

Mental health of seafarers amidst pandemics

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Mental health is a critical problem that affects companies and individuals all over the world yet lurks beneath the shadows. Seafarers are exposed to several physical and psychosocial stressors [1]. The social and recreational options available to seafarers who work and live aboard are constrained. They frequently work 10–12 hour shifts for days without a break and are typically hired for 6–8 months on ships with breaks beyond the initial contract time [1]. Prior to the pandemic, studies on the mental health and wellbeing of seafarers revealed that they experienced higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation than the overall population [1]. Some of the pre-existing problems have gotten worse as a result of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, and new problems have also emerged for the maritime sector [2].

According to studies, the COVID-19 pandemic's diverse hurdles may compound the high stress levels that maritime workplaces already experienced before the pandemic, creating a conducive atmosphere for mental health issues [2, 3]. For instance, efforts taken to stop the virus' spread, such as travel bans and border closures, have had an impact on crew changes and helped to extend the time sailors spend at sea, often above the legally allowed maximum [1–3]. Numerous sailors were forced to remain on board cruise ships since they were unable to disembark in ports to return to their native countries. Many of these mariners have not received payment [3]. As a result of the growing epidemic, the mental health of many seafarers is already suffering. Approximately 60% of the 400,000 sailors stranded aboard ships throughout the world are concerned that not enough reasonable precautions have been taken to protect their health at work during the epidemic. They are increasingly concerned about the negative consequences of spending so much time on board [4, 5]. The affected seafarers experienced severe

anxiety, social isolation, and stress, all of which had an adverse effect on their mental health and, in some cases, resulted in suicide [3]. In several ports, shore leave was further limited or not allowed at all. As a result, it was challenging to perform maintenance and repair work as well as obtain medical aid and supplies. The risk of contracting an infection, uncertainty, employment insecurity, and worries about the safety of friends and relatives back home were additional stressors [2]. Evidence from other industries suggests that the added difficulties posed by the epidemic have a detrimental impact on workers' capacity to cope and are a factor in the rising prevalence of mental health issues including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [2, 4]. Seafarers are also commonly exposed to PTSD as a result of experiences from piracy, accidents, threats and disasters [4]. Seafaring remains a dangerous and socially isolating occupation where work-related accidents are likely and will be potentially traumatic to mariners [5].

Global stakeholders have pushed for the designation of seafarers as “key workers,” in the same rank as medical professionals or other individuals whose job is crucial for the welfare of the entire public, in recognition of the impact of COVID-19 on seafarers and the significant role they play. When traveling to or from their ships, they will be permitted to use “safe corridors” in airports since they have the status of a key worker. This acknowledgment could lessen the mental discomfort that the COVID-19 pandemic is causing among seafarers [1, 3, 5]. There are continuing gaps in mental health research, as well as unmet data demands on many levels, particularly in the marine industry. There is a need for increased research, sustainable initiatives and grants to get a thorough understanding of seafarers' mental health during pandemics and beyond [4, 5].

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