

Improving the mental health of seafarers



The life of seafarers working in the contemporary cargo industry is physically and mentally challenging. While many seafarers make considerable sacrifices to gain the qualifications and experience that allow them to work at sea, and many enjoy their shipboard work, they nevertheless find themselves significantly less happy on board than when they are at home.

What makes seafarers unhappy?

Shipboard factors which seafarers and academic studies identify as producing feelings of sadness include: isolation; loneliness; lack of shore leave; fear of criminalisation; fear of job loss; and separation from family.

In our research seafarers identified ship-specific factors such as **too much work**, **being unable to take shore leave** and **poor food** as depressing. Crew-related factors such as a **bossy captain**, **discrimination**, **blame**, **poor relationships with superiors**, **fatigue** and **boredom** were also of great importance.

Seafarers identified free unlimited internet access as essential to their levels of happiness and recognised the benefits of social and recreational activities in combatting feelings of sadness and depression on board.

There is evidence that in the period 2011–16 there was an increase in recent-onset anxiety and depression amongst serving seafarers. There is also evidence that in some roles and departments seafarers may be particularly prone to emotional exhaustion and burn-out.

Research by the Seafarers International Research Centre part of Cardiff University suggests seafarers can benefit from having on-board access to:



Methods of strengthening relationships

- Internet and satellite TV
- Video games
- Access to email
- Digital health (e.g mobile apps).



Activities promoting social interaction on board

- Sports activities (basketball, squash, swimming, table tennis)
- Leisure activities (darts, barbecues, karaoke, card and board games)
- Social interaction with crew members
- Gym equipment.



Improvements in mental wellbeing

- Varied, good quality food
- Comfortable facilities (e.g mattresses, furniture) to facilitate rest and sleep
- Strategies to increase mental resilience of workers.



Employment arrangements

- Anti-bullying/harassment policies
- Policies on continuing to or returning to work after common mental disorders
- Shore leave for all ranks
- Employment contracts balancing work and leave
- Practices that restrict tour length to a maximum of six months.



Training and awareness

- Self-help guidance on improving mental resilience
- Wellbeing training
- Training to create positive working environments
- Managers should be trained to discuss mental health and wellbeing with workers.



Organisational support

- Advice on identifying work-related risk factors for health (including mental health)
- Confidential counselling services
- Environments that promote respectful interactions with workers
- Comprehensive health insurances and services.