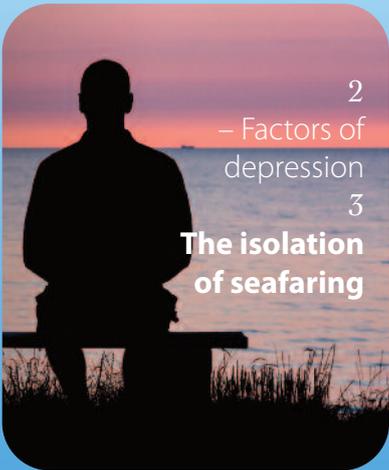


Contents:



2
– Factors of depression
3
The isolation of seafaring

4 – Recognising depression

5 – Suicide case studies



7
Peace of mind
– Steps you can take
– Seek help

8 – Keeping in touch, Wellness at Sea



Beating stress and depression

Dear Seafarer,

Andreas Lubitz, the co-pilot at the controls of the Germanwings jet that crashed into the French Alps in March this year, had a mental illness but kept this hidden from his employer and colleagues.

Of course, if someone develops a mental illness it is not something a colleague can necessarily spot, but there are often signs that in hindsight could have led to helping a colleague in distress.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that more than 800,000 people die due to suicide every year and it is the second leading cause of death among 15-29 year olds. Every suicide is a tragedy that affects families and communities and has long-lasting effects on the people left behind and seafaring is one of the recognised high risk occupations for suicide. Seafarers are exposed to loneliness with separation from family and friends, often spending months away from home and working unsociable shifts. They experience stress and fatigue and there are often cultural differences with colleagues on board. There are also short turnarounds which reduce the amount of shore leave. A combination of these factors can lead to anxiety and depression and in some cases to suicide.

The most effective means of trying to prevent problems with mental health and to avoid stress is to encourage open

communication amongst the crew. Senior management ashore and the officers on board should be acutely aware of the need to maintain a high level of social interaction and impose a transparent and positive culture on board the ship. Mentoring should also be encouraged and this is explored in a little more detail in this edition. Mentoring can help guide, support and inspire junior colleagues and can help them to bridge the gap that can exist between their shore life where there is constant contact with family and friends through social media, and their life at sea where there will not necessarily be live communication with those back home and probably minimal e-mail opportunities.

Senior officers can also raise awareness of mental health problems at safety meetings and on other occasions. Any symptoms recognised should be discussed with senior management ashore to ensure that help is provided and a solution found for any problems.

In this edition of Health Watch we highlight a Wellness at Sea programme launched by the Sailors' Society that aims to update seafarer training to meet the psychological demands of the 21st century.

If you have any questions or comments about any of the articles in this issue, please do not hesitate to contact us using the email address on the back cover.



Here are factors which can cause depression on board:

Isolation and loneliness

For those feeling lonely or vulnerable it is advisable to seek out the company of others rather than remain on their own. Taking part in recreational activities with colleagues can really help.

Absence of family and friends

The absence of family and friendship networks means there is often a lack of social and emotional support and this can make seafarers feel more vulnerable. Sometimes, seafarers will be away from home at times of family crisis or social unrest in their homeland, leaving the seafarer feeling helpless and isolated. Traumatic events onshore, such as bereavement or a relationship break-up, increase the feeling of isolation on the ship.

Stress

Work pressures, money worries, relationship problems and life-changing moments (such as becoming a new parent) can all leave a person feeling unable to cope.



Drug and alcohol abuse

Some people may turn to drink or drugs to try to drown their sorrows or escape their loneliness. However, the use of alcohol and drugs (both legal and illegal) can alter a user's perceptions and behaviour, can influence their underlying mental state and alter their mood. It can also have a serious effect on your general health.

Cultural differences

There are often many nationalities on board ships and they may have different attitudes towards mental illness. This can make it difficult to recognise and to treat it effectively. Seafarers who are severely depressed and are perhaps thinking of suicide or self-harm may not tell their fellow crew members because mental illness is not discussed openly in their cultures.

Limited shore leave

The fast turnaround times of modern ships often result in limited time in port and therefore less opportunity for shore leave.



The **isolation** of seafaring

What can be done?

The most effective way of preventing problems with mental health is to encourage open communication amongst crew. As a member of the crew you will want to be part of a team that is happy, healthy and productive. Meal times are an opportunity to interact with your colleagues and, hopefully, efforts are made to discourage colleagues from regularly eating alone and retiring to their cabins to watch a DVD or play computer games.

Maybe you could start a book club with regular meetings to discuss your chosen book, or encourage evening presentations where crew share an insight into their favourite hobby or sport, or delve into their own culture and customs. One of our Members has a resident artist programme where each year they have several artists on board, all working in different media and creating work inspired by observing the oceans and the activities on board. No doubt this can motivate the crew too. Perhaps you could encourage your own artistic programme on board, taking inspiration from the diverse artistic heritage of the work force. Or how about a photographic competition for each voyage?

It is up to the captain and the senior officers to set the tone on board. Some Members have regular social BBQ nights on board where all crew are encouraged to attend and, hopefully, have a go on the karaoke machine. Sport has always played an important part in social activities for crew and, where the opportunity arises, it is always good to challenge another ship in the fleet or a third party ship to a game of darts or basketball. You could organise a ship quiz or even an inter-ship quiz.

Do you have regular social activities on board where everyone gets together for some fun? If so, do let us know by contacting us at the e-mail address on the back cover.





Recognising depression

Depression is not simply feeling unhappy or fed up for a few days. When you are depressed you feel persistently sad for weeks and even months and the symptoms are bad enough to interfere with your work, social life and family life.

It is not a trivial condition, it is a real illness and it affects different people in different ways. There are a wide range of symptoms which are described below. When depression and feelings of hopelessness intensify, they can sometimes lead to suicidal thoughts. Cases of depression are increasing among men in their 30s to 50s.

One of the common problems with depression is that the symptoms are not always apparent to those around the depressed person. Following a suicide on board, many on the ship will say that they did not realise anything was wrong with their colleague. Among those suffering from depression, statistically men are more likely than women to take their own lives. This is partly due to the fact that men suffering from depression are more likely to go unrecognised and untreated because studies have shown that they are less likely to seek help, often viewing poor mental health as a weakness.

Here is a list of many of the common symptoms. Although a person is unlikely to have every one of these symptoms

described, if you experience some of the symptoms for most of the day, every day for more than two weeks, then you should seek help from your doctor.

Psychological symptoms include:

- + Continuous low mood or sadness
- + Feeling hopeless and helpless
- + Low self-esteem
- + Feeling tearful
- + Feeling guilt-ridden
- + Feeling irritable and intolerant of others
- + Having no motivation or interest in things
- + Finding it difficult to make decisions
- + Not getting any enjoyment out of life
- + Feeling anxious or worried
- + Having suicidal thoughts or thoughts of harming yourself

Physical symptoms include:

- + Moving or speaking more slowly than usual
- + Change in appetite or weight (usually decreased but sometimes increased)
- + Constipation
- + Unexplained aches and pains
- + Loss of libido
- + Disturbed sleep (eg finding it hard to fall asleep at night or waking up very early in the morning)

Social symptoms include:

- + Taking less interest in work
- + Taking part in fewer social activities and avoiding contact with friends
- + Neglecting your hobbies and interests
- + Difficulties in your home and family life

Suicide warning signs include:

- + Talking about suicide - you may think people who talk about suicide won't go through with it but many people who have taken their own lives will have talked about these feelings with someone
- + Isolation and withdrawal from crew mates
- + A perceived 'failure' - not passing an exam or going through a relationship break-up
- + Behaving out of character - a person may seem calm, peaceful or even euphoric before committing suicide but it is more common for them to be withdrawn and uncommunicative
- + Sleep problems, especially rising early
- + Low self-esteem
- + Not taking care of one's appearance
- + Eating badly
- + Feeling useless and wondering 'what's the point?'

Suicide case studies

The Club is a sponsor of the Nautical Institute Mariners' Alerting and Reporting Scheme (MARS) which is a confidential arrangement where crew can send in reports of accidents or near misses and these are then published on a monthly basis without fear of reprisals. The purpose is to raise awareness and learn lessons to avoid similar incidents. Here is a case taken from MARS and also another case investigated by the Danish Maritime Authority.

Home sickness led to suicide attempt

While coasting at the end of a trans-Pacific passage, a training module was planned for two deck cadets after lunch on the bridge but only one cadet showed up and the other could not be found.

The crew was mustered for a search and some crew members reported seeing the missing cadet before lunch, leaving the accommodation area.

When the crew failed to find him, the ship was turned around and coastal authorities were informed. The weather turned steadily worse and several ships joined in the search and rescue operations.

At around noon the following day, one of the participating ships sighted the cadet and took him into a lifeboat. After receiving first aid on board the rescuing ship, his condition stabilised and after arrival in port he was transferred back to his ship where the circumstances surrounding his disappearance were investigated.

It was found that the cadet felt alienated and victimised because the majority of the other crew members were of a different nationality. Due to severe home sickness and perhaps a lack of counselling on board, he decided to take his own life by jumping overboard. Luckily he did not succeed.

Poor shipboard culture led to suicide

Poor shipboard culture, along with a questionable decision not to initiate a search, were highlighted in the Danish Maritime Authority's report into the disappearance of a seafarer from the *TOR ANGLIA* in November 2007.

The ship was travelling from Cadiz on a voyage to Santa Cruz de Tenerife with 22 crew members on board. The 44-year-old Polish AB had failed to turn up for a watch at 0800 hours having last been seen at midnight the night before going down the indoor staircase from the bridge.

A search was carried out on board but the AB was not found. The Maritime Rescue

Coordination Centre in Tenerife then initiated a search and rescue operation, but they could not find the AB and so the *TOR ANGLIA* proceeded on its way to port.

During the master's inspection of the cabin of the missing AB, two pill boxes, with Polish text on them, were found. One was empty and was in the wastebasket and the master had the impression that it was a psychoactive drug (one that changes brain functions and can alter perception, mood or consciousness). The boxes were not saved but according to the report from the Spanish police, the drug was Oxazepam, which is used as a tranquiliser for anxiety and also to treat withdrawal symptoms after alcohol abuse.

The police received statements from the master, chief officer and three Polish crew members, one of whom said he believed it to be suicide because the missing AB had become very introverted and did not communicate much.

The subsequent investigation by the Danish marine accident division highlighted a poor culture on board the ship and also emphasised that two Polish crew strongly criticised the master in written statements as to why he did not turn the ship around at once and instigate a search for the victim.





Peace of Mind

Depression is not likely to go away on its own. However, the good news is that with the right support and treatment, most people will make a full recovery.

Telling a medical professional, such as a doctor or counsellor, about your difficulties will go a long way to help as they can help you change any negative thought patterns you may have and this will help with recovery.

There are a variety of ways to help manage the risk of becoming depressed and many of them focus on eating well and keeping fit and generally making sure that our bodies remain in good physical shape. But a good state of mind is a just as important way of boosting morale and encouraging a sense of well-being.

Here are a number of steps you can take to improve your physical and mental state and to help avoid becoming depressed:



Recreation

The importance of bringing crew together to interact socially cannot be stressed enough. There are many activities you can take part in as a group, including watching television or films, playing games such as cards, listening to music or simply talking to each other. Don't let any language barriers on board prevent these activities taking place as these play an important part in avoiding loneliness on board.

When ashore, seafarers' centres also offer the chance to get on the internet and make a phone call, as well as offering recreational activities such as pool, table tennis and darts. Many also contain a small convenience store and some have a library of donated books.

Mind over matter

We all have negative thoughts from time to time, but it is how you choose to react to these thoughts that really matters. It is important to practise mindfulness, a simple technique where you really focus on the present moment, rather than getting distracted by thoughts of the past or the future. Mindfulness can increase your awareness and acceptance of your surroundings and everyday life and will make you feel more peaceful and less stressed.

Keep active

Physical activity has long been associated with good mental health as it has been proved that exercise increases the levels of serotonin – an important hormone which is widely considered to contribute to feelings of well-being and happiness.

Seek help

There is no doubt that depression is a serious illness and it is unlikely to go away on its own, but with the right treatment and support, most people will make a full recovery. If you are suffering from depression, you should tell a medical professional, such as the ship's medical officer or a port physician, how you are feeling. Counselling from a doctor or therapist is a proven method of helping to change negative thought patterns and help with recovery.

Take time out

If you are suffering from depression, you must make time for yourself - take up a relaxing hobby such as reading, drawing or puzzles.



Eat well

A nutritious, balanced diet can really help with a general feeling of well-being.

Get enough sleep

Try to get between six and nine hours of good quality sleep to help combat stress and fatigue.

Talk it through

Remember, it is okay to discuss your thoughts and feelings – find someone you trust and feel comfortable with.

The following people and organisations can help:

Colleagues – if you find you cannot speak to a professional, at least try and talk to a colleague or someone else you trust and feel comfortable talking to.

SeafarerHelp is a confidential service, available by phone, email, SMS, live-chat or post. Staff can offer advice in 27 different languages.
Tel: 00 44 20 7323 2737, email: help@seafarerhelp.org web: www.seafarerhelp.org

Chaplains – they are trained to offer support and comfort, whether you are simply feeling homesick or experiencing a personal crisis.

There are also three important organisations that have bases in many ports around the world:

The Mission to Seafarers cares for seafarers of all ranks, nationalities and beliefs. Through its global network of chaplains, staff and volunteers, it offers practical, emotional and spiritual support to seafarers through ship visits, drop-in centres and a range of welfare and emergency support services. In over 100 ports its

Flying Angel centres provide a 'home away from home' for seafarers who may have been at sea for up to two years. Here they can enjoy time away from their ship and use internet and phone facilities to get in touch with loved ones after months away.

www.missiontoseafarers.org

Apostleship of the Sea provides practical and pastoral care to all seafarers, regardless of nationality, belief or race. Its port chaplains and volunteer ship visitors welcome seafarers, offer welfare services and advice, practical help, care and friendship. The Apostleship of the Sea in Great Britain is part of an international network known to the maritime world as Stella Maris.

www.aos-world.org

Sailors' Society maintains a staff of professional Chaplains who are experienced in multi-faith and cross-cultural work. The Chaplains and volunteers assist thousands of merchant seafarers each year; extending a hand of friendship, hospitality and pastoral care to all those seafarers they meet regardless of their rank or circumstance.

www.sailors-society.org

Keeping in touch

Communication is key when it comes to avoiding loneliness – a major cause of depression – and in recent times social media has been playing a vital role in helping to keep seafarers in touch with friends and family and even other seafarers around the world.

Along with **Facebook** and **Twitter**, there are some other websites providing a vital link with the outside world:

Crewtoo – this is probably the largest informal social networking website for seafarers with over 100,000 members. It allows crew members to interact with other maritime professionals around the world.
www.crewtoo.com

My Ship – another social networking site dedicated to seafarers which boasts over 95,000 members.
www.myship.com

Sea Folks – This social network site also features a variety of forums and web blogs.
www.seafolks.com

Mentoring

Mentoring plays an important part in supporting seafarers and also for those ashore who support them. Mentoring should be incorporated into the daily on board routine.

A few years ago The Nautical Institute launched a book called 'Mentoring at sea – the 10 minute challenge', which aims to show that anyone can be a mentor at sea and anyone can need mentoring and shows how it only takes 10 minutes to get started.

Mentoring allows the passing on of experience and knowledge in an informal way and can cascade down from senior officers to junior officers and cadets. As well as helping with skill development, it can also help with morale and lead to a reduction in the number of accidents and incidents on board.

Senior crew who are mentoring juniors are being trained in how to spot signs of depression and how to encourage their crew to talk about these issues.

The International Maritime Mentoring website was set up in 2012 to match volunteer maritime mentors with seafarers. The site records details of an individual's years of experience, career aspirations, location, spoken languages and then matches them with a suitable mentor.

www.maritimementors.com

Wellness at Sea: a new initiative from the Sailors' Society

Wellness at Sea is Sailors' Society's new coaching programme for seafarers, aimed at improving on board well-being. The course, which has been designed for cadets and officers, seeks to prepare seafarers for life at sea and the social and emotional problems that they might face.

The programme comes as a positive response to a call from within the industry to address the issue of poor mental health and its associated risks. Wellness at Sea takes a preventative role in equipping seafarers in self-awareness so that they can recognise the early signs of poor wellness in themselves. Prevention is key; if left unaddressed, issues such as fatigue, loneliness and depression can quickly turn a stimulating and rewarding career at sea into a gruelling and miserable experience.

The course examines wellness through a holistic lens by exploring five key modules, which each address a different dimension of wellness – Social, Emotional, Physical, Intellectual and Spiritual. The idea here is that the seafarer's experience of life at sea is related to their makeup as an organised whole – as a holistic, multidimensional and unique human being. Recognising that life at sea can present seafarers with a number of challenges, the programme encourages seafarers to draw support from fellow crewmates – their natural support network whilst at sea.

Wellness at Sea has now been launched globally across three different continents and roll-out of the programme is now underway.

www.sailors-society.org/welfare-mission/wellness/

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