale.

### Fostering good mental health

In summary, good mental health can be encouraged by normalizing mental wellness as a natural extension

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to overall health and safety. Maintaining a balance between rest and exercise supplemented by a healthy diet is also important. A well established and implemented policy ensuring the support between crew members in a safe and bullying and harassment free environment is critical to ensuring a good safety culture for all crew onboard. Ensuring availability and opportunity to engage in positive activities including sports and hobbies should also be encouraged. Finally, confidential and professional help and counseling should be made available to seafarers wherever and whenever possible.



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