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Wellness at Sea

Since the pandemic hit, more than half of rotational workers, including seafarers, are suffering increased stress and anxiety, according to the SOS Foundation and Affinity Health at Work study 'Mental Health and the Remote Rotational Workforce' (2021).

Sara Baade
(CEO, Sailors' Society)

Seafaring was already one of the most challenging jobs in the world, and now the pandemic has imposed huge levels of stress onto the maritime industry and the seafarers who keep it going.

The crew change crisis and extended contracts have led to many seafarers feeling exhausted and worried about their families back home. The daily challenges of a career at sea, such as accessing health care, vaccines or a visit to pick up essentials, have been exacerbated.

With human error accounting for more than 80 per cent of all accidents at sea in pre-pandemic times, fatigue, stress and depression on board don't just pose a threat to seafarer mental health, but also to the effective running of a ship and the safety of its crew.

As a maritime charity that has supported seafarers, their families and communities for more than 200 years, Sailors' Society understands the importance of investing in crew welfare alongside the more traditional skills and knowledge necessary for a career at sea.

With more than 10 years of experience in wellness training and industry-leading work on mental health, we saw the need for a dedicated programme and launched Wellness at Sea in 2015. Combining both proactive and reactive mental health support for seafarers, Wellness at Sea aims to empower seafarers of all ranks to look after their own and others' wellbeing across every area of their lives, giving them the best opportunity to enjoy a fulfilling career at sea.

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Since its launch, Wellness at Sea has been making waves, providing wellness training to more than 34,000 seafarers to date.

The programme has developed to offer a wide range of welfare solutions beyond the original training to include e-learning, coaching, dedicated helplines, and peer-to- peer support.

Working closely with company partners, Sailors' Society develops a bespoke package to fit individual needs and budgets with a view to empowering seafarers to keep physically and mentally fit for a long and productive career.

Seaspan Ship Management has been using Sailors' Society's Wellness at Sea programme to support their staff since its launch six years ago. In that time, they've seen huge progress which they've attributed to the programme, with retention rates increasing from 88 per cent to 96 per cent.

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Crew motivation has improved and there's been a positive impact on the operational performance of their fleet. They've
also reported that their crew has really appreciated having a confidential helpline to use to talk to someone about how they're feeling.

So, looking after crew wellbeing is not only the right thing to do morally – it also makes good business sense.

And the stats back it up.

Earlier this year, the preliminary findings of a psychology PhD research project investigating the mental health of seafarers found that Sailors' Society's Wellness at Sea programme reduced anxiety and sadness.

Researcher Lauren Brown conducted the analysis with two groups of crew, from different nationalities. The seafarers had all been at sea for less than two years, serving on a number of vessels.

One of the groups had attended a Wellness at Sea workshop and were part of a Wellness at Sea peer support programme, while the other had not attended any kind of training on wellness or mental health.

Nearly 10 per cent fewer seafarers who had taken part in Wellness at Sea reported feeling anxious or worried at work on a regular basis than those who had not attended any wellness training, while 14 per cent fewer of the wellness-trained crew reported regularly feeling sad at work.

The seafarers who had been through Wellness at Sea also showed a better understanding of mental health and were less likely to stigmatise mental illness.

Breaking down these barriers is crucially important – it means individuals who are struggling are more likely to seek help if they need it.

These findings reflect what we have seen across thousands of seafarers who have completed Wellness at Sea training: even a small amount of training and support can make a big difference to a seafarer's mental health.

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At Sailors' Society, we're really heartened that more and more companies are seeing the value of investing in good crew welfare.

As part of our Wellness work, we developed our free 27-week Wellness at Sea Awareness Campaign in response to the pandemic last year. It was so successful, that we extended it to offer support and information not just to seafarers, but to their families and shore staff. More than 50 organisations have signed up to the campaign this time around, including

Swire Pacific Offshore, Fleet Management Ltd, Carnival Cruise Line, V. Ships and Wah Kwong.

We're also updating the Wellness at Sea e-learning platform and making it free for all seafarers when it launches next year so that it's easier for companies to get on board and protect their crews' mental health.

As reported in Waypoints, Issue 1, West of England P&I has generously committed to a 10-year partnership with Sailors' Society's Wellness at Sea programme, enabling our charity to continue to care for the mental wellbeing, and thereby safety, of the world's seafarers.

There may be no vaccine against poor mental health; but if we work together to give seafarers, their families and shore staff advice and support, we can help turn the tide on this mental health crisis, protecting the future of our industry and the people it relies upon.

Sailors' Society

Visit the Sailors' Society to find out more here.

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