Mental Health — study guide

Mental health problems are common at sea and heavily stigmatised, which is why so many seafarers suffer in silence. This guide covers how to recognise the signs, how to help, and the pressures of shipboard life.[1]

How to help a fellow seafarer

If a fellow seafarer comes to you with mental health issues, the simple steps are to **stay calm**, **listen**, and **keep social contact**. You do not need to be a counsellor — being present and non-judgemental is most of the help.

Recognising the signs

Noticeable changes that might indicate a seafarer is suffering from mental health issues include an inability to focus, changes in mood or behaviour, and changes in eating habits. Symptoms of anxiety include heart palpitations, difficulty concentrating and hyperventilation. For someone with PTSD, a traumatic event can be relived through smells, nightmares, sounds and flashbacks.

Scale of the problem

45% of seafarers reported feelings of depression but had not approached anyone for help. Note that the global shipping industry provides work to about **1.5 million** seafarers — not 3 million.

Stigma and isolation

Mental health stigma in the shipping industry is driven by several factors: it is considered more "macho" than other industries, crews have deep cultural differences, and men — who make up most of the workforce — are less likely to share their mental health issues. Sea life can isolate seafarers through cultural differences, language barriers, technology distractions and a lack of organised events. Loneliness in turn causes problems when recalling memories, making decisions and processing information.

Life-style factors

A good diet contributes to a positive experience: healthy food at sea can lift the mood of the crew and help maintain a healthy weight.

Key facts to remember

- Help: stay calm, listen, keep social contact.
- Signs: inability to focus, mood/behaviour changes, eating changes. Anxiety: palpitations, poor concentration, hyperventilation. PTSD triggers: smells, nightmares, sounds, flashbacks.

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- 45% reported depression without seeking help; the industry employs ~1.5 million seafarers (not 3 million).
- Stigma: "macho" culture, cultural differences, male-dominated workforce.
- Isolation: cultural differences, language barriers, tech distractions, few organised events. Loneliness hurts recall, decisions and information processing.
- Healthy food lifts mood and helps maintain a healthy weight.

Sources

1. Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (as amended) — health protection and medical care, including mental health provisions.