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Are seafarers more susceptible to mental health problems?

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Mental health concerns are one of the main causes leading to an inability to work and the development of issues such as anxiety. In addition to the personal impact, the cost to the global economy of mental health issues is enormous, both in direct monetary terms and in decreased productivity.

Mental health concerns are often characterised as being at "crisis point" worldwide and continue to increase. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that at least 264 million people suffer from depression alone and the scale of this problem has extensive material impacts.

What is the difference between mental health and mental disorder?

Mental health is the wellbeing of the individual – every individual – irrespective of whether they suffer from a diagnosed disorder or not. Disorders are characterised by a combination of abnormal thoughts, perceptions, emotions, behaviours and relationships with others, some examples being bipolar affective disorder, dementia, and schizophrenia. Mental health can include aspects of these symptoms but is a more general term and can include factors such as the quality of the work environment – both physical and psychological (i.e. harassment and bullying) – social isolation and job satisfaction or stress. Everyone can suffer poor mental health, even without a diagnosed disorder. Depression can be both a diagnosed disorder and a more general feeling of mental unease and can lead to significant problems for the individual.

A helpful WHO fact sheet on mental health in the workplace can be found here Mental Health In The Workplace.

Are seafarers more susceptible to mental health problems?

The life of a seafarer means living and working under more challenging conditions than most people. Theirs is a continuous routine, seven days a week, working and living onboard the vessel, sometimes for very long contractual periods (nine months or more). They are often far from home and may have limited contact with their family and friends, all of which can contribute to feelings of isolation and loneliness. To add to this there are often cultural issues, where crew members regularly come from different countries with diverse backgrounds, religions and lifestyles. All these elements, coupled with stress, loneliness and the demanding nature of being onboard, can contribute directly to negative outcomes on mental health and concerns such as depression.

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Signs of depression and what to do

According to the Sailor's Society more than a quarter of seafarers suffer from depression and their campaign 'Not On My Watch' is dedicated to stopping suicide and dealing with depression. Find out more about this campaign here Not On My Watch .

Depression varies from person to person, but there are some common signs and symptoms. It is important to remember that these symptoms can be part of life's normal lows, but the more symptoms a person has, the stronger they are, and the longer they last, the more likely it is that the person is moving toward diagnosed depression. It is consequently vital that all learn to recognise these signs, such as people slowing down, looking withdrawn, or becoming irritable. Identifying these signs early means that support can be obtained from those around the individual or provided by dedicated external organisations.

One such organisation is the Sailors' Society. An international charity working in ports across the world, it provides a response network for seafarers and their families – from all faiths and from none – with welfare and practical support including trauma care and counselling for scenarios such as pirate attacks, natural disasters and other crises.

Full details of the support the Sailor's Society provides can be found here Seafarers Mental Health Wellbeing.

Improving mental health onboard

There are steps that can be followed onboard to help improve mental health and wellbeing at sea, which include the following:

- Have free internet access allowing contact with the outside world. This was identified by seafarers as the single most important provision employers could make to improving mental health by an Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH)-funded study through Cardiff University, canvassing 1,500 seafarers regarding their experience. Their summary report can be found here.
- Undertake some form of physical activity, whether this be going to the gym or doing a sporting activity such as swimming or basketball (if the facilities have been provided).
- Connect with people, whether through leisure activities (darts, cards etc.), sport activities or general social interaction with crew members.
- Make sure that the seafarer is getting adequate rest when needed.

- Maintain a schedule each day, with realistic goals, helps to keep the mind focussed on the task at hand and when a goal is completed a sense of accomplishment will be felt.
- Sustain a healthy diet with access to a good variety of food.
- Take a moment to self-reflect, whether by opening a port hole (if weather permits it) or going on deck to get a breath of fresh air to help to calm the mind.
- Provide clear and abundant advice on where a seafarer can request a referral to professional help or counselling, should the situation become overwhelming.
- Take some downtime to relax, whether by playing video games, going on mobile apps or watching television.

Ashore

Shore management also need to play their part in ensuring that the following are implemented and/or improved:

- Designate someone ashore to look after mental health at sea and ensure adherence to the policy.

- Ask for feedback from seafarers, making questionnaires anonymous to ensure honest answers and to find out what the specific problem(s) is/are.

- Analyse this feedback, looking at the findings to help develop a solution to the problems in order to ensure positive change within the working environment.

- Educate the crew, so that they are aware of where or whom they can contact to receive specialist help/advice, e.g. the Sailors' Society.

- Provide training for crew, so that they know what to do if they spot someone who is suffering from mental health issues or if they themselves are suffering.

- Put effective policies in place to tackle bullying and harassment, as these are key issues which can negatively impact on mental health.

Finally, as regards training courses available in this area, the Sailors' Society provides a Wellness at Sea coaching programme which is meant to empower seafarers to look after their own well-being. Information can be found here Wellness at Sea.