



**INTERTANKO**



**Crew Welfare  
Management and  
Mental Wellness**

**TWENTY 20**



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# **Crew Welfare Management and Mental Wellness**

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to widespread concerns over its effects on people's lives and employment, while seafarers are also anxious about their families and loved ones back home.

Anxieties about how worrying events may evolve can affect the wellbeing of seafarers. Unpleasant thoughts and feelings can escalate quickly, making it difficult for those on board to find the energy to follow their daily routine and to concentrate on their work tasks. Although seafarers access news and hear stories from home, they may feel disconnected and unable to engage. The resulting impact on their mental wellness and welfare should not be ignored.

If left undetected, or if seafarers do not have the opportunity to process these thoughts and feelings, or have not had the opportunity to develop coping strategies, they can become overwhelmed and potentially suffer from depression or psychosis.

This pandemic has highlighted a need for more guidance on how to manage crew welfare and mental wellness management. INTERTANKO's Human Element in Shipping Committee (HEiSC) prepared these recommendations, which are written with crewing managers and shore-side staff in mind.

The guidance includes advice on helping seafarers to deal with emotional stress and overcome negative feelings. While this guidance has been written during the Covid-19 global pandemic, the key principles are applicable at any time.

We would like to extend particular thanks to Eaglestar for allowing HEiSC to use its internal guidance in the development of this document.

## Advice and recommendations

The advice and recommendations that follow have been developed for the consideration of shore-side staff when providing practical guidance to leadership teams on how to manage crew that may be experiencing stress as a result of prolonged service onboard.

While this guidance is aimed at non-healthcare professionals, if in any doubt, guidance from health professionals should always be sought.

There are four key areas to be considered:

- Effective Communication
- Look out
- Reach out
- Lead by example

## Effective communication

It is especially important at this time to convey to seafarers that they are not alone and reassure them that they have not been abandoned. This can be achieved through increased, effective communication.

Make communication part of the regular routine to check on the wellbeing of the crew onboard; do not mix these checks with work/ operations issues.

Effective communication begins with the way that messages are delivered and how care is conveyed towards the people you engage with.

Frequent communication will harness familiarity, trust, commitment, and an appreciation of being on the same team.

## Prepare messages in advance

Keep to known facts, for example, if seafarers were to ask about their status about signing off:

*"We are sorry that this has happened. We are extremely concerned about what you are going through. I wish we had more definitive answers for you. Rest assured, management is highlighting the issues with the relevant authorities for seafarers at national and international level so that we can develop amicable and practical solutions."*

## Tips for effective communication

Be compassionate, empathetic, courteous and considerate. It's not easy to do this under pressure when many questions are asked or repeated, but shore-side staff need to adopt a patient approach.

Do not over-assure. The objective is not to soothe, but to convey accurate information and calm concern. In fact, it is better to over-estimate the problem and then be able to say that the situation is better than first thought.

Acknowledge uncertainty. Say only what is known, show concern and acknowledge the concern of your crew.

Emphasise that a process is in place to resolve the issue.

Be regretful, not defensive. Say, *"We are sorry..."*, or *"We feel terrible that..."* when acknowledging the issue.

Acknowledge people's fears and concerns. Don't tell the crew they should not be afraid. They are afraid and have a right to share their fears/concerns.

Express wishes. Say, *"I wish we knew more,"* or *"I wish we had more definitive answers from the government/ authorities"*.

Be willing to address the 'what if' questions. These are the questions that everyone is thinking about and they want your answers. "What will happen to us if the Covid-19 issue doesn't resolve in the next one or two months?" Empathetic Listening - One basic principle is to "seek to understand, before being understood."

People will only feel comfortable to share their true feelings and thoughts when they are convinced that they will be heard appropriately, without judgment from the listener.

### **Do**

- Be nonjudgmental - allow people to express their worries or stress.
- Give the person your undivided attention.
- Listen carefully (to feelings and facts).
- Show concern by asking about their families and their wellbeing.
- Follow up, especially with those who show signs of weak coping ability.

Most importantly, firmly assure that worrying events will pass and everyone will be safe at home with their families again.

### **Avoid**

- Belittling people's worries or concerns.
- Offering solutions or advice.
- Sounding repetitive and giving out the same information.

## **Why is effective communication important?**

Effective communication can help to foster a good working relationship between you and your crew onboard, which can in turn improve the team's morale, productivity, commitment and efficiency.

How people are treated and managed on a day-to-day basis is central to their mental well-being and motivation, as well as the level of trust they put in the Ship Management team.

The behaviours of the Ship Management team will largely determine to what extent the crew onboard stay resilient under pressure during periods of prolonged shipboard service and remain loyal to the company during tough times.

**Q: How can people, who are confined to vessels under quarantine, stay safe and well at this difficult time?**

*“You have developed a skill that the general population needs to learn in order to better manage Covid-19. You have developed a skill to work for long periods onboard, where you can circulate freely and manage boredom by making sure that you stay connected with your loved ones. You also know how to manage boredom by staying connected with people around you. So, please stay connected remotely and enjoy the activities onboard i.e. exercise, recreation activities etc. Please draw on these strengths and share them with others so that we can all manage the pressure and boredom of the coming weeks”. [Source ISWAN helpline](#)*

**Q: My family needs me, therefore please find ways to sign me off immediately**

*“These are difficult situations that seafarers are facing globally, with port closures and travel bans imposed by many countries. We know that you are feeling anxious, especially with regard to those countries with high cases of Covid-19. Rushing back home may put your family at risk, so it would be wiser to stay onboard and stay connected to them remotely”. [Source ISWAN helpline](#)*

## Look out

It can be very easy to focus on our own immediate concerns in times of high stress and as a consequence we can unintentionally overlook the pressures on sea staff. Taking time to look out for your crew’s welfare and signs of distress means that you can intervene early to help them manage their worries at this time.

Worrying situations may not go away overnight and your crew will be facing similar pressures to you.

Sea staff could experience what is known as “anxious distress” in addition to low mood. People with anxious distress often feel tense, restless, and have trouble concentrating because they worry so much. Therefore, it is important that the Ship Management team takes a more caring and compassionate approach in dealing with their team onboard.

## Early intervention: spotting the signs of stress and poor mental health

Like physical health, everyone can have mental health issues and it can fluctuate along a spectrum of good to poor. Good ship management support is crucial in assisting wellbeing, spotting early signs of distress and initiating early interventions. Stress can take a toll on people physiologically and in the long run, it can affect the immune system of a person. Look out for the following signs during your engagement with the team:

Physical	Psychological	Behavioral
Fatigue	Anxiety or distress	Increased smoking and drinking
	Tearfulness	Using recreational drugs
Headache	Feeling low and/or lonely	Withdrawal syndrome
Appetite and weight changes	Mood changes	Resigned attitude
Joint and back pain	Indecision	Irritability, anger or aggression
Changes in sleep pattern	Loss of motivation	Overexcitement or euphoria
Visible tension or trembling	Loss of humour	Restlessness
Nervous trembling speech	Increased sensitivity	
Chest or throat pain	Distraction or confusion	
Sweating	Difficulty relaxing	Intense or obsessive activity
Constantly feeling cold	Lapses in memory	Repetitive speech or activity
	Illogical or irrational thought	
	Difficulty in concentration	Uncharacteristic errors
	Suicidal thoughts	Uncharacteristic problems with colleagues
	Slowing down of thought process	Apparent over-reaction to problems
	Feelings of guilt and/or worthlessness	Disruptive or anti-social behavior

## Reach out

Reaching out early can signal to your onboard teams that you are concerned for their welfare. Following the advice regarding effective communication will also help to ensure that you come across as sincere and caring rather than simply concerned about performance.

Always keep in mind that the current situation may not go away overnight and you should focus on longer-term working capacity rather than repeated short-term crisis responses.



Empathy is an essential leadership skill. It helps to build bonds and without it you will not be able to reach your people. When you empathise with and care about the crew onboard, you can create a stronger bond with them. You can connect and understand their interests and perspectives. Once you have developed this trust and bond, you will be able to play an effective part in reducing the stress levels within your team.

Demonstrating empathy is hard; it takes time and effort to show awareness and understanding. When it comes to building teams and earning trust, you must take an interest in your people to show that you care. You must show curiosity by asking questions about their challenges and their families.

It's not always easy to understand why someone feels or thinks the way that they do. People often react in ways that are surprising, and it may leave you clueless about how to respond. But with empathy in your leadership toolkit, you don't have to worry about how to respond, because the goal is not to respond but to listen, not to reply but to understand. Empathy allows you to understand others without passing judgment or making assumptions.

Here are some tips to guide your conversation:

Questions to ask	Questions to avoid
<p><i>How are you doing at the moment? How is your family doing?</i></p> <p><i>You seem to be a bit down/ upset/ under pressure/ frustrated/ angry. Is everything okay?</i></p> <p><i>Is there anything I can do to help?</i></p> <p><i>What support do you think might help?</i></p>	<p><i>You're clearly struggling. What's up?</i></p> <p><i>Why can't you just get your act together? What do you expect me to do about it?</i></p> <p><i>Your performance is unacceptable right now – what's going on?</i></p> <p><i>Everyone else is in the same boat and they're okay, why aren't you?</i></p>

Tips to facilitate your conversation:

Choose an appropriate place

It's important to make people feel comfortable. Choose somewhere private and quiet to have the conversation. This applies specifically to shipboard conversations.

Avoid making assumptions

It can be difficult for people to disclose information relating to their problems, so make it easier by keeping an open mind and giving them space to talk it out.

Embed confidentially

People can understandably be anxious about disclosing information, so be prepared to assume responsibility for confidential and sensitive details. Reassure the individual that any private information they disclose will not be leaked to their colleagues.

### Encourage people to talk

It's important to have an open dialogue when discussing personal problems.

### Be understanding and honest

It's important to recognise that a person's performance or behaviour can be affected if they are experiencing any personal problems/ mental health issues.

### Reassure people

People may not always be ready to talk straight away, so it's important that you outline the support that is available. Reassure the individual that there are always people available and they can speak to you at any time. Let them know that you'll ensure they will get the possible support that they need.

### Encourage people to seek support

Provide details of your organisation's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) if you have one, and inform the crew onboard of any arrangements for online counselling.

You can direct them to [www.seafarerhelp.org](http://www.seafarerhelp.org), which provides a free, confidential, 24/7 helpline service for seafarers and their families around the world. The SeafarerHelp team speaks a wide range of languages including Filipino, Russian, Hindi, Chinese, Spanish and Arabic and can be contacted via several different methods including telephone (with a callback option), email, live chat and WhatsApp.

## Lead by example

The Ship Management team plays an important role in creating and ensuring the right culture for the company. Hence, treat your crew with respect, praise good work, offer support if there are any skill gaps, and try to use a positive coaching style of management.

Ask for feedback about the support that you have provided and what support they need to help them achieve their goals.

Encourage seafarers to overcome this storm by exploring the following interventions, which may help to lower anxiety and stress levels:

### Reach out

Encourage staying connected remotely with loved ones to check on their wellbeing. This is extremely effective and creates a positive impact on both the seafarer onboard as well as the family at home.

### Events onboard

Organise regular events and engagement activities for the crew onboard to help them bond and ease stress levels. Example activities that you can organise with your crew include:

- Movie nights
- Dance parties
- Thematic parties
- Indoor team-building games

Workout

Exercise is the all-natural treatment to fight stress and depression. Practicing yoga can also be an effective way of alleviating stress and boosting positivity.

Healthy lifestyle

Adopt a healthier working style by managing the work/ rest hours well and by taking proper healthy meals and breaks.

Breathing exercises

Manage stress by using a breathing exercise such as the following:

Exhale deeply for eight seconds and then inhale through the nose for four seconds. Hold the breath for seven seconds, then repeat the steps.

Good sleep

Sleep deprivation can affect the psychological and mental state of people onboard. Keep an eye out for signs of stress, depression and anxiety among crew members.

Look out

Ensure that seafarers are working together to look out for each other.

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