

# Seafarers' mental health and wellbeing



# Our research programme

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## What's the problem?

In the context of growing concerns about mental health and wellbeing at work, this research set out to explore mental health and wellbeing among seafarers working in the international cargo shipping industry. To investigate the nature and extent of the issue we commissioned Helen Sampson and Neil Ellis from the Seafarers International Research Centre.

Seafarers working in the contemporary international cargo shipping sector tend to work as part of small crews made up of people from different countries. Most work long hours and have voyage-based contracts lasting for up to 12 months at a time. Communication with families and friends ashore is subject to limitations as a consequence of a lack of internet availability, associated high costs, time zone differences, and long working hours. In this context, the workforce may be regarded as particularly vulnerable to mental ill-health.

In recent years some key stakeholders in the industry have emphasised the need to protect seafarers' mental health and wellbeing. However, their efforts have been hampered by confusion produced by apparently conflicting evidence relating to indicators of poor mental health such as suicides and repatriations on mental health grounds. In addition, seafarers' perspectives have not previously provided the basis for recommendations for good practice, which has limited the effectiveness of many health promotion strategies in this area.

## Aims

The research sought to address the following questions.

1. Given the changes to ship-board work and life in the twenty-first century, are mental health problems among seafarers considered to be a significant problem by key stakeholders within the international cargo shipping industry?
2. Which factors and features of life on cargo vessels do seafarers identify as supporting or undermining good mental health and wellbeing?
3. Which policies and practices could be implemented by ship operators and/or welfare bodies to provide better support for the mental health and wellbeing of seafarers?

## Objectives

In addressing these questions the research sought to:

1. consider existing published evidence relating to the mental health of seafarers.
2. consider the analyses of P&I clubs (which serve as insurers to ship operators) relating to mental health repatriations and suicide cases.
3. ascertain the views and experiences of HR managers working in ship operating companies.
4. consider the perspectives of large numbers of seafarers to discover more about their levels of happiness and the causes and remedies for unhappiness and distress on board ship.
5. explore, in some detail, the ideas and attitudes of a small number of employers, seafarers, maritime charities and stakeholder organisations with regard to what could and should be done to improve the mental wellbeing of seafarers.

## What did our researchers do?

The research team conducted a review of relevant literature.

A questionnaire was sent to a small, randomly generated, sample of HR managers working in ship operating companies. This resulted in the return of 43 completed questionnaires.

In addition, an interviewer-administered questionnaire was used with a large sample of seafarers (1,507 in total). The researchers conducted 15 interviews with employers, seafarers, maritime charities and stakeholder organisations. A further 15 interviews were conducted with personnel working in P&I clubs, which serve as insurers to ship operators. The researchers made requests to them for data.

## What did our researchers find out?

The literature is inconclusive in establishing the extent of the problem of mental ill-health (and suicide) among seafarers relative to comparable populations. However, there is evidence of an increase in recent-onset anxiety and depression among serving seafarers and there is evidence that in some roles seafarers may be particularly prone to emotional exhaustion and 'burn-out'.

A consideration of the perspectives of seafarers indicates that significantly more seafarers are happy or very happy at home than report being happy or very happy on board. Seafarers are also significantly more likely to report being lonely at sea than at home. Isolation, loneliness, lack of shore leave, fear of criminalisation, fear of job loss and separation from family all predispose seafarers to mental ill-health. Most of the activities that seafarers identified as making them happy at home were not available to them at sea (many involved interactions and activities with families and friends, for example). Seafarers were able to identify

a range of things which had the potential to make them happy on board. However, in many cases they described how these were not available on their current vessel.

When they were experienced, family-related problems caused most seafarers to feel 'down' or depressed on board. Various ship-specific factors caused seafarers to feel down, such as too much work, being unable to take shore leave and poor food. Various crew-related factors caused seafarers to feel down, such as having a 'bossy captain', experiencing discrimination, being blamed for things and falling out with superiors and other colleagues. Getting tired was identified by the majority of seafarers as an underlying cause of shipboard depression, as was boredom.

Mental health and welfare is identified by maritime charities, P&I clubs and stakeholder organisations as an important issue. However, the research revealed that employers do not recognise the importance of mental health and welfare on board to the same extent as maritime charities and other stakeholders. Neither employer records nor records obtained from P&I clubs provide evidence of an increasing problem of repatriations as a result of mental ill-health or of suicides among seafarers.

Maritime stakeholders and charities are inclined to recommend proactive self-help guidance for seafarers and reactive services in support of seafarers. They are less likely to recommend proactive changes to seafarers' terms and conditions of work and shipboard life. By contrast, some employers and most seafarers recognise that proactive changes to conditions of shipboard life and work can be significant for mental wellbeing.

Some employers have adopted a wide-ranging approach to improving seafarers' mental health and wellbeing on board, which includes proactive changes to terms and conditions of employment as well as improvements in the quality of ship-board life. However, 55 per cent of employer respondents stated that their companies had not introduced any policies or practices aimed at addressing issues of seafarers' mental health in the last ten years. Seafarers reported a range of shipboard strategies which they used to combat depression, including recreational activities and interactive activities

Seafarers identified the provision of free internet access as the most significant contribution which could be made by employers to the improvement of mental health and wellbeing on board. Alongside free internet provision, they identified a range of areas where employers could take action in support of mental wellbeing on board. These included: terms and conditions of work, relationships on board, physical health, accommodation and recreation.

### What does the research mean?

Strategies to support good mental health need to be orientated towards proactive ship-board improvements designed to stimulate positive social interaction (with those on board and those ashore) and to improve opportunities for seafarers to relax, recharge and uplift their mood. Improvements in terms and conditions in support of a good work life balance for seafarers are also required.

1. Companies and stakeholders should take steps to address the significant difference found between the happiness levels of seafarers when they are on board and when they are at home.
2. Companies and stakeholders should be aware of the evidence indicating that recent-onset psychological disorders are increasing among serving seafarers.
3. Companies and stakeholders should recognise the importance of good mental health and wellbeing in the cargo shipping industry.
4. Companies and stakeholders should reconfigure their efforts to support mental health and wellbeing on board in order to reduce proactively the incidence of unhappiness and of recent-onset anxiety and depression among seafarers.

Specific recommendations are made as follows:

1. Free and unlimited internet access should be made available to all seafarers on board all cargo vessels.
2. In recognition of the differences between individuals, a varied menu of interactive recreational activities should be available to seafarers on board. While it has been difficult to judge what this would constitute it is nevertheless necessary to recommend specific levels of provision to arrive at a minimum standard and level playing field. Levels of provision have therefore been arrived at which are considered genuinely to provide a range of provision while not placing an undue burden on ship operators. This explanatory note may be applied to all the quantified recommendations arrived at in the report.
  - a. As a minimum, one of the following activities should be facilitated on board: basketball, squash, swimming.
  - b. In addition, a minimum of four of the following activities should be facilitated on board: table tennis, darts, barbecues, karaoke, bingo (with prizes) and card and board games.

3. A varied menu of solitary recreational activities should also be available to seafarers on board.
  - a. As a minimum, a dedicated gymnasium with three different pieces of equipment should be provided.
  - b. In addition, a minimum of two of the following should be provided: a sauna, a book and DVD library, satellite TV within cabins, a library of interactive video games.
4. Comfortable mattresses and furnishings within cabins should be prioritised to facilitate rest and sleep.
5. Shore leave should be provided at every opportunity and for all ranks.
6. Varied, good quality food should be provided on board and a feeding rate of at least US\$11.00 per person should be allocated to each vessel. (This figure is arrived at using known existing feeding rates as a guide.)
7. Self-help guidance on improving mental resilience should be provided to all seafarers.
8. Contracts should balance work and leave time for all ranks in a ratio which is not worse than 2:1 and with an upper limit of a maximum of six months on board.
9. Anti-bullying and harassment policies should be introduced and enforced.
10. Officers should receive training in creating a positive atmosphere on board, including via the provision of positive feedback on work, when appropriate, and respectful interactions with subordinates.
11. Confidential counselling services should be made available to seafarers.



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