

## **Calm Seas, Turbulent Minds: Navigating Mental Health Issues in the Seafaring Profession**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Mental health issues in the seafaring profession result from the unique occupational and psychological challenges faced by seafarers and some systemic issues within the maritime industry that aggravate these challenges. This article aims to provide an introductory academic overview of the mental health issues facing seafarers, with due emphasis on evidence-based data and an overview of existing research on the topic. The paper begins by exploring the unique stressors faced by seafaring professionals, followed by an examination of their psychological impact and the systemic issues that exacerbate these challenges. Additionally, it offers recommendations and suggestions aimed at improving the mental well-being of those affected. Whilst the data has primarily been taken from the merchant marine, some studies in the naval context - including the Indian Naval context - have also been referred to. While the Indian Navy and the Merchant Marine are very different fields with distinct working environments, there is some commonality as well. Understandably, military-specific data is limited, but deductions can be extrapolated based on other available open-source data. Based on the study, some recommendations have been made to try and address the mental health challenges in the seafaring profession and highlight the steps necessary to support the psychological well-being of those at sea. Limitations such as the absence of large-scale primary research on Indian seafarers and other related issues have been highlighted as possible areas for further research.

**Key Words:** Mental health, seafarers, psychological well-being

Seafaring has historically been regarded as an adventurous and romantic calling. However, it is also an extremely demanding and psychologically taxing profession. In recent years, there has been an increase in the attention that has been given to the mental health issues associated with seafaring, as the unique psychological challenges facing this profession are becoming more widely acknowledged. There is emerging evidence of high rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide among seafarers<sup>1</sup>.

It is well-established that individuals across various professions experience mental health challenges, including stress, anxiety, and, in some cases, depression. However, these issues are particularly pronounced among mariners, who frequently face more demanding and strenuous situations as compared to the general population due to the nature of their work. The unpredictability of the sea and weather, combined with physical risks such as accidents and piracy, intensifies the mental health challenges seafarers encounter<sup>2</sup>. The

recent drone and missile attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea may have exacerbated the mental health challenges being faced by seafarers multi-fold.

The global maritime industry is a complex, multi-faceted and essential sector that serves as the cornerstone of international trade, playing a crucial role in global welfare and economic systems. This is primarily made possible by its skilled workforce. Although the challenges faced by seafarers in both the merchant marine and the military are not identical, they share many similarities. Naval personnel, in particular, are additionally tasked with responsibilities such as warfare preparation, surveillance, threat detection, and the maintenance of safety. While the primary focus often lies on mission success or profitability (in the case of military and merchant marine, respectively), the mental health of those manning these vessels is sometimes neglected. Issues such as multicultural crews may be more relevant to the merchant marine, but issues such as separation from families may be common to both domains.

Seafaring involves significant psychological challenges, including isolation, extended voyages, harsh weather conditions, and the demanding nature of the work. These factors can lead to serious mental health issues, which in turn, can have severe consequences for individual seafarers and the safety of ships, crew members, and cargo. Other professionals within the maritime industry, such as those working in the offshore oil and gas sectors, may face similar psychological challenges<sup>3</sup>.

Mental well-being in the maritime domain is not merely a 'hygiene' factor but is directly linked to safety and security at sea. Unfortunately, numerous maritime accidents involving both the Indian Navy and the merchant marine have resulted in the loss of life and property. A significant contributing factor in these incidents has been identified as human error<sup>4</sup>. Human error is a broad term encompassing issues such as insufficient knowledge, inadequate technical skills, and improper vigilance<sup>5,6</sup>. Poor vigilance, in particular, is often linked to psychological and neurobiological factors such as fatigue, reduced concentration, impaired judgment, and poor decision-making. Ankita and Tripathi (2017) conducted a study on 300 merchant marine officers (with 150 each Deck and 150 Engine officers) specifically studying the quality of sleep and effects thereof. In their analysis, they also cited many other studies in which seafarers reported experiencing emotional exhaustion, fatigue, sleep disorders, and even de-personalisation due to various occupational demands, including watch-keeping.<sup>7,8</sup>

Even before going into the unique stressors of the maritime profession, it is important to examine whether interventions and/or institutional remedial mechanisms can be effective. This is important so that the exercise does not remain a mere academic summation of existing studies, and, the recommendations made can be meaningful.

To study this aspect, it may be useful to contrast the studies in the military domain with those in the merchant marine. A study conducted by Pawar and Rathod (2007) provided an overview of occupational stress and life satisfaction levels among Indian Navy officers

and sailors, concluding that all personnel groups reported experiencing a certain degree of stress, which in turn correlated with lower levels of life satisfaction<sup>9</sup>. While there appear to be no other comparable studies conducted within the Indian context, research from other regions of the world has yielded similar findings. Some other findings of the study are, however, counterintuitive. As per their research, “*personnel serving ashore reported greater occupational stress than those serving on board ships and submarines*”. Significantly, stress was reportedly the lowest in submarines (with 34.5% of personnel serving in shore establishments, 24.8% of those onboard ships and only 7.7% of those serving on submarines reporting high occupational stress). The authors attributed this to “*greater unit cohesion among submariners than others*”. Whilst the same may certainly be a factor, this may not adequately explain the statistically significant variation between ‘ashore’ and ‘afloat’ billets. A higher job satisfaction level correlates with lower occupational stress. This may explain the stress levels being the lowest amongst officers, followed by Senior Sailors and lastly by Junior Sailors. Another possibility (which may require greater study) may be the time-tested ‘Divisional System’ of the Navy. There does not appear to be any psychological study directly linking this with lower stress levels. However, most naval officers would ‘intuitively’ vouch for the efficacy of the system where officers and divisional sailors act as a ‘friend, philosopher and guide’ for their subordinates. Though these ‘mentors’ are not formally trained in psychology, they do possess (and have been formally trained in) leadership skills - some of which may overlap with psychological interventions. Further, the very act of regular interaction may be useful. This could be the reason that afloat billets (where the officers and men live and work together thereby providing more avenues for interaction) have lower stress. Such a system may not be feasible in the merchant marine but has been highlighted here to show that interventions and institutional remedial mechanisms can be effective, and therefore must be well thought through.

## **Psychological Issues Faced by Seafarers**

Prevalence of psychological issues and mental health problems in seafarers has been studied both qualitatively and quantitatively and factors leading to the issues have also been commonly acknowledged. Jonglertmontree et al (2022) undertook an extensive scoping review of existing studies on the issue of the mental well-being of seafarers<sup>10</sup>. Starting with an online database of 3,790 studies, twenty-five studies were selected by them for quality assessment and review. The review effectively summarises the available literature on the subject. The study summarised both individual and work-related factors and concluded that stress, depressive symptoms and burnout are common. Some of the most prominent factors that have been described in existing literature are covered in the succeeding paragraphs.

**Isolation and Loneliness.** One of the most significant challenges faced by seafarers is prolonged isolation. Voyages can last anywhere from weeks to several months, during

which time crew members are separated from their families, friends, and the familiar comforts of life onshore. Multiple studies published by the International Maritime Health Association (IMHA) and others emphasise that extended absence from loved ones is a major contributing factor to depression among seafarers. Even in cases where more serious mental health conditions, such as clinical depression, are not present, this isolation can lead to stress, irritability, aggression, diminished cognitive functioning, and general dissatisfaction<sup>11,12</sup>. Whilst this is something that seafarers routinely experience, the Covid pandemic resulted in many aspects of isolation and their impact on mental health being studied.

Although advancements in technology, such as satellite phones and email, have alleviated some aspects of isolation, the quality of communication via these mediums is often insufficient compared to face-to-face interaction. These forms of communication lack important non-verbal cues, offer limited emotional engagement, increase the potential for misunderstandings, and do little to mitigate the desire for physical presence and intimacy<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, such connectivity is often restricted and, at times, unreliable due to the very nature of seafaring.

Even when seafarers are not at sea, the sense of loneliness can persist, especially when they are away from their home port. While recreational opportunities at port visits can temporarily alleviate this sense of isolation, they do not fully eliminate the emotional challenges. Additionally, in the merchant marine, where crew members operate on a rotational basis, there is limited time for building meaningful relationships with fellow crew members. The transient nature of the work, combined with the frequent change of teams from one voyage to the next, further complicates the development of long-term friendships. As a result, many seafarers, particularly those in the merchant marine, report feelings of disconnection from the world, especially during periods of intense workload or when they have limited access to the internet and social networks.

**Communication Barriers Due to Multicultural Crew.** Maritime crews are often composed of individuals from diverse nationalities and multicultural backgrounds. While such diversity can enrich the work environment by introducing new perspectives and fostering intercultural learning, it also presents significant challenges. The limited human-to-human interactions among crew members can be greatly affected by communication barriers that arise from the multicultural nature of these interactions. These barriers can hinder the effectiveness of peer support, making it difficult for crew members to connect on a meaningful level. Differences in first languages, religious affiliations, cultural norms, behaviours, beliefs, values, and communication styles can contribute to misunderstandings, social isolation, anxiety, and even disorientation<sup>14</sup>. Consequently, seafarers, despite being physically surrounded by colleagues, may struggle to form meaningful connections, exacerbating feelings of loneliness and psychological stress<sup>15</sup>. Although such issues are not unique to the maritime industry, the combination of these factors within the high-pressure, isolated environment of life at sea can magnify their effects.

Beyond language differences, cultural disparities can lead to the development of an ‘in-group’ versus ‘out-group’ dynamic, where individuals feel disconnected from those who do not share their cultural background. This perceived lack of belonging plays a crucial role in the formation of trust and social cohesion within the crew. When seafarers perceive others as part of an out-group, building the rapport necessary for open and vulnerable communication becomes more challenging, further contributing to social isolation. This phenomenon, often referred to as the ‘constrict proposition’, describes the tendency for individuals to withdraw in ethnically or culturally diverse environments<sup>16</sup>. In such contexts, crew members may avoid seeking support from those they perceive as foreign or different, fearing that they will be misunderstood or judged. As a result, social fragmentation can occur, undermining both interpersonal relationships and the overall well-being of the crew. Addressing these challenges requires intentional efforts to foster inclusivity and trust through cross-cultural training and structured opportunities for crew members to build rapport and engage in meaningful dialogue.

While in the military the crew is usually from a single nationality and language group, this is not always true. In the case of a diverse country like India, language distinction can arguably play a factor. In the Indian Army, for example, some units have recruitment from across the country while others remain class or region-specific. There are advantages and disadvantages of each. The Navy has no such distinction but the newer recruits may (at least initially) face multi-cultural or multi-linguistic issues, albeit to a much lesser extent than in the merchant marine. This factor needs to be borne in mind.

**Harsh Working Environment and Dangerous Conditions.** Seafaring is inherently dangerous, as crew members are continuously exposed to a range of hazards, including extreme weather, mechanical failures, and the potential for accidents on deck or within machinery spaces. The physical environment at sea can be unforgiving, with seafarers frequently experiencing extremes of heat and cold, alongside the challenge of maintaining balance on unstable platforms subject to rolling and pitching. Additionally, exposure to adverse weather conditions, such as rainfall or low visibility due to fog, further exacerbates stress levels, even when not all personnel are directly exposed to these conditions. These environmental factors contribute to a high-stress atmosphere, leading to chronic anxiety and fear<sup>17</sup>. This situation is particularly aggravated in regions known for prolonged periods of rough seas or areas prone to seasonal storms, where the unpredictability of weather amplifies the physical and psychological strain on crew members. The risk of seasickness further adds to the physical discomfort and mental fatigue that seafarers continuously endure at sea.

In addition to environmental stressors, piracy remains a significant concern in certain regions, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea, the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean Region. The constant threat of piracy attacks imposes an additional layer of psychological stress, as seafarers must maintain heightened vigilance and have to be prepared to respond to potential threats at any moment. The presence of armed guards on board, while a

necessary precaution in these high-risk areas, may further contribute to the sense of danger, underscoring the constant awareness of potential violence. These combined factors create a work environment that is not only physically demanding but also mentally exhausting, significantly impacting the overall well-being of crew members.

**Long or Uneven Working Hours and Physical Fatigue.** Seafaring involves not only mental but also physical exhaustion. Crew members often work long hours, sometimes exceeding 12-hour shifts, particularly during periods of heavy traffic, when transiting straits or other ‘pilotage’ waters or most commonly while approaching busy ports. Fatigue therefore becomes a serious concern, as it directly impacts alertness and the ability to handle the high-pressure demands of ship operation.

Sleep deprivation has also been linked to anxiety, cognitive impairment, and depression<sup>18</sup>. Seafarers often endure erratic sleep schedules even when the hours themselves are not excessive due to shift work of ‘keeping watches’, which disrupts circadian rhythms and exacerbates mental health problems and social as well as occupational functioning<sup>19</sup>. Night watches especially, can be lonely and often boring, where there is little to keep one occupied. This apparent lack of work is nonetheless physically and mentally exhausting - especially if continued over prolonged durations.

This is one issue that is probably very different in the case of the military and non-military seafarers. Naval personnel would often additionally be involved in rigorous training activities even when not engaged in watchkeeping. Drills such as ‘Action Stations’ interspersed with normal duties can lead to excessive working hours and the resultant sleep deprivation. Certain appointments are more prone to these pressures than others.

The maritime industry has struggled to enforce adequate work/ rest ratios, leaving crew members vulnerable to burnout, a well-known contributor to poor mental health. This is one issue that the aviation industry has arguably handled better than its marine counterpart.

The issues highlighted above are not the only issues that seafarers face, but various studies, as cited, have highlighted their pronounced effect. The impact on the merchant marine and the military will be varied. This is summarised in Table 1.

## **Mental Health Consequences for Seafarers**

**Depression and Anxiety.** Depression and anxiety are prevalent mental health issues among seafarers, reflecting the unique challenges faced in the maritime profession. A study conducted in 2020 by the Sailors’ Society in collaboration with Yale University revealed that 26% of seafarers surveyed reported experiencing feelings of depression, while 17% exhibited symptoms of anxiety<sup>20</sup>. These figures are statistically significant and

**Table 1** - Issues Faced by Merchant Marine or Navy and their Impacts

S No	Issue	Relevance to Merchant Marine or Indian Navy	Remarks
(a)	Isolation and Loneliness	Higher for the merchant marine	Isolation from families is relevant to both, however the merchant marine voyages are longer.
(b)	Communication Barriers Due to Multicultural Crew	Primarily merchant marine	Multi-linguistic barriers could be an issue for recruits in the <i>IN</i> . This needs more study.
(c)	Harsh Working Environment and Dangerous Conditions	Both. Higher for <i>IN</i>	Instances of piracy and attacks on merchant ships may contribute to stress levels.
(d)	Long or Uneven Working Hours and Physical Fatigue	Both	Remedial measures such as those instituted in the aviation industry are more relevant to the merchant marine. In the <i>IN</i> , planners may need to consider the impact of fatigue on operations and safety, especially in peacetime.

**Source:** Collated by the authors

markedly higher than global averages, highlighting the considerable psychological toll that seafaring imposes on individuals.

The relationship between depression and the seafaring lifestyle is multifaceted and often sees an incremental increase due to factors such as social isolation, chronic fatigue, and the emotional strain associated with extended absences from home. The maritime environment frequently isolates crew members from their social support networks for extended periods, leading to a profound sense of loneliness and emotional detachment. This isolation can foster feelings of helplessness and despair, which are critical components of depressive disorders.

Additionally, the physically demanding nature of maritime work, characterised by long hours and irregular schedules, contributes to chronic fatigue, further diminishing emotional resilience and exacerbating depressive symptoms. The emotional toll of being away from family and familiar surroundings can also lead to increased levels of stress and sadness, compounding the risks associated with depression.

Conversely, anxiety among seafarers is often rooted in the unpredictable and high-stakes nature of maritime work. The constant need to remain vigilant and alert in the face of potential hazards—such as extreme weather, mechanical failures, and the threat of accidents—creates a sustained state of hyper-arousal. This heightened alertness can lead to chronic anxiety, characterised by persistent worry and a sense of impending doom. Furthermore, the risk of piracy in certain maritime regions adds another layer of psychological distress, as seafarers must be prepared to respond to potential threats, thereby amplifying their sense of vulnerability.

**Suicidal Ideation.** Suicide rates among seafarers are alarmingly high, presenting a critical public health concern within the maritime industry. According to a report by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), suicide ranks as one of the leading causes of death for individuals at sea, with rates significantly surpassing those observed in land-based professions<sup>21</sup>. The prevalence of suicidal ideation among seafarers is often linked to untreated depression, which is aggravated by the limited availability of mental health resources on board ships.

A crucial distinction exists between active and passive suicidal ideation. Active suicidal ideation involves a clear and conscious intent to end one's life, accompanied by specific plans or methods to do so. In contrast, passive suicidal ideation reflects a general wish or desire for death without any definitive intent or plan. This distinction is important for understanding the varying levels of risk associated with suicidal thoughts. Some researchers have critiqued the separation between active and passive suicidal ideation, suggesting that it is an artificial construct that can rapidly shift during an individual's emotional or psychological crisis<sup>22</sup>. This fluidity in suicidal thoughts is particularly concerning, as seafarers may be more inclined to disclose experiences of active suicidal ideation while remaining silent about passive thoughts of death. The latter can be equally perilous, as individuals may not seek help or express their distress, further increasing their risk of self-harm.

Many seafarers do not receive adequate mental health care due to pervasive stigma and a lack of access to trained professionals. Although some shipping companies have implemented Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to provide support, seafarers frequently express reluctance to utilise these services. Concerns about potential judgment from peers or fears of negative repercussions on their careers contribute to this hesitancy, effectively discouraging them from seeking the help they need.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).** Seafarers who have encountered traumatic events—such as piracy attacks, accidents, or extreme weather conditions—are at a heightened risk of developing PTSD. The study conducted by Oldenburg, Jensen, and Wegner (2013) revealed that seafarers who survived life-threatening incidents at sea were significantly more likely to exhibit symptoms of PTSD compared to their peers who had not experienced such trauma. This finding underscores the unique psychological vulnerabilities faced by those in the maritime profession, particularly given the high-stakes environment in which they operate.

PTSD is characterised by three primary symptom clusters: (1) re-experiencing the traumatic event through distressing recollections, flashbacks, or nightmares; (2) avoidance of places, people, or stimuli that trigger distressing memories; and (3) hyper-arousal, which includes heightened emotional responses such as irritability, hyper-vigilance, and sleep disturbances. This conceptual framework highlights the multifaceted nature of PTSD and the pervasive impact it can have on an individual's daily functioning<sup>23</sup>. Importantly, undiagnosed and untreated PTSD can significantly impair occupational functioning. For

seafarers, avoidance behaviours may manifest as a reluctance to engage with certain aspects of their work that elicit distressing memories, ultimately calling into question their effectiveness and reliability in performing essential job tasks. Such impairments can lead to decreased job performance, increased absenteeism, and heightened risk of accidents at sea, thereby endangering not only the affected individuals but also their colleagues and the integrity of maritime operations.

The long-lasting effects of PTSD on mental health can be profound, with symptoms such as flashbacks and nightmares persisting long after the traumatic event has occurred. Furthermore, avoidance behaviours may continue to interfere with daily life and occupational responsibilities, even into retirement. In some cases, psychological scars of such trauma can manifest years later, affecting the individual's overall quality of life and mental well-being.

## **Systemic Issues in Addressing Seafarers' Mental Health**

**Lack of Mental Health Resources on Ships and Prevalent Stigma.** One of the most significant barriers to effectively addressing mental health issues within the seafaring profession is the insufficient availability of mental health resources onboard ships. This deficiency is particularly concerning given the unique psychological demands and stressors that seafarers encounter while at sea. Unlike their land-based counterparts, who can typically access a range of mental health services and support networks, seafarers face considerable challenges in obtaining counselling services or psychiatric care. The isolation inherent to life at sea worsens this problem, making it even more difficult for crew members to seek help or support from outside sources.

While some vessels may employ medical officers to attend to the health needs of the crew, it is important to note that these personnel are predominantly trained to address physical health concerns. Their training often lacks a comprehensive focus on mental health, limiting their ability to identify, diagnose, and treat psychological conditions effectively. This gap in training can result in a lack of understanding and sensitivity to mental health issues, further discouraging seafarers from seeking help when they experience distress or mental health challenges.

Moreover, the shipping industry has historically prioritised physical safety over mental health, often incorporating minimal emphasis on psychological well-being within existing health and safety protocols<sup>24</sup>. This prioritisation reflects a broader societal trend that tends to view physical health as more critical than mental health, despite the increasing recognition of the profound impact mental well-being has on overall health outcomes and occupational performance. The lack of dedicated mental health resources, such as access to trained psychologists or counsellors, alongside inadequate training for medical staff, creates an environment where mental health issues can go unnoticed and untreated.

**Prevalent Stigma Experienced by Seafarers.** Seafarers grappling with mental health challenges often fear that seeking help will be perceived as a sign of weakness or incompetence. This stigma is especially pronounced in male-dominated professions like seafaring, where attributes such as toughness and resilience are highly esteemed. Consequently, many seafarers opt to endure their struggles in silence rather than risk jeopardising their reputation or career opportunities. This reluctance to seek assistance contributes to the elevated rates of untreated depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation prevalent within the profession. The absence of timely intervention can lead to mental health issues going unaddressed, worsening over time and potentially culminating in severe psychological distress.

Research indicates that many individuals are resistant to seeking mental health support due to the pervasive societal stigma associated with being labelled as ‘mentally ill’. This stigma can significantly diminish self-esteem and social standing, exacerbating cognitive and emotional strain. Notably, individuals labelled as ‘mentally ill’ are statistically more likely to experience suicidal ideation, likely due to the compounded negative emotional repercussions stemming from societal perceptions of stigma<sup>25</sup>. In high-pressure environments such as maritime work, where social acceptance among peers is crucial - especially given the extended periods spent together - this stigma can be particularly detrimental.

The implications of this lack of intervention extend beyond individual suffering; they can significantly impact the overall safety and well-being of the crew. Unaddressed mental health issues can impair decision-making, reduce situational awareness, and increase the likelihood of accidents at sea.

**Workplace Culture and Hierarchies.** The hierarchical structure inherent in ship life can significantly impede the effectiveness of mental health support systems. In maritime environments, captains and high-ranking officers wield considerable authority over the crew members, establishing a power dynamic that can discourage open dialogue regarding mental health issues. This hierarchy may cultivate an atmosphere of apprehension, where seafarers feel uncomfortable sharing their psychological struggles with superiors, fearing that such disclosures could be interpreted as a sign of weakness or incompetence. Consequently, crew members may refrain from discussing their mental health challenges, resulting in a lack of essential support and resources that could otherwise mitigate their distress.

This reluctance to communicate about mental health concerns is compounded by the transient nature of crew compositions on vessels. Due to the cyclical rotation of crew members, there is often limited time available for the establishment of trust and rapport between officers and crew. This lack of familiarity can hinder effective communication and foster a sense of alienation among crew members, making it difficult for them to feel comfortable seeking help. When individuals are unable to cultivate trusting relationships

within their work environment, they may be less inclined to disclose their vulnerabilities, further perpetuating the stigma surrounding mental health issues.

Moreover, the consequences of this hierarchical and transient environment extend beyond individual well-being. The inability to discuss mental health openly can lead to an accumulation of unaddressed psychological issues among crew members, which can adversely affect team dynamics, morale, and overall operational effectiveness. High levels of unrecognised stress, anxiety, and depression can compromise decision-making, decrease situational awareness, and increase the risk of accidents at sea.

## **Solutions and Recommendations**

Solutions and recommendations would vary between the merchant marine and the Indian Navy. Even in the merchant marine, the recommendations and the practicality of their implementation can have large variations based on numerous factors, including simple factors such as type of the vessel and the composition of the crew. Some generic recommendations are enumerated in this section.

**Improving Access to Mental Health Services.** To more effectively address the mental health needs of seafarers, shipping companies must integrate mental health care into their comprehensive safety protocols, recognising it as an essential component of occupational wellbeing. One promising approach is the implementation of telemedicine services, which would enable seafarers to consult with mental health professionals remotely during their time at sea. These services provide vital support, particularly during extended voyages, ensuring that crew members have timely access to psychological counselling and psychiatric care when needed. Telemedicine, particularly in the form of tele-psychology or tele-counselling, has demonstrated significant efficacy. Research suggests that telephone counselling is comparable in effectiveness to traditional face-to-face therapy, with clients experiencing similar trait-based outcomes. Not only does tele-counselling offer equivalent therapeutic benefits, but it also gives patients a heightened sense of control over their treatment process<sup>26</sup>. This method ensures that individuals can access professional mental health services regardless of their geographic location or isolation at sea, thus addressing one of the primary challenges in delivering care to maritime workers. Additionally, companies should expand the availability of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and encourage their use by promoting confidentiality and reducing the stigma associated with seeking help.

**Mental Health Training for Officers and Crew.** Training programs designed to educate officers and crew members on recognising the signs and symptoms of mental health issues are essential for fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment on board ships. These programs should not only focus on identifying early indicators of mental distress, such as depression, anxiety, or burnout, but also provide crew members with practical

strategies for fostering open communication about mental health. By equipping both officers and crew with the skills to engage in mental health conversations without fear of stigma, such programs can significantly reduce the cultural and psychological barriers that typically prevent seafarers from seeking help. In addition to promoting awareness, comprehensive training initiatives must incorporate psycho-education on evidence-based coping strategies and mental health interventions. Topics such as mindfulness, stress management, and resilience-building techniques should be central components, providing seafarers with the tools to mitigate the effects of long-term isolation, fatigue, and high-pressure work environments.

Furthermore, these programs should emphasise the importance of social cohesion and provide crew members with strategies for building and maintaining strong interpersonal connections aboard. Training officers and crew in techniques to promote social cohesion - such as team-building activities or peer support networks, can strengthen the ship's social fabric, enhancing both individual mental health and overall crew morale. Specialised interventions for managing specific mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety, should also be included in the training curriculum. Seafarers should be educated on how to identify and implement effective interventions, such as cognitive-behavioural techniques or relaxation exercises, both individually and as part of a peer-support framework. Such interventions can empower seafarers to take proactive steps in managing their mental health, fostering a sense of agency even in stressful or overwhelming situations.

By promoting mental health awareness and equipping seafarers with practical tools to address mental health concerns, shipping companies can cultivate a culture of psychological safety and support.

**Addressing Fatigue and Overwork.** Fatigue, burnout, and the tendency to be overworked are critical issues that require significant attention when considering the mental health of seafarers. Bakker and Vries (2020) propose that when individuals face work-related stressors, they often, unknowingly, adopt maladaptive coping strategies, such as self-undermining and coping inflexibility. Self-undermining occurs when individuals, already experiencing burnout and depleted energy resources, unintentionally create further obstacles for themselves, which exacerbate work pressure, lead to conflict, and increase the likelihood of making errors. Coping inflexibility refers to the inability to adapt one's coping strategies to the demands of the situation or to evaluate the effectiveness of the coping mechanisms employed. Both phenomena typically arise from pre-existing states of fatigue and burnout, while simultaneously reinforcing these conditions, creating a self-perpetuating cycle<sup>27</sup>.

Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) suggest that certain factors can alleviate stress, including experiencing a sense of control over non-working hours, practising psychological detachment from work during free time, engaging in mastery experiences (taking on positive challenges or learning new skills), and relaxation<sup>28</sup>. Psycho-education for seafarers may

focus on helping them recognise and alter maladaptive coping strategies while promoting the implementation of evidence-based techniques such as those mentioned above to manage burnout and stress.

In addition to individual interventions, systemic policies and occupational-level changes are essential. These should include stricter enforcement of work/rest ratios, re-evaluation of crew workloads, prioritisation of adequate rest periods, and designing schedules that promote a healthy work-life balance, even during extended voyages. By addressing both individual coping mechanisms and systemic occupational factors, a more sustainable approach to managing seafarers' mental health and well-being can be achieved.

**Directions for Future Research.** The following areas are recommended for future research: -

- (a) The instant paper has attempted to collate existing studies on the subject and has not undertaken primary research through surveys. The aim was to highlight an important aspect of seafaring which may need greater study, including through interviews and surveys with Indian seafarers.
- (b) The efficacy and possible use of online peer support groups, possibly moderated by Artificial Intelligence or human counsellors, may be examined for the maritime field. Such an approach has been shown to be effective and was extensively used during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- (c) Whilst isolation of seafarers has been examined in this study, the reverse phenomenon, namely the families back home also not being in touch with the seafarers, needs more study. Here again, the military support groups such as the NWWA (Naval Wellness and Welfare Association), which provides a support framework, can be a useful starting point to study its implementation in the merchant marine. This would need to be done online, given the peculiarities of the merchant marine *vis-à-vis* the Indian Navy.

## Conclusion

Mental health represents a critical yet frequently overlooked dimension of the seafaring profession. The unique stressors inherent in life at sea—including isolation, fatigue, communication barriers, and hazardous working conditions—significantly contribute to elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among seafarers. Research indicates that these occupational stressors create an environment in which mental health issues can proliferate, exacerbated by the often-limited access to psychological support and resources.

To effectively address these challenges, a multifaceted approach is essential. This approach should encompass several key strategies, including the enhancement of access to mental

health services tailored specifically for seafarers. It is also crucial to reduce the stigma associated with seeking help for mental health issues, which often prevents individuals from accessing necessary support. Additionally, fostering a more supportive workplace culture - where open dialogue about mental health is encouraged and peer support systems are established - can significantly mitigate the adverse effects of occupational stressors.

By implementing these measures, the maritime industry can not only safeguard the mental health and well-being of seafarers but also contribute to a more resilient workforce, ultimately ensuring the continued efficacy and sustainability of global trade and national security. Such initiatives are vital for recognising the fundamental role that mental health plays in the overall safety and operational efficiency of maritime operations.

## Notes

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## **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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