

Seafarer mental health: A rising tide

It is a sad fact that despite the many advances in the area of seafarer welfare in the last 30 years, the number of seafarers suffering from mental illness is on the rise. There is a pressing need to address this problem.



Ray Barker
Head of Operations, ISWAN
T +44 20 8253 0160
E ray.barker@iswan.org.uk

Over the last four years, ISWAN has noticed an increase in the number of seafarers calling our helpline suffering from a variety of mental health issues. There is also a consensus that the number of seafarer suicides has increased. However, no single organisation collates such information and existing data is not regarded as particularly accurate. One P&I club has reported that suicide among seafarers with mental health issues has tripled since 2014 and that 40% of those who died were cadets. This trend should be of grave concern to all stakeholders within the maritime industry. Tackling this problem and reversing this trend should be at the top of the agenda for those with the power to affect change in the lives of seafarers.

Risk factors

ISWAN's experience shows that working at sea exposes seafarers to a number of factors that can push them towards the higher-risk areas for mental health problems.

These factors include:

1. Social isolation: Long periods of time spent alone in cabins allows seafarers to ruminate over perceived problems.
2. Long voyages: The rigours of life at sea without a break can take a toll on even the most robust seafarer.
3. Fatigue due to the watch system: Lack of rest has been linked to a host of physical/emotional problems.
4. Separation from family and friends: Lack of contact with loved ones who can provide a sympathetic ear in times of stress can have a profound impact on some individuals.
5. Increased pressure: Lower crewing levels places the burden of on-board tasks on the shoulders of fewer seafarers, who will inevitably feel the strain.



The International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) is a UK-based charity which works to promote and support the welfare of seafarers globally.

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6. Lack of crew cohesion: Crews often do not mix socially as they did only 20 years ago; problems concerning language and culture may also exacerbate this problem.
 7. Lack of shore leave: Shorter turnaround times often deprive seafarers of the benefits of a run ashore.
 8. Harassment and bullying: Seafarers subjected to bullying and harassment live in close proximity to those who are bullying and harassing them.
 9. Precarious employment: With employment after the completion of their contracts not guaranteed, many seafarers experience anxiety when their current contracts come to an end.

The good news is that help is out there

Organisations such as ISWAN cannot resolve the problems of smaller crew sizes or lack of shore leave, but we can provide support for seafarers in need. An effective tool for seafarers suffering from mental health problems is emotional support (and if necessary, counselling) provided remotely. ISWAN delivers support via a helpline called 'SeafarerHelp', which operates 24 hours per day, 365 days per year for seafarers and their families. It is available to any seafarer, or their family, globally.

SeafarerHelp will try to assist with any kind of a problem and can be contacted by email, Facebook, LiveChat, telephone, Skype, WhatsApp, Viber, SMS text and vk.com. We speak 12 different languages including Filipino, Hindi, Russian, Chinese, Spanish and Arabic. Operatives have been trained by the Samaritans, counsellors and a clinical psychologist to further enhance their skills in these areas.

How can companies help

1. Stigma: General educational programmes for ship staff to help remove the stigma around mental health
2. Training: To help ship staff to be aware of the signs when someone is having a mental health problem, particularly for officers/senior officers
3. Awareness of resources: Companies can help promote knowledge of ISWAN's SeafarerHelp service and other organisations that can provide counselling to seafarers on board their ships – a list is provided at the end of this publication.
4. Taking steps to try to address some of the risk factors that are known to contribute to mental health problems amongst seafarers.

Conclusion

Whilst there is no easy solution to tackle mental health issues amongst seafarers, a combination of action by employers and access to services such as SeafarerHelp could hopefully address the trend of increased mental illness at sea.

