

UK P&I CLUB 

RISK FOCUS: MENTAL HEALTH

Managing the emotional well-being of crew at sea

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Mental well-being of seafarers – are we paying enough attention?

Sophia Bullard, PEME Programme Director at UK P&I Club, discusses the importance of managing the emotional well-being of crew at sea.

Loneliness, isolation and fatigue – these are usually the answers seafarers give when asked how they feel in their job. Being thousands of miles away from home and loved ones, it is no surprise that a seafarer's life can be a lonely one. The hostile environment, with low, or no, social interaction, can easily bring about depression and mental health issues.

For many seafarers, forming relationships on-board can be very difficult, and a clash of personality and culture types can be unavoidable, particularly when spending such long periods of time confined within a restricted space.

In 2013 Swansea University undertook research, which showed that between 2001 and 2005, merchant seafarers scored the second highest level of suicides amongst all professions, after coal miners. Today, the rate of suicide for international seafarers is triple that of shore workers, according to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).

Despite such high suicide rates within the industry, seafarers' mental well-being is seen as a taboo subject and a poorly discussed issue. Due to a high level of prejudice and poor education about tackling mental health and its implications, seafarers are not likely to seek counselling or professional support, and this often leads to grave consequences.

Choosing a career at sea

For many, a career at sea is a dream come true, and we must not forget the reasons for wanting to pursue such a career. Below are the top ten reasons, according to the International Chamber of Shipping, as to why people want to work at sea.

1. Good wages

Wages earned by seafarers are normally above similar professions ashore. Opportunities for accumulating savings, even when young, are considerable. The real value of wages may often be substantially greater because they are often tax free.

2. Early responsibility

Ships' officers enjoy considerable responsibility from the start of their careers. Within ten years it is possible to qualify as a Captain or Chief Engineer, with total responsibility for the operation of a ship and the management and safety of its crew.



3. Opportunity to travel

A career in shipping gives the chance of incredible global travel. This gives seafarers the chance to experience interesting and unusual places, rather than just the typical business or holiday destinations visited by many people.

4. Long-term prospects

There is a great need for more qualified ships' officers to meet the skills required by international shipping companies. There is a massive shortage predicted, so the demand for good people will increase.

5. Doing something useful

Seafarers make a massive impact – on both their immediate vessel and on world trade too. In most jobs it can be a struggle to see the value brought, being a seafarer makes it obvious.

6. Career flexibility and job security

Shipping is an ideal occupation for young people seeking something exciting and different to just working in an office, which in the long run will also lead to an enjoyable and well paid executive career in a major international industry.

7. International recognition

Ships' officers hold internationally recognised qualifications, so most officers are qualified to work for the thousands of international shipping companies located all around the world, on ships flying the flags of almost every country.

8. Long holidays

In most jobs, it is only possible to take a maximum of two or three weeks holiday at one time, but seafarers commonly enjoy generous leave or holiday periods. So while seafarers may sometimes be away from home for extended periods, they also enjoy the benefits when they come home.

9. A career that is different

A ship is a unique working environment, and those working on-board ship often develop lasting friendships with their colleagues and have a stimulating life which is different to the experience of many people working ashore.

10. Transferable skills

Qualifications and experience gained at sea are also readily transferable to other industries outside merchant shipping. Career opportunities extend to thousands of shore-based management jobs, which require people with seagoing experience.

Wellness at Sea programme

In claims presented by members, UK P&I Club has continued to see an increase in mental health and suicide cases. Mental health affects crew of all ages, nationalities and ranks and a recent analysis of crew mental health revealed anxiety, social isolation, pressure of work and disturbed sleep can all be experienced by crew. These situations often lead to an incident and sadly, in some severe cases, they even lead to the death of a seafarer.

To assist members concerned with the rise in suicide cases, we spoke to a number of industry experts, including Sailors' Society, who introduced us to their *Wellness at Sea* Programme. We

quickly realised the programme was a unique product and a valuable addition to the training of crew worldwide.

Wellness at Sea seeks to combat issues by addressing 'wellness' as a holistic concept made up of five areas of well-being: Social, Emotional, Physical, Intellectual and Spiritual. The UK P&I Club is supporting Sailors' Society's Emotional Wellness training module within its *Wellness at Sea* coaching programme.

The training, the second in a set of five modules, is designed to improve emotional well-being through early identification of mental health issues and empowerment of the seafarer to handle challenging situations at sea.

Through the training, we believe crew can become better equipped to identify and manage the challenges of life at sea, and this can help prevent deterioration of their health whilst on-board. The programme could lead to a decline in incidents and potentially could save lives.

Wellness at Sea also seeks to educate seafarers, often before they embark on an offshore career, about the challenges of a maritime lifestyle and how to efficiently cope with them. By tackling issues before they become a problem, seafarers will be better educated as to what to expect with a life at sea.

As an industry we need to work together to break the cycle of not speaking up when it comes to mental health. Courses such as the *Wellness at Sea* programme help educate seafarers about mental struggles and can help improve retention rates and keep up staff productivity. For more on *Wellness at Sea*, visit: www.sailors-society.org/wellness



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