

# WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY: STRATEGIES FOR SHIPOWNERS AND MANAGERS

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Ahead of World Mental Health Day, observed on 10 October, leading telemedical assistance provider, MedSea, an International SOS Company, shares insights about mental health on board and provides strategies for management to support seafarers.

We are all aware of the challenging environment seafarers face, often away from their families for extended periods of time; unable to access a social support system. These factors alone can exacerbate any mental health issues, so for shipowners and managers World Mental Health Day should serve as an opportunity to learn more about how to better support those at sea.

MedSea manage on average 5,000+ medical cases every year, responding to everything from minor scrapes and burns to serious medical emergencies. On a yearly basis only about 1%

of cases relate to mental health issues, which may indicate underreporting and provide an opportunity for education. Even when further professional counselling services are offered, uptake remains low, suggesting further work is required to destigmatise the perceptions around mental health and encourage seafarers to seek support when needed.

## UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

A holistic approach to health recognises that emotional issues can manifest through physical symptoms. Stress and anxiety can lead to headaches, digestive problems, and other physical ailments. By facilitating access to quality medical services, regardless of the type of ailment, better support can be provided for mental health related issues onboard.

## CASE STUDY: INSOMNIA

How providing an open channel for communication, allowed the seafarer's overall health to be addressed in a more holistic manner:

1. A seafarer called MedSea: Reporting a low mood and inability to sleep, which was affecting their work performance
2. MedSea provided sleep hygiene information and relaxation techniques
3. During the consultation with MedSea the seafarer also disclosed anxious feelings, following a recent medical diagnosis of a family member
4. MedSea referred the crew member for further counselling where the seafarer was able to develop coping strategies
5. The seafarer's sleep improved as did their mood and counselling sessions were no longer required.

## STRATEGIES FOR MANAGEMENT TO SUPPORT SEAFARER MENTAL WELLBEING

### 1. PROMOTE OPEN COMMUNICATION

Encouraging open communication is vital. Shipowners and managers should create an environment where seafarers feel comfortable discussing their mental health concerns without fear of stigma or retribution. Regular check-ins can help identify issues early and provide the necessary support.

### 2. CONSIDER MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING

These programmes should cover topics such as recognising signs of mental distress, providing initial support, and knowing when to seek professional help. Creating on board mental health ambassadors can help to develop a more positive culture towards mental health and wellbeing.

### 3. PROVIDE ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Having access to services with professional medical oversight, such as MedSea, is crucial in supporting overall health. Some crew members may also benefit from access to faith-based services.

### 4. LISTEN TO THE NEEDS OF YOUR SEAFARERS

The Seafarers Happiness index reveals the complexity of factors that contribute to mental wellbeing on ships. Their latest findings (Q2 2024)<sup>1</sup>, fortunately revealed a stable picture with regards to factors like: connectivity, food, workloads and shoreside leave. This is positive news. However, to improve mental wellbeing on board, it is important to continue listening to the needs of your seafarers – perhaps through regular surveys or focus groups.

### 5. ENCOURAGE HEALTHY LIFESTYLE CHOICES

There is growing evidence that connects mental wellbeing with diet and healthy living. Your gut has two-way communication with your brain via various pathways such as the nervous system and immune system and chemicals (neurotransmitters). This highlights the increasing importance in ensuring that seafarers have adequate access to fruit, vegetables, nuts, legumes and whole grains. Alongside other healthy habits like regular physical exercise, mental outlook can be improved.

## BENEFITS OF SUPPORTING MENTAL WELLBEING

Half of cases opened by MedSea for mental health issues result in the seafarer needing to be repatriated to their home country for further care. As with many other medical conditions, early recognition and intervention can result in improved patient outcomes and fewer operational disruptions while at sea.

According to the WHO<sup>2</sup>, there can be a significant monetary return on investment for companies supporting mental wellbeing initiatives. Factors contributing to this return include improved productivity and fewer accidents, as well as wider reaching benefits, like the attraction and retention of seafarers and improving your company's brand image.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT MEDSEA'S SOLUTIONS FOR SHIPS AT [WWW.INTERNATIONALSOS.COM](http://WWW.INTERNATIONALSOS.COM)

1. [https://www.seafarershappinessindex.org/wp-content/uploads/Seafarers\\_Happiness\\_Index\\_Q2\\_2024.pdf](https://www.seafarershappinessindex.org/wp-content/uploads/Seafarers_Happiness_Index_Q2_2024.pdf)  
2. <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-04-2016-investing-in-treatment-for-depression-and-anxiety-leads-to-fourfold-return>