



Caring for Seafarers' Mental Wellbeing



FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Coming from our insurance and humanitarian perspectives respectively, the American Club and the Seamen's Church Institute (SCI) share a passion and deep respect for the human factors involved in safe maritime commerce and quality of life for those who work on ships around the world. With nearly 300 years of combined maritime service, our organizations know intimately the triumphs, tragedies, and risks associated with maritime life. Together, we want to better understand the root causes of failure and the unique DNA of resilience embodied by seafarers at work 24/7/365 to support our modern way of life.

This document highlights our shared insights on responding to both the routine and the extreme stressors that impact seafarers' quality of life and safety aboard ship. We hope it will inform a global conversation and stimulate new insights on seafarer skill and wellbeing.

I wish to thank the thousands of seafarers who have shared their personal stories with SCI staff amid routine, stressful, or tragic circumstances. While we have sought to serve their needs, we also have learned about the unique circumstances of life aboard ship, one seafarer at a time.

Further, I wish to thank the myriad maritime organizations who have supported SCI's charitable mission and who have been conversation partners in our ongoing learning about the highs and lows of life at sea.

We stand on the shoulders of giants who have gone before us and who walk with us in our mission: to promote the safety, dignity, and improved working environment for the men and women serving in North American and international maritime communities through pastoral care, training, advocacy, and thought leadership.

Finally, I wish to thank SCI's Dr. Naomi Walker and Douglas B. Stevenson, Esq. for articulately communicating many of those seafarers' thoughts and words into *Caring for Seafarers' Mental Wellbeing*. From the American Club, my thanks go to the Safety & Environmental Protection Committee for their enthusiastic support, and also to Dr. William Moore, Danielle Centeno, and Richard Swan for their valuable inputs to bring this document to fruition.

The Rev. David M. Rider
President & Executive Director
The Seamen's Church Institute

PREFACE

The Romans had an expression for it: *mens sana in corpore sano* – a healthy mind in a healthy body. Much of the effort to ensure the wellbeing of seafarers has in modern times been aimed at the second part of the Latin maxim: the avoidance of circumstances which might give rise to physical injury or illness on board ship. But the other dimension of wellbeing, which the Romans addressed as a first condition of overall health, has not until recently attracted as much attention as the physical side of the holistic equation of what it means to be well.

This was bound to change, and it is a sign of genuine progress in the domain of seafarers' wellbeing that mental health has now moved front and center in making certain that shipboard and shoreside conditions are as conducive as they can be in generating positive conditions for mental health and, when episodes of mental illness occur, that they can be dealt with in an effective and appropriate manner.

Service at sea is a particularly challenging vocation. It entails, in addition to often hard physical work, and sometimes real danger, dislocation from family and friends, native cultures, and the many other elements of psychological contentment. It is particularly important, therefore, that all stakeholders in maritime enterprise are conscious of the emotional challenges that arise from these conditions of seafarer service, and that they are equipped to handle their consequences.

This booklet, in the production of which the American Club is particularly proud to have worked with the Seamen's Church Institute (SCI), seeks to raise the profile of mental wellbeing as a key component of a healthy and effective working environment for seafarers. It is by no means exhaustive on the subject, but it is hoped that those who use it to enhance awareness of mental health as a real dimension of service at sea will find it to be useful in progressing their aims.

The Seamen's Church Institute has taken a particularly active role in recent years in raising awareness of mental wellbeing among seafarers as an adjunct to the outstanding work it does in providing pastoral care, ashore and afloat, to those who benefit so conspicuously from the services SCI provides.

The reputation of the Seamen's Church Institute is without peer, and the American Club is honored to have been able to participate in the production of this guide which will form part of its own growing catalogue of loss prevention support to the global maritime community. That the Club should have been able to produce this document in conjunction with SCI is a particular pleasure, and one which makes it all the more gratifying to record here our appreciation – and congratulations! – to everyone who has been involved in it both at the Seamen's Church Institute, and at the Club.

Joseph E.M. Hughes
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The American Club

Introduction

Seafaring can provide skilled and responsible men and women with excellent career prospects, good wages, long holidays, responsibility, travel opportunities, and job satisfaction. On the other hand, certain unique aspects of maritime life can contribute to stress for seafarers, causing reactions which can jeopardize physical health, wellbeing, and workplace morale. Such stress applies to seafarers on long sea voyages, those in coastal trading, and seafarers working aboard vessels on inland waterways.

Extreme stress can make seafarers vulnerable to mental health issues. No research has shown that seafarers suffer different rates of mental health problems than the general population or other working occupations. However, the World Health Organization has estimated that at any given time, approximately 20% of the adult population have a mental health problem. Furthermore, mental health issues have attendant costs (e.g., \$192 billion in lost earnings per year in the United States alone).

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This guide is intended to help seafarers and others identify common psychological reactions to traumatic events and acute stress, and to assist them through early intervention techniques.

The guidance does not assume that seafarers who have experienced extreme stress will develop long-term or significant mental health problems or difficulties in recovery. Most people, including seafarers, experience reactions to traumatic events and acute stress, but most people, including seafarers, also recover without long-term problems.

Some stressors unique to shipboard life can become acute for some seafarers. These stressors may be:

SOCIAL

- long periods of time spent away from family, friends, culture and professional resources
- cross-cultural social and language barriers that might create stress or increase isolation
- the blessing and curse of telecommunications and social media that informs a seafarer of problems at home, increasing a sense of helplessness
- a culture of self-sufficiency that may decrease a willingness to admit suffering or a need for help

WORKPLACE-RELATED

- the 24/7 reality of life aboard ship that impacts one’s work/life balance and may diminish a worker’s opportunities for mental and physical relaxation after a day’s work
- diminished access to resources or sources of support when exposed to unwanted behavior like bullying, cultural disparagement, or sexual harassment

Break the Stigma

Feel empowered, not ashamed!

SAFETY CULTURE: Promote a ship culture where speaking openly about wellness is encouraged & seafarers seeking help are not disparaged.

EDUCATION: Educate managers and crew members on stressors, reactions, and resources for treatment.

HONESTY: Any crew member experiencing difficulty is likely not alone. Encourage everyone to speak up and support each other.





PERSONAL

- hidden, pre-existing trauma that the seafarer brings aboard ship
- stress undergone by a cadet or seafarer away from home on a first contract

OCCASIONAL CIRCUMSTANTIAL TRAUMAS

- navigating through extreme weather and the threat of sinking
- facing the threat of piracy, or experiencing a piracy attack
- ship fire or other threats to the vessel's integrity
- discovering death aboard ship by injury, natural cause, suicide, or homicide
- witnessing the death or severe injury or illness of a crewmate
- acts of abuse, bullying and harassment while on board

Points to Remember

Stigma associated with mental health care is an important barrier to seafarers seeking, providing, or receiving interventions and professional care following a traumatic event or acute stress. The perception that seafarers are resilient can cause them to conceal emotional suffering, thinking that it is a sign of weakness. Seafarers may also fear that they will lose their jobs if they are considered “damaged goods” by their employers or shipmates. **It is therefore very important for seafarers and their employers to understand that reactions to extreme stress are understandable and to be expected.**

All maritime stakeholders (i.e., shipowners, ship managers, shipmates) should promote an environment where seafarers can safely disclose potential mental health concerns in the same way they disclose physical health concerns. The primary objective is to get the help they need without fear of losing their jobs.

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Cultural considerations

Seafarers are an international workforce with diverse cultures, religions, and languages. Cultural factors may contribute to whether a seafarer will seek help. Seafarers may also have difficulty expressing strong feelings in a language other than their first language.

Mental health awareness is spreading globally and positive progress is being made, but mental health issues are still stigmatized in many cultures. These cultural stigmas play a role in whether seafarers seek mental health assistance, as they may be concerned that it will impact their employability. Many seafarers are the primary wage earner supporting their families, which can add additional pressure to remain silent.

Common reactions to traumatic events and acute stress

Mental

confusion, disorientation, worry, intrusive thoughts and images, self-blame, experiencing “flashbacks” (feeling like the experience is happening all over again)

Emotional

shock, sorrow, grief, sadness, fear, anger, irritability, guilt, shame, emotional numbness

Physical

fatigue, headache, muscle tension, stomach ache, increased heart rate, exaggerated startle response, difficulty falling or staying asleep, problems with concentration

Behavioral

withdrawal, detachment and estrangement from others, interpersonal conflict, avoiding talking, thinking, or having feelings about the traumatic event, losing interest in previously pleasurable activities, startling easily or being jumpy

How to deal with reactions to extreme stress

Healthy and helpful

- talking to another person for support or spending time with others
- engaging in positive activities (e.g. sports, hobbies, listening to music, reading, regularly scheduled religious services—if applicable)
- getting adequate rest and a healthy diet
- maintaining a normal and consistent work and rest schedule as possible
- exercising in moderation
- seeking professional help or counseling where and when possible

Unhelpful

- engaging in risky behaviors or activities (e.g. overusing alcohol, drug abuse, high risk sexual activities)
- overeating or failing to eat
- excessive use of TV or computer games (especially when this interferes with necessary rest hours)
- working too many hours
- withdrawing from family or friends
- withdrawing from pleasant activities that make you happy while on board ship



Common Reactions to Extreme Stress

All people react differently to extreme stress situations. Seafarers are no different. Some may display very little reaction, while others may have intense reactions. Such reactions are common and should not be misunderstood as a sign of weakness. With timely care, many common reactions will diminish over time.

The length or intensity of the extreme stress may contribute to the magnitude and duration of the reactions to it. Pre-existing vulnerability from an earlier life trauma may make reactions to a current stressor worse.

If you suspect that some of your fellow crew are experiencing long-term stress, it is very important to provide active support to ensure the mental wellness of these crew members. This is not only important for the individuals undergoing stress, but also essential to the safety and security of the ship and crew.

This can be done by:

- showing interest, attention, and care in the physical and mental wellbeing of all seafarers by taking time to inquire how things are going and listening to the response;
- acknowledging that reactions to stress can take time to resolve;
- talking about common reactions to stress and trauma, and discussing and encouraging healthy means and ways of coping; and
- expressing belief that the person is capable of recovery.

Unhelpful ways to respond to crew members suffering stress include:

- rushing to tell someone that he or she will be OK or that they should just “get over it”;
- discussing your own personal experiences without listening to the other person’s story;
- acting like someone is weak or exaggerating because he or she isn’t coping as well as you are;
- giving advice without listening to the person’s concerns or asking the person what works for him or her;
- stopping someone from talking about what is bothering them; and
- telling them that they were lucky it wasn’t worse.

When More Help Is Needed

Early intervention techniques aid seafarers’ ability to manage common psychological reactions to stress, most of which will diminish over time. If the reactions to extreme stress continue to interfere with a seafarer’s ability to function adequately for an extended period, seafarers should be encouraged to seek professional help.

When the need for professional mental health is indicated, it is a good practice for the shipowners to assist the seafarer in obtaining such treatment. Seafarers who safely disclose reactions to stress and receive treatment become safer employees than those who suppress concerns for fear of lost income. With competent treatment, seafarers can return a highly skilled worker to productive employment while reducing the risk of future medical deviation and repatriation.

Professional mental health care can be provided by:

- Port chaplains, who are available in many ports to provide counseling and referrals to mental health care professionals;
- Psychological care in port, which can be arranged in advance of a port call by a vessel's managers and agents; and
- Telemedicine services while at sea, which are equipped to provide professional mental health care to seafarers.

Mental wellness outreach resource services available around the world can be found at the American Club's website below. This list will be updated periodically as information is made available.

<http://american-club.com/page/seafarer-wellness>

Preventative Measures & Support Resources

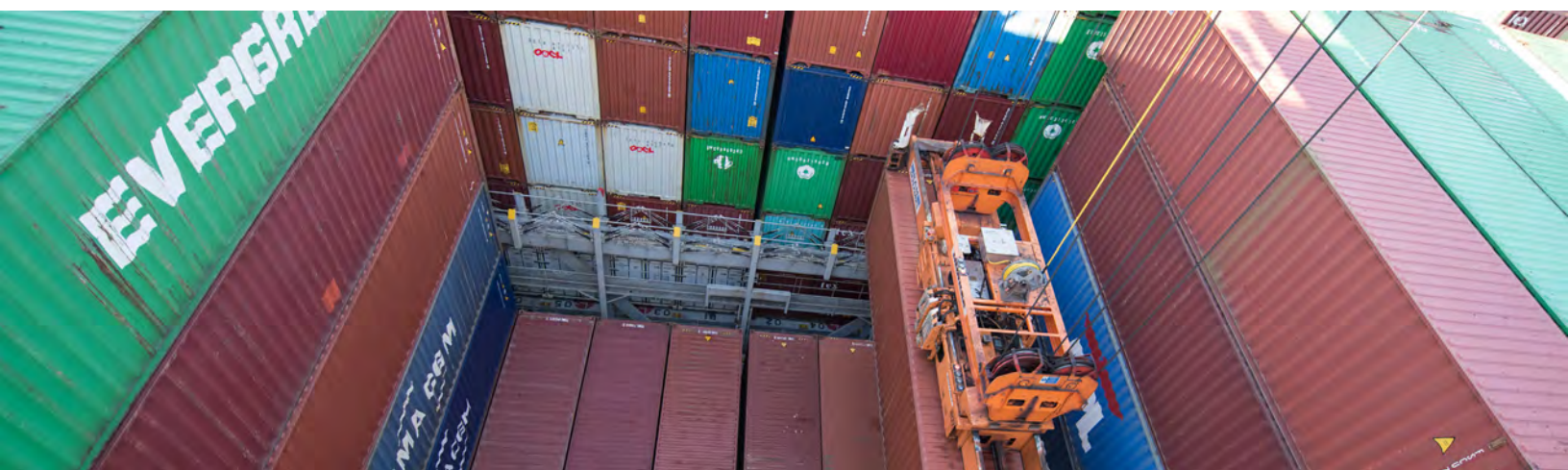
Shipowners and ships' Masters can maximize a crew's resilience and wellbeing by taking preventative measures and accessing support resources. For example:

- **Shipowners and operators** should establish a defined policy and relevant training for Masters, as well as the company's crewing and human resources departments ashore to consider how to promote mental wellness for their shipboard crewmembers. This should include preventative measures (e.g. anti-bullying and anti-harassment training) identifying those who may be at risk, and coordinating between the Master and the company's crewing and resource departments to properly manage any persons found to be at risk on board ship.
- **Port chaplains** visit many vessels every day and quickly sense the individual and crew morale aboard ship. Even on the ships with the best morale, an individual seafarer can be preoccupied by a personal or back-home distraction and find it helpful to talk it through with a neutral third-party.
- **Quality of food, need for rest and hygiene, regular exercise, and positive team spirit** strengthen morale and fitness for duty.
- Whenever possible, **shore leave** allows respite from the worksite, personal errands, and opportunity to "see the world."
- **Drills and skills**—from fire drills to anti-piracy and harassment prevention training—equip crew and empower them to respond to acute stressors. Policies and training to reduce bullying and harassment reduce behaviors that demean others and threaten their wellbeing. A well-trained seafarer becomes more confident and less stressed.

Helpful Resources

- The American Club has established a list of global contacts of mental health hotlines and references. This list is periodically updated and can be found at the American Club website.

<http://american-club.com/page/seafarer-wellness>





- The American Club’s brochure *What’s on Your Mind? – Guidance for Seafarers’ Mental Health Awareness*, presents some of the common risk factors of developing a mental health condition and recommends measures to prevent or treat an occurrence onboard.

http://www.american-club.com/files/files/whats_on_your_mind.pdf

- ISWAN’s brochure, *Steps to Positive Health: Good Mental Health Guide for Seafarers* includes practical steps seafarers can take to promote mindfulness and stress reduction via meditation and team cohesion.

<https://seafarerswelfare.org/ship-shop/good-mental-health-guide>

- **Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)**, sponsored by LivingWorks, approaches suicide risk like any other public health problem, attempting to de-stigmatize and normalize conversation about suicide. The ASIST method develops skills to ask a vulnerable person about suicide thoughts and, when acknowledged, to develop a joint plan to keep the suicidal person safe for now. The two-day ASIST training is recommended for every ship’s medical officer. More information regarding ASIST can be found on their website.

<https://www.livingworks.net/programs/asist/>

- The Psychological First Aid Field Operations Guide published by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) and National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) provides extensive guidance and training in psychological first aid for first responders to disaster-affected communities that are adaptable to seafarers’ exposure to extreme stress.

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/psychological-first-aid-pfa-field-operations-guide-2nd-edition>

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The Seamen’s Church Institute (SCI) promotes the safety, dignity, and improved working environment for the men and women serving in North American and international maritime communities through pastoral care, training, advocacy, and thought leadership. From this historic legacy and recent work on piracy, suicide prevention, and medical wellbeing, SCI draws from its chaplains’ daily interaction with seafarers, its Center for Seafarers’ Rights cases and advocacy work, its maritime education insights, and its cross-disciplinary work with maritime physicians and psychologists.

American Steamship Owners Mutual Protection and Indemnity Association, Inc. (the American Club) was established in New York in 1917. It is the only mutual Protection and Indemnity Club domiciled in the entire Americas and its headquarters are in New York, USA.

The American Club has been successful in recent years in building on its US heritage to create a truly international insurer with a global reach second-to-none in the industry. Day to day management of the American Club is provided by Shipowners Claims Bureau, Inc. also headquartered in New York.

The Club can provide local service for its members across all time zones, communicating in eleven languages, and has subsidiary offices located in London, Houston, Piraeus, Hong Kong and Shanghai, plus a worldwide network of correspondents.



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