

MENTAL HEALTH *and* WELL-BEING of Seafaring Professionals



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Mental Health and Overall Well-Being Of Seafarers





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Chapter 1

Introduction and background

Brief History of Seafaring: Important Milestones

Seafaring has been an eminent part of human existence since prehistoric times. Rudimentary watercrafts made of simple logs of wood were used by ancient humans, the homo Erectus, over a million years ago for crossing landmasses.

“The oldest canoe, known as the Pesse Canoe, dates between 8040 BC to 7510 BC. However, the earliest depiction of a watercraft comes from Norway’s Rock art at Valle, which is 10,000 years old.”

Many civilisations, notably the Austronesians and Phoenicians, developed sailing technology and made the world’s first catamarans, using them to engage in trade. The Northern European Vikings also set sturdy vessels and used them for travel before 1000 AD.

Around 5000 years ago, the first major shipping routes opened up between modern-day India and Pakistan. As land travel became increasingly dangerous due to bandits and robbers, many communities explored the seas and oceans to establish trade ties with distant civilisations. This, in return, boosted the development of navigation systems and the advancement of maritime vessels.

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From the 7th to the 13th centuries, the Arab Empire established trade routes to Asia, Africa and Europe. The specialised vessels called Qaribs were used for the purpose.

The 15th to 19th centuries were known as the age of discovery or the age of exploration. Many European powers like Spain and Portugal developed vessels for exploring far-off lands and bringing them under their control. They sailed across the Atlantic, opening sea routes to Virginia and Maryland for tobacco and Mexico and Peru for silver.



Mercantilization grew as a direct result of the shipping trade. Many researchers have established a relationship between shipping and



colonisation. Throughout history, nations or empires with strong and organised navies like the Ottomans, Spanish, Danish and later British carved large empires and brought regions like the Americas, Indian subcontinent and South Asia under their control.

Many shipping companies came into existence between the 16th and 18th centuries. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Suez Canal opened, easing the trade between Europe and Asia. Around this time, steamships came up.

After the end of the world wars, cruise ships came into vogue, and in the late 20th century, container shipping brought about a revolution in how goods were transported. It also laid the foundations of the modern shipping industry we see today.

Maritime Sector: An overarching subject

The history of the maritime sector is broad and all-encompassing. It is genuinely overarching and includes the study of international maritime laws, the history of whaling, fishing, seafaring, and the evolution of ships, sea exploration, naval sciences, marine themes in literature and art, the development of navigation, and not to forget, the socio-cultural history of sailors and passengers, each with a story of their own making.

In contemporary times, a relatively new and less explored area of research has emerged, i.e. seafarer mental health. This vital issue would be the core topic of discussion in this paper.

Importance of Seafarers and Seafaring

- About 90% of the world's food, fuel, raw materials and manufactured items are transported via sea. This is made possible by skilled seafarers who maintain and repair ships and also keep the cargoes safe from pirate attacks by risking their lives and facing health hazards onboard ships.



- World trade and globalisation depend on seafarers. They are trained to withstand harsh weather conditions and tackle stressful situations to keep the global economy running.
- Our daily lives depend on seafarers. If not for them, we might be deprived of our favourite foods, some of which come from the world's farthest corners.

- Not everyone can execute this job, which requires patience, willpower and, most of all, courage. Seafarers are the unsung heroes who leave behind their families and social life, spending months at sea, ensuring the safe delivery of essential goods like food and fuel.
- Seafarers are also engaged in humanitarian activities and play a vital role in saving lives at sea when the situation demands.

Challenges faced by seafarers

- Most studies conducted by maritime institutes and international organisations term seafaring as a 'risky occupation', both physically and mentally challenging and demanding, as seafarers are constantly in a dangerous physical and psychosocial working environment.
- Seafaring is a unique occupation, and seafarers remain in their workplace during working and non-working hours, spending their time with their colleagues, making them an isolated working population. Onboard interpersonal relationships must be cohesive and optimistic. However, research highlights frequent conflicts and skirmishes amongst different ranks and departments, which, coupled with loneliness, can exacerbate mental health problems among the group.
- Seafarers spend months at sea, watching the same scenery, which is detrimental to mental health. Also, different cultures, ethnicities and languages amongst crew and separation from partners, friends and family take a toll on their physical and psychological well-being.
- Besides handling job demands and pressures, economic pressure is also tremendous. New aspirants must make time to study to clear exams, to secure better employment opportunities and promotions.

- They are constantly exposed to noise and vibration from equipment and experience long working hours with irregular shifts leading to a lack of sleep, which causes fatigue.



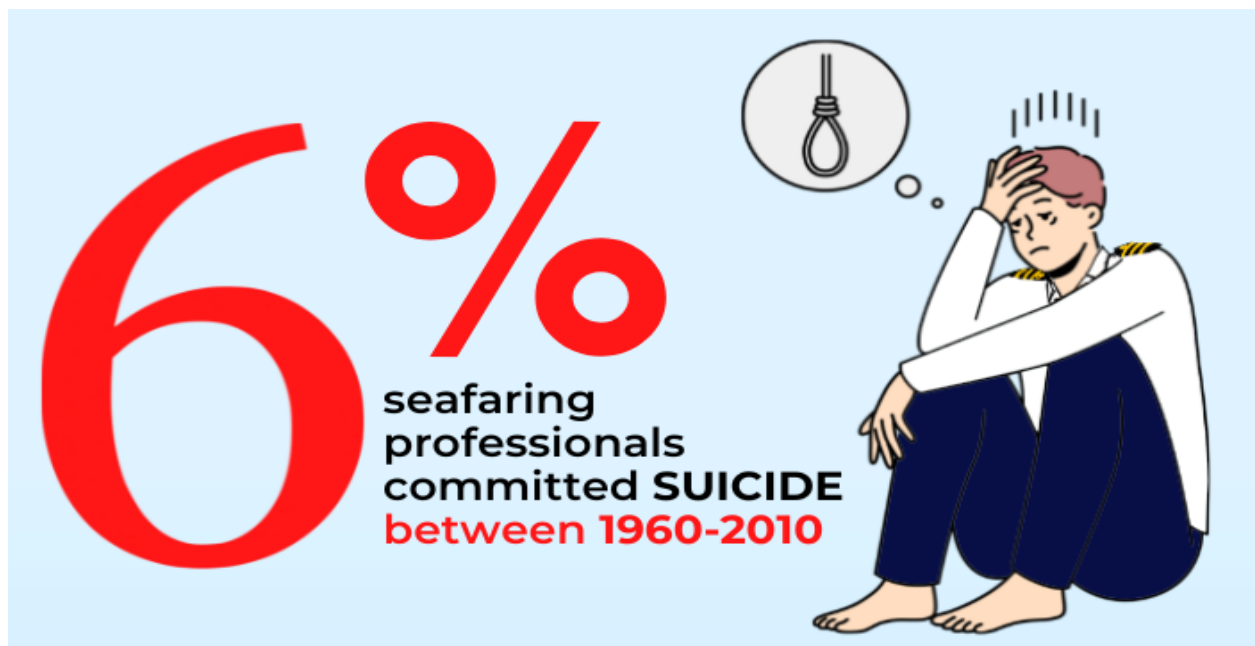
- Other risk factors include extreme weather conditions like heat or cold, lack of autonomy in work, scheduling uncertainties, feeling unsafe due to the threat of pirate attack, criminalisation onboard or the possibility of shipwreck.
- Most times, seafarers are on their own with little social support. Their work-rest times are not clearly demarcated; hence they work 10-hour shifts when the situation is pressing, leading to over-commitment. The 2022 Seafarer Happiness Index Report revealed that most seafarers feel pressured to work longer hours.
- Hence, seafarers have limited time for recreation, have monotonous working routines with little basic rights, and live onboard with the least

accommodation and communication facilities.

- Recent disruptions in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have added to their woes. Most seafarers do not get shore leaves and live in constant fear due to a lack of job security.

All these factors adversely impact seafarers' mental health by arousing job dissatisfaction, causing stress, depression, frequent burnouts, and thoughts of suicide.

A 2021 research published on Pubmed highlighted that roughly 6 per cent of seafaring professionals committed suicide between 1960 to 2010. Hence, the issue of seafarers mental health is extremely important.



Seafarer mental Health neglected: Most Studies report.

A recent study published in an online journal, *BMC Public Health*, titled '*Mental health problems and their related factors among seafarers: a scoping review*,' highlighted the neglect of seafarers' mental health. While many surveys were conducted on improving physical health, mental well-being was not prioritised enough.

Surprisingly, only three latest review articles were published on seafarer mental health. The first portrayed that research on the psychological functioning, decision-making, and other mental health issues among seafarers was low, only 10.61% to be precise.

The second study reported the rate of suicide and missing at sea numbers to determine mental health issues among the group. The third study also focused on the risks of depression and anxiety due to stress and loneliness.

Studies on Seafarers' Mental Health Scarce

It was found that studies on depression and suicide among seafarers were limited in scope. In addition, some studies conducted were few and fragmented and usually entailed a small group of participants, from 100 to 500 maximum.

Also, such studies showcased wide gender disparities as most study participants were male. No individual studies were undertaken to highlight the issues faced by women in the maritime domain.

These findings show that reviews on mental health issues and other factors are unavailable, and extensive studies in the seafarer domain are lacking.

Chapter 2

Mental Health And Psychological Issues Among Seafarers

Current Status of Seafarers' Mental Health

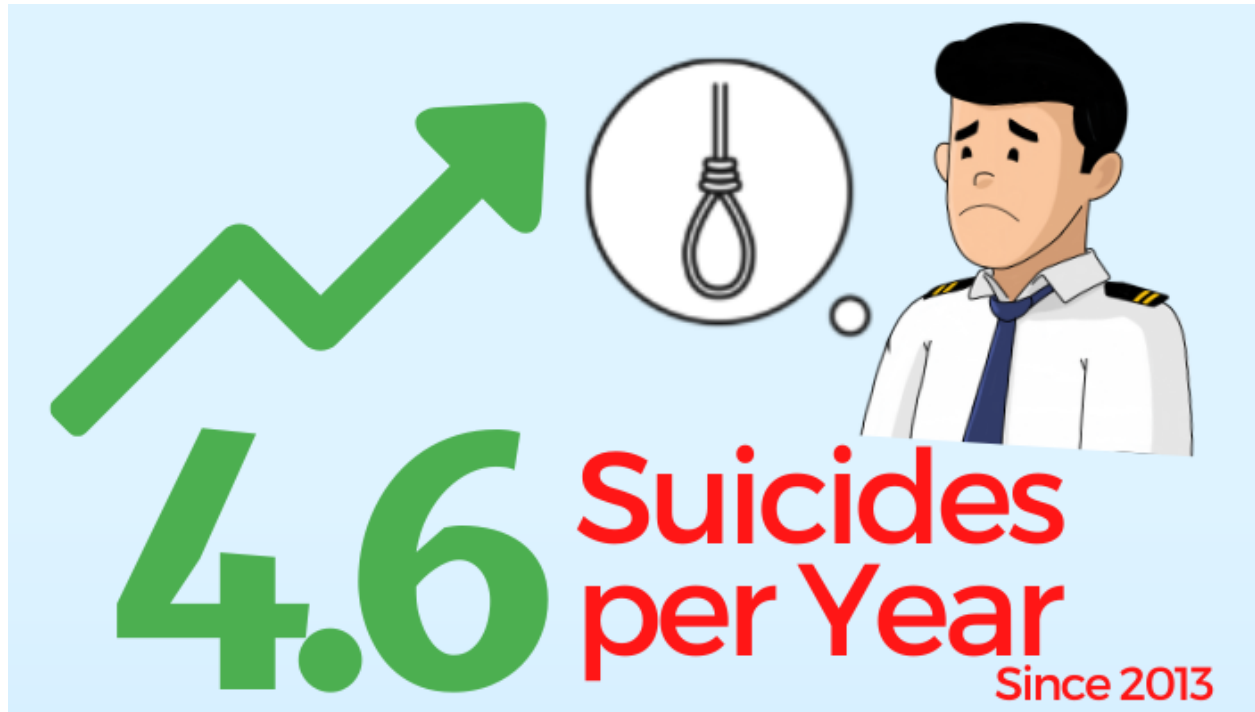
Amidst growing concerns about mental health and well-being in general, Cardiff University conducted a study on seafarers working in the international cargo shipping industry to identify and ascertain the mental health issues faced by the working group. It was funded by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health and used questionnaires, interviews, literature and popularly held claims.

Although the study found no extraordinary evidence of alarming mental health situations, it concluded that 65% of seafarers are prone to psychological issues and complications compared to other occupational groups. It also outlined that recent-onset psychiatric disorders were becoming common onboard vessels but are generally neglected or ignored or simply seen as mood disorders.

Another review published by Gard in 2019 considered research data between 2010 and 2019 and highlighted a 5.6% decrease in the number of deaths due to maritime accidents and physical illnesses from 2012 onwards. However, the cases of mental health issues increased by 4.2%.

Seafarers are suffering from high levels of stress and anxiety. Suicide rates among seafarers are higher than some national averages.

It also reported an average of 4.6 suicides every year from 2013 onwards. The latter did not include the cases of missing seafarers.



Gard's study showed seafarers of all age groups were equally vulnerable to mental illness and suicide. Specifically, cases of mental illness were equally distributed across age groups 26-40 years, and incidents of suicide were more frequently seen in seafarers aged over 35 years when compared to younger colleagues.

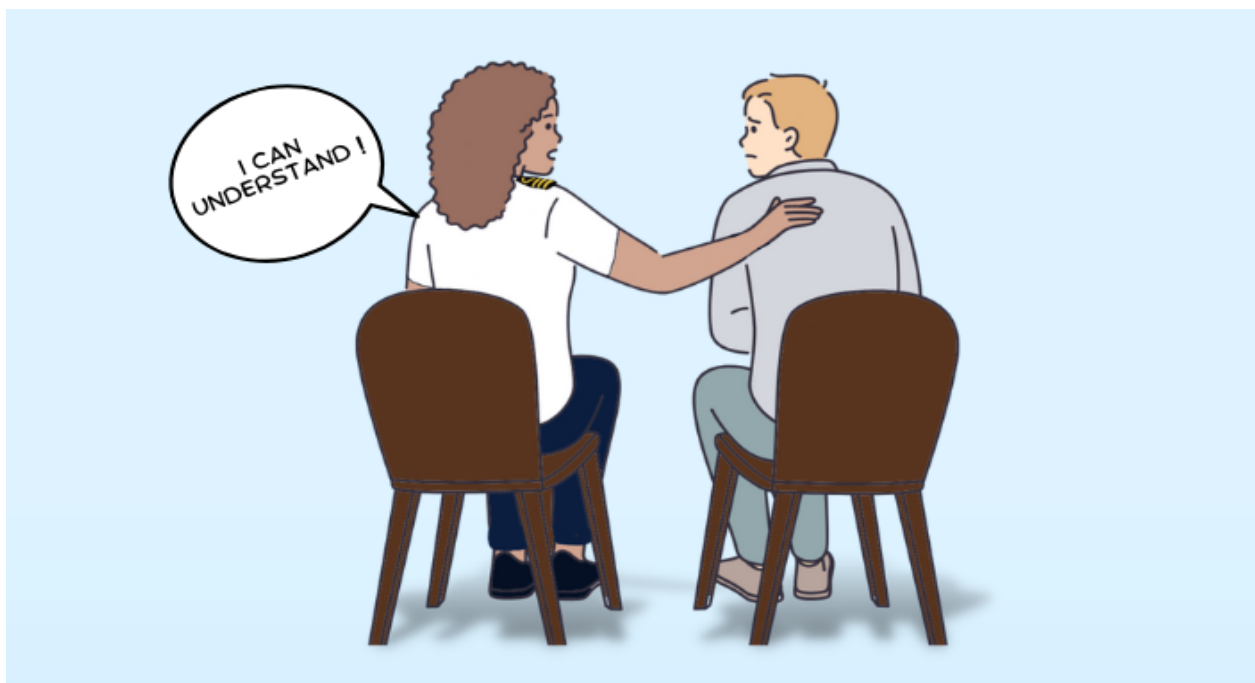
This is an important finding since it raises questions about the industry's focused nature on younger seafarers as 'being susceptible to mental disorder or suicide as they find the seafaring life very hard in the beginning.' The study outlines that mental health issues need to be addressed in all age groups.

Fear of Social Stigma leads to mental health cases onboard vessels being underreported

The primary reason for mental health negligence onboard vessels and in the shipping industry, in general, is the social stigma linked to mental issues, which are normal and, most importantly, curable with the right treatment and support.

However, individuals with mental issues are usually seen as no longer employable or 'fit to work.' This leads many to ignore or often hide their symptoms unless the situation worsens.

This assumption is due to a lack of understanding of mental illnesses and issues and a lack of awareness of how to treat and manage them. A study conducted by Australian Health Services and Support highlighted that most mental health issues could be treated if recognised and diagnosed at early stages. These studies are essential to break the social stigma surrounding mental health issues.





Several other studies highlight the effectiveness of short and long-term psychological intervention. However, it depends on whether ship owners or shipping companies are willing to discuss these issues in office meetings or whether crew onboard vessels talk about these concerns in safety meetings.

Awareness equals acceptance; the more these issues are addressed, the better they can be tackled.

Importance of Identifying Mental Health issues: Taking the Right Action

A difficult challenge for seafarers might be identifying their mental health issues and checking for the right treatment options. Seafarers, like ordinary people, are not trained to identify other people suffering from anxiety, PTSD or depression. Hence, it is vital to equip oneself at an individual level, and knowledge about common mental health issues is a must for seafarers. PFA or Psychological First Aid is found to be effective.

Gard worked with Red Cross, Singapore, regarding PFA, a supportive first response given to those under emotional stress or a mental health crisis. Any person can be trained in PFA, which can go a long way in mitigating mental health illnesses onboard vessels.

According to several Red Cross studies, PFA works for most people and gives positive results if implemented correctly. The first step is to look for symptoms like irritability, anxiety, absenteeism, or aggression towards colleagues and intervene before it worsens.



It was thought that senior members of the team could provide PFA. However, Gard's study highlights the rate of suicides is higher among senior ranks. Hence, training only senior officers would not be fruitful. PFA training should be given to all seafarers for their benefit.

Some Major Findings From Recent Studies and Surveys

A recent review published in BMC Medical Health in February 2022 utilised studies on electronic databases like Medline, Pubmed, ScienceDirect etc., to find current data on the mental health of seafarers. The studies were limited to peer-reviewed ones, written in English between 2010-2021.

Research criteria determined the search terms and eligibility. Around 3790 studies were found on various databases, out of which only 109 texts were selected, and only 63 were selected for review. Of these, 16 studies were conducted in Europe, 5 in Asia, 2 in North America, and 1 in South America.

The number of participants in each study ranged from 52 to 1950. Participants of only one study included female Chinese seafarers.

Mentioned below are the latest findings from these studies and reports.

- 18 Qualitative studies detailed mental health problems and psychological issues among seafarers. The incidence of mental illnesses like depression, anxiety and social withdrawal among international seafarers was almost 4 per 100,000.
- Five studies reported depression, anxiety, loneliness and isolation as the most prominent mental health issues among seafarers, irrespective of ethnicity, nationality or age group.

15-49%

of seafarers on international vessels have one or more problems related to **depression, anxiety, loneliness and isolation.**



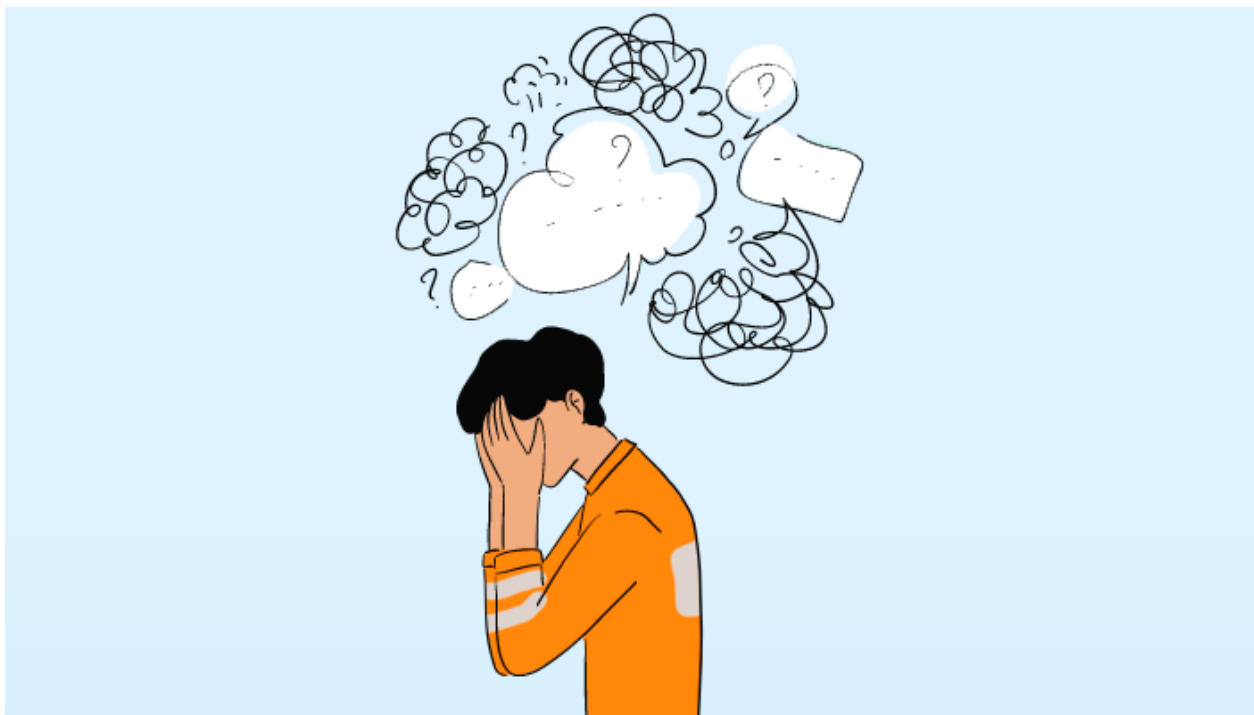
- 34% of seafarers with physical health problems, particularly type-2 diabetes, reported increased stress and tension during their voyages.
- Seven studies reported stress and fatigue emerging from their mental and physical work environments.
- A study published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health titled, *Stress and Strain among Seafarers Related to the Occupational Groups*, concluded that out of 65% of participants, deck officers were most mentally tired and stressed and deck ratings were most physically drained.
- Another study published in June 2019 titled, '*Stress and strain among merchant seafarers differs across the three voyage episodes of port stay, river passage and sea passage*' biometrically surveyed 323 sailors on 22 container vessels and found that 37.8% of seafarers



found port stays most stressful, followed by river passages (24.8%) and sea passage (13%).

- This was due to short working times on sea passages compared to port stays. Hence, seafarers had more spare time to spend on leisure activities and sleep during the former.
- Also, the levels of cortisol (primary stress hormone) were highest among deck officers, followed by deck ratings and engine room personnel. These levels substantially increased, at least by 2.6%, during port stays. Also, seafarers had lower heart rates during the sea or river passages than during port stays.
- Another study showed that 51 to 67% of seafarers were stressed about family members and financial issues, ship safety, port state control and occupational strains regarding ending contracts. 28.3% of seafarers developed stress that demotivated them from working usually.
- A 2015 study titled, '*Resilience and well-being amongst seafarers: a cross-sectional study of crew across 51 ships*' published in Springer found that stress levels were also determined by ethnicity on the international vessels. East Asian seafarers had higher stress scores than seafarers of other ethnicities like Caucasian, Latino/Hispanic and South Asian.
- Burnout syndrome was analysed in two studies. A survey conducted among 264 german seafarers found that 10.8 % of participants were emotionally exhausted. The levels differed according to rank and role onboard ships: officers had a stress level of 10.7%, ratings had 4.5%, and the highest was for galley staff, i.e. 25%. Also, the burnout score for personal issues was higher than for work-related problems.

- The same study highlighted that 14% of seafarers were at risk of depersonalisation, and 63% had a low sense of personal accomplishment.
- A 2018 study of 162 seafarers working in an Italian shipping company demonstrated that engineer officers experienced more anxiety and greater dissatisfaction with their working conditions than deck crew.



- Another study, *'Association between social support and health-related quality of life among Chinese seafarers: A cross-sectional study,'* surveyed and interviewed 917 Chinese seafarers. It showed that the mental health of Chinese seafarers was below the designated Chinese norms. They were also more stressed than seafarers of other nationalities.

Chapter 3

Factors Undermining Seafarers' Mental Health

Many socio-demographic, job-related, and indirect causes negatively impact seafarers' mental well-being. The significant ones are mentioned below.

1. Socio-demographic and personal factors

Age: Most studies reported that psychological diagnoses impacted young seafarers most (30 and under). Also, most mental illness claims were made by seafarers under 40. Younger seafarers also reported more self directed-violence, like self-harm, depression, stress or work-related burnouts, and mental fatigue compared to older staff. Many studies reported increased psychological capital, i.e., optimism, hope and resilience with age.

Gender differences: Although quite a few studies considered gender differences, most study participants were male. However, one of the studies titled *Risk factors for positive depression screening across a shipboard deployment cycle*, published online by Cambridge University Press, found that females onboard vessels were at greater risk of developing work-related stress or depression.

Ethnicity and Nationality: Many studies reported greater claims of poor mental health by European seafarers and those hailing from the Philippines and the Pacific than in other parts of Asia. Higher levels of stress were reported by East Asians compared to South Asians. Another study found

that mental health symptoms were more prevalent in Italian Seafarers than other nationalities. Lastly, a 2019 study showed that the risk of depression was higher in Hispanic seafarers.

Relationships and Parental Status: In a 2016 study, *The relationship between job stress, job satisfaction, and the symptom*, the researchers found that unmarried seafarers were most likely to experience self-directed harm or violence and obsessive-compulsive behaviour compared to married seafarers. Also, the risk of depression was lower in those in a relationship.

Marital dissatisfaction was connected to increased stress and anxiety. Seafarers with children had less emotional stress and sleepiness.

Personality type: Most studies that considered personality traits reported a positive approach to life by seafarers with an extroverted personalities.





Those with a neurotic personality had a negative approach to life. One study said seafarers with high-self efficacy had greater work-life balance and managed stress better than others.

Prior mental health diagnosis or traumatic events: Studies reported that having experienced at least one stressful life experience was associated with a greater risk of developing anxiety disorders and depression. Mainly, seafarers held hostage had an increased risk of developing PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorders. However, this could be avoided by appropriate pre-departure training.

Poor physical health and diet: Most seafarers who exercised regularly onboard and maintained a healthy diet rich in fibre, protein and essential nutrients reported better mental health. Those with poor dietary habits and physical health reported psychoticism, somatisation, depression, anxiety and phobic anxiety.

Duration at sea: Research highlights that increased duration at sea (more than four months) led to greater anxiety among younger seafarers compared to senior officials.

2. Physical working and living conditions

Several studies identified the physical work environment as a cause of ill health. Sliskovic and Penezic's 2015 study, a *Descriptive study of job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction in a sample of Croatian seafarers*, cited the onboard working conditions leading to job dissatisfaction and poor mental well-being. Out of 530 participants, 35.8 % felt the same.

About 40% said they were affected by the constant noise, vibrations, ship motions, temperature, poor bedding, restricted living space and air

pollution. These participants reported poor sleeping patterns, irritability, greater anxiety and depression, lower job satisfaction, and lack of energy.

Concerns for Safety: In one of the studies, 65% of the 917 participants felt stressed about safety onboard the ship, while 60% were worried about piracy. Most studies report a correlation between safety perceptions and psychological capital.



Seafarers with more safety concerns reported more mental fatigue, sleepiness, dissatisfaction and intentions to leave.

Two recent studies focused on the impact of covid 19 on seafarers concluded that half of the participants did not feel safe while working, and over 60% felt that their health and well-being were not considered.

During this time, almost a quarter reported insomnia, unhappiness, depression and less will to work.

Job-related pressures and demands: Seafarers, in most surveys, report high job demands as stressors. Also, demands relating to environmental compliance were cited as adding to the workload. Other job demands which led to stress were several emails from the shore office to vessels, difficulties coordinating with stakeholders like charters, port operators, and managers, and many unnecessary and unstructured safety meetings.

Also, the inability to disengage from work at the end of their shift and over-commitment led to burnout. Participants also reported long working hours and irregular shifts as causes of mental fatigue.

Lack of Sleep: Difficulties in sleeping are a common problem reported among seafarers. Most studies reported stress and tensions as one of the major barriers preventing sleep, the second being hypervigilance.



A study also found that most seafarers prioritised other activities rather than sleeping, as they had little free time.

Impact of interpersonal relationships onboard vessels: Social cohesion was associated with seafarers' positive mental well-being. Such relationships could be forged by spending time together after work hours, working out, etc.

However, studies reported a lack of cohesion among crew members. Those with a low level of education experienced harassment in the workplace, though such incidences were minimal.

Others highlighted the changing crew relations, and interacting with people of different ages, nationalities, and mindsets was stressful. It also led to differing opinions on how work should be managed and decisions forged.

Relationship with managers and supervisors: In a 2020 study titled, *Occupational safety and health for service crew on passenger ships*, it was found that cordial relations with immediate managers were essential for mental well-being.

Also, having professional and experienced managers with confidence, mutual responsiveness, and respect were seen as positive attributes appreciated by seafarers.

Low supervisor support has been shown to increase the risk of mental health problems and particularly depressive and anxiety disorders or severe depressive symptoms. Supervisor support has been found to be additionally and positively associated with job satisfaction



Organisational Justice and fair treatment: One study highlighted the importance of an equal and fair environment onboard vessels. Most participants raised concerns regarding discrimination, disrespect by some officers, expectations to adjust by officers, excess overtime hours, concealment of mistakes and complaints by officers and enforcement of different rules by different seniors, flouting rules by captains etc.

Some participants also reported that the shipping company did not always understand their concerns and neither appreciated nor recognised their efforts.

Work autonomy: Ship crews reported less job autonomy and little participation in decision-making. Little work autonomy was a major stressor, leading to stress.

Uncertainty: Seafarers under temporary contracts reported uncertainties arising from scheduling, being deployed to a vessel at short notice without proper rest at home, unstable working teams, improper training, and mandatory tour extensions leading to stress and fatigue.

In Sliskovic's study of the impact of COVID-19 on seafarers, over 50% of participants said that not knowing when their work contract would end impacted their mental health. Participants with short, temporary contracts and apprentices reported depression and anxiety.

Ship type and size: A 2013 study published on Pubmed, titled *Burnout syndrome in seafarers in the merchant marine service*, highlighted that seafarers working on tanker ships and passenger vessels, particularly cruises, had higher burnout risks than those working on cargo vessels and container ships.



The same study highlighted that those on small vessels weighing about 2000 to 5000 Gross tons had higher risks of emotional exhaustion than those working on huge ships.

3. Other Indirect Factors

Feelings of loneliness and homesickness: Most seafarers reported anxieties, worries and stress related to family problems. Feelings of loneliness, staying away from wives/husbands, girlfriends/boyfriends and parents for more than five months caused depressive symptoms like lack of interest in working, insomnia, physical discomfort etc.

Restricted internet access: Seafarers in international vessels experienced limited internet access or high internet costs as a major strain. When a study asked seafarers how their working conditions could be improved, almost 60 responded that telecommunications must be free and non-restricted. One study reported that an increase in internet usage onboard vessels lowered social cohesion and bonds among work teams.

Alcohol and smoking: Stress at work decreased sleep quality, which was linked to increased alcohol consumption and smoking. One study highlighted that high voluptuary habits were found among those working in a stressed environment, with vessels docking in several ports a week. In some studies, seafarers reported consuming less alcohol onboard ships.

Worries regarding finances: A 2017 study, *Association between social support and health-related quality of life among Chinese seafarers: a cross-sectional study* highlighted that 56% of participants were worried about finances, paying loans, buying a house or getting their children educated. Only 15% felt satisfied with the money they were earning.



Impact of Piracy: Developing Research has shown that seafarers might suffer from long-lasting stress as a result of pirate attacks or being held hostage. Post-traumatic stress might impact work performance and have other negative effects.

To date, there has been no significant study that effectively highlights the complex issues faced by sailors held as hostages or studies examining their behavioural changes following such a traumatic experience.

A 2018 study, *The long-term impact of maritime piracy on seafarers' behavioural health and work decisions*, published online on researchgate, tries to fill this gap by highlighting some key findings.

It revealed that over 6000 seafarers had been held hostage in the last decade. This study surveyed 101 former hostages from the Philippines, India and Ukraine. Around 363 seafarers who had experienced pirate attacks in the past were also interviewed.

The study employed clinically validated scales and found that roughly 26% of former hostages had symptoms consistent with PTSD and that hostage experiences and other maritime traumas in a seafarers' carrier can have life-long impacts that can manifest in the form of anxiety, depression or sleeplessness.

While transiting a piracy-prone area, seafarers face stress and worry. If there is a pirate attack, there is a high risk of injury, death or being held hostage for ransom, which involves physical and emotional abuse in many cases.



There is sufficient evidence to show that this stress has a lasting impact on seafarers' mental well-being. A 2016 study of former Filipino hostages showed that over half of them face lasting issues like subjective fear, distress, loss of control over their lives and persistent anxiety that stemmed from PTSD, substance abuse and poor physical health.



The study mentioned that severe PTSD was diagnosed in three Italian seafarers held hostage and seven Bulgarian seafarers. The symptoms persisted 20 days after the event had occurred, and they had been rescued.

Two descriptive studies have highlighted varying types of emotional disruption and behavioural changes in those who returned from piracy without assessing clinical mental health. However, there is an increasing focus on pre-departure training aimed at teaching seafarers to manage pirate attacks. It might help them to tackle the situation with a sense of control and understanding.

Seafaring is quite risky, and seafarers are exposed to many traumatic events in their careers, which could make them sensitive over time and impact their work and personal life.

Research has also documented decisions by previously held hostages to leave the profession of seafaring, but no large-scale studies have been conducted to examine how frequent these happenings were or the scale of their impact on seafarers' behaviour.

War Zones: Seafarers have a right to say no to a contract or board a vessel that would pass through a piracy zone or a war zone. However, at times, a war might suddenly break out, trapping the sailors in the region.

Seafarers trapped in war zones live in constant fear of bombardment. They worry about the lack of food, water and other vital resources, especially fuel availability. In April 2022, the International Labour Organisation and the International Maritime Organisation called for action to protect seafarers stuck in Ukrainian ports. Per the international organisations, over 1000 sailors were stuck in the city of Mariupol and on several vessels berthed in

the Sea of Azov. IMO, ILO, ICF and ITF worked together to rescue them and ensure their safety.

Ship Abandonment: The Maritime Labour Convention has defined it as the violation of rights of repatriation and payment of seafarers' wages.



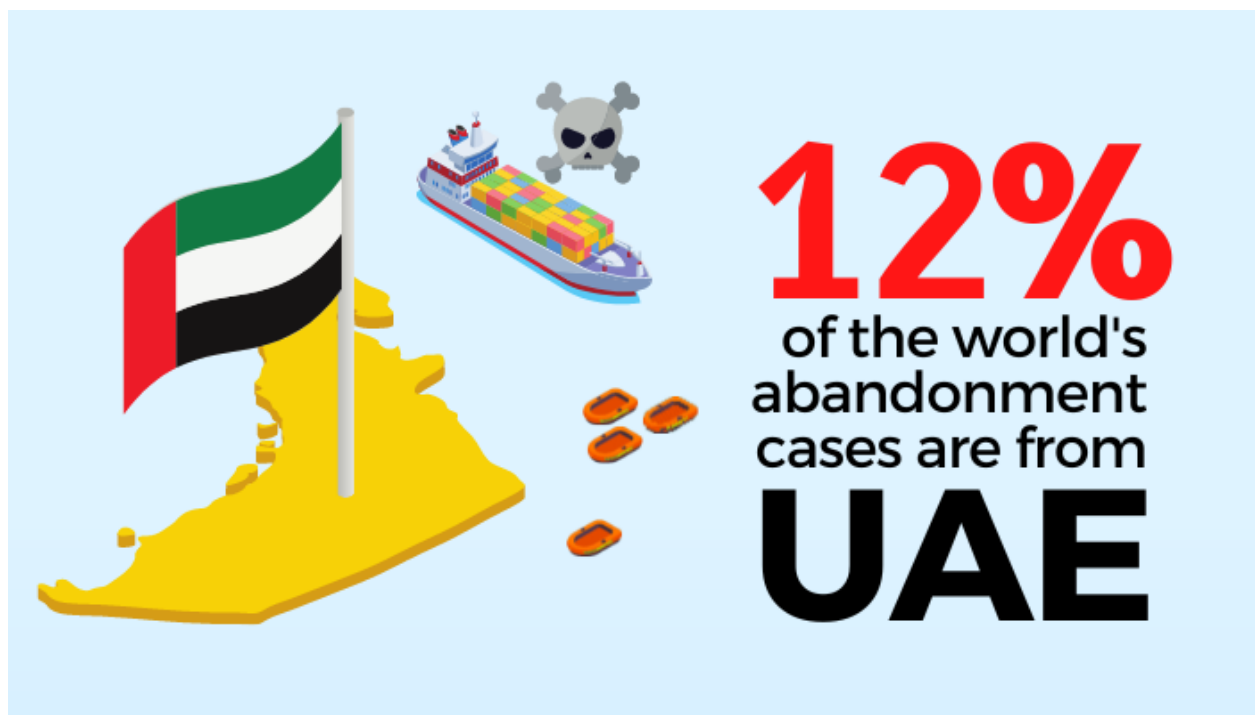
This increase could be due to economic instability and global recession since the pandemic. Many shipping companies went bankrupt and could not support their onshore and offshore employees.

According to ILO, seafarers from India, Russia and the Philippines accounted for 35% of those abandoned at sea. Most of them had to live in inhumane conditions, which worsened their mental health. Also, such seafarers are usually the only breadwinners in their family, impacting an entire family and not just an individual.

Due to these reasons, amendments were brought to the MLC 2006, which came into effect on 18th January 2017. Under these, seafarers must be given four-month wages and repatriation and livelihood needs through their P&I club¹ under the CIOFS² certificate. However, after looking at reports for 2019-2020, it seems that seafarers are also not completely aware of how to invoke financial security after being abandoned by shipowners.

Safe Manning rules make matters worse as seafarers are not allowed to disembark the vessel, which then becomes a floating prison for them.

According to ILO, UAE still accounts for 12% of the world's abandonment cases. In 2017, a UAE-based company abandoned all its eight ships and seafarers. The crew had no food, water or electricity to stay indoors. They suffered from malnutrition, skin rashes, infection and poor mental well-being until they were saved by Mission To Seafarers and ISWAN South Asia.



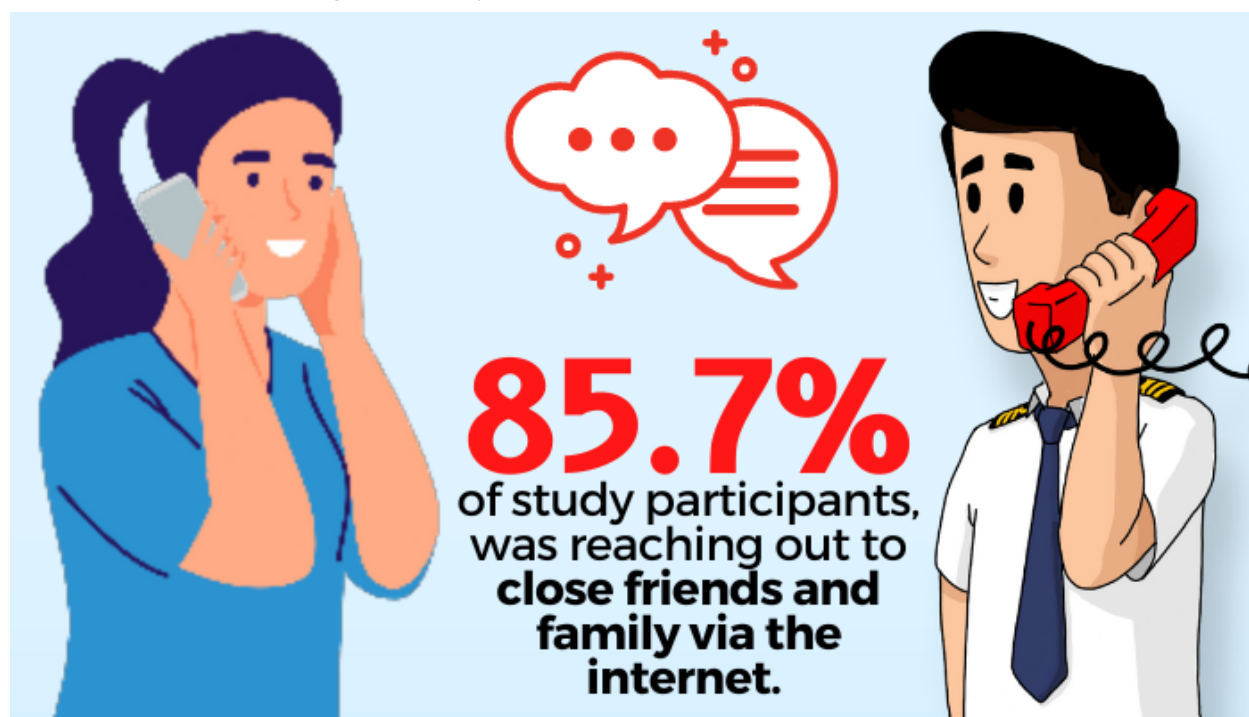
Chapter 4

How To Tackle Mental Health Issues: Some Useful Coping Strategies

Beneficial approaches to the mental health of seafarers can be derived at individual and organisational levels.

1. Strategies employed by seafarers to combat depression and onboard anxiety

The most commonly utilised strategy by seafarers to combat the blues was reaching out to close friends and family via the internet. Video calls decreased stress significantly compared to normal phone calls.





One of the study participants said, “ I believe the internet goes a long way in keeping you sane, trust me. [...] not having this feeling that you are excluded from the rest of the world.”

Another seafarer said that the internet allowed them to keep in touch with the events onshore and even be part of important family events, though virtually.

A 2017 study, *Association between social support and health-related quality of life among Chinese seafarers: a cross-sectional study*, concluded that seafarers with better social help from either friends, family or close ones had better mental health.

Studies also found that 80% of seafarers watched DVDs, 82% liked listening to music, and 60% talked to colleagues to combat feelings of loneliness. 48% liked hitting the gym, 40% texted family or friends for emotional support, 22% liked playing cards, and 30% enjoyed karaoke in their free time.

Other coping activities included playing video games, smoking, swimming, doing other tasks, reading their respective holy scriptures, and planning for the future. Less than 2% of seafarers replied that they do not get lonely onboard.

Some seafarers were asked if they ever get anxious at home. About 3.5% answered yes and mentioned strategies they employed to unburden themselves. These included spending quality time with family and friends, spouses or partners, going hiking, fishing, shopping, spending time with pets, playing sports, cooking a meal and drinking beer.

The top three things that would make seafarers happier were reported to be free internet access, mentioned by 987 seafarers, followed by



permanent contracts and also shorter contracts, meaning short stays at sea. The third thing was large crews and sufficient shore leaves.

A 2013 Study published in BMC Public Health, *Health promotion in the Danish maritime setting: challenges and possibilities for changing lifestyle behaviour and health among seafarers*, highlighted the importance of a healthy diet and physical exercise for seafarers' mental well-being.

2. Responsibility of the Shipping Company, Managers and Other Stakeholders

According to the 2019 Guard Study, “it is appropriate for industry stakeholders to be concerned about seafarers’ mental health and wellbeing and that such worries may be somewhat overdue”.

It concluded that 55 employer respondents said that their companies had not introduced or discussed any policies and practices for addressing the mental health issues of seafarers.

The study highlighted the importance of stakeholder involvement and the role of managers. In the case of safety procedures, good management and leadership can go a long way. Giving information on healthy daily meals by suggesting cooking courses and improving fitness facilities are the responsibilities of company managers.

Resilience training is essential, and for this reason, shipping companies can offer various training programs, especially for inexperienced, young and low-ranking seafarers and those working during port stays.

A 2018 study published in Springer, *Perceptions of Well-Being, Resilience and Stress Amongst a Sample of Merchant Seafarers and*

Superintendents, mentioned the Pilot Resilience Program, aimed at supporting onshore and offshore workers of shipping companies. It incorporates building a positive or optimistic approach towards life situations, cognitive-behavioural therapy and training in management and leadership.

Each session lasted 40 to 60 minutes and talked about the importance of optimism, discovering and enhancing one's potential, setting short-term personal goals and gratefulness. The study reported mixed findings; some found the intervention useful, while others saw it as another safety initiative amidst hectic work. Others believed the program was useful if implemented properly onboard vessels, using trained facilitators, to accommodate crew members of different native languages and ethnicities.



Shipping companies should devise a health management plan for the crew onboard their ships, as obesity and diabetes are related to mental health issues. Clinical tests should be done every five months.



If possible, companies should make noise cancellation equipment available as engine noise is a strain. Also, on onboard vessels, seafarers are pressured by contractors due to limited work time. Companies should try to facilitate support for better communication between both parties.

As seafarers work long hours, sufficient breaks are needed for good mental health. Another stressor is an effort-reward imbalance, which should include career rewards like establishing an adequate promotion system.

In a research report titled, ‘Seafarers’ mental health and wellbeing, published by the Seafarers International Research Centre, Cardiff University, researchers asked seafarers what companies could do for their mental well-being. Over 50% answered that improving recreation facilities onboard their vessels could go a long way.

Some of these activities included organising weekend BBQ parties, gaming competitions, introducing a welfare fund, constructing a swimming pool on ships and providing motivational books and magazines.

An equally significant percentage of seafarers mentioned that improving the terms and conditions of employment could help them feel better.

A shocking find is that less than 2% of seafarers mentioned that counselling services could be provided onboard vessels for seafarers to tackle depression or anxiety. This shows that seafaring personnel did not take therapy or counselling even at home.

An interesting way was proposed in a 2016 study, *Stress and fatigue management using balneotherapy in a short-time randomised controlled*

trial. This study combined balneotherapy using natural spring water said to have spiritual healing effects on a group of participants.

It involved a bath with warm mineral water for 15 minutes every day for 14 days. Music therapy involved the participants listening to relaxing music for 20 minutes after the bath. Over 80% of participants showed drastic improvements in their stress levels, fatigue, anxiety and mood swings.



3. The Contribution of Maritime Charities

Though many steps have been taken at an individual and organised level, the work done by maritime charities for the welfare of seafarers, their families and communities is truly praiseworthy.

One such organisation is the sailors' society, whose core work is chaplaincy. Their trained chaplains bring free wifi onboard ships in case of restrictions. They also bring joy onboard vessels by supplying essential

items such as warm clothes for winter, snacks or chocolates to cheer the sailors.

If seafarers stuck in ports face any problem, they can even take them to a hospital or lend an ear to discuss their issues, offering them emotional support. They also give away bibles and try to provide spiritual support, if needed.

Sailors society also provides many programs aimed at seafarers' mental well-being. One such is the 'Wellness-At-Sea, E-learning Programme', an extension of their award-winning coaching and mentorship programme. It enables seafarers to tackle rough situations at work while being physically and emotionally fit.

They also have a crisis response network to offer trauma care and counselling services for seafarers who have suffered piracy attacks, natural disasters, confinement, or other traumas.





Lastly, their sea change fund supports serving and retired seafarers.

Stella Maris is another organisation that has done its part in promoting seafarers' mental well-being. In 2021, on World Mental Health Day, the organisation collaborated with Mental Health Support Solutions (MHSS).

Stella Maris chaplains distributed a booklet called 'A Guide to Mental Health At Sea' in the UK. It is a comprehensive document that offers tips and valuable, practical strategies to take care of their mental well-being, including the role of a healthy diet, the importance of a good physique and socialising, and how to accept differences of opinions onboard vessels etc.

This was a great initiative, given the consequences of Covid-19, on seafarers' mental health and general well-being.

MHSS Chief Executive Christian Ayerst said that seafaring involves a lot of stress and mental strain which has a negative impact on seafarers' mental health. Also, their fears have increased due to the changing times, where uncertainty has grappled the shipping industry.

Some organisations like the Maritime Charities Group had even started a fund for seafarers who had lost their jobs during the pandemic.

Chapter 5

Limitations of Studies on Seafarers' Mental Health

Studies on seafarers' mental health are restricted in many ways. Usually, no restrictions are placed on the study type. Hence several research designs like qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods are used.

There are significant limitations where study design is concerned. Most studies used to write this paper were quantitative cross-sectional surveys. It is a common way; however, a relationship between mental health issues and their underlying factors should be carefully interpreted.

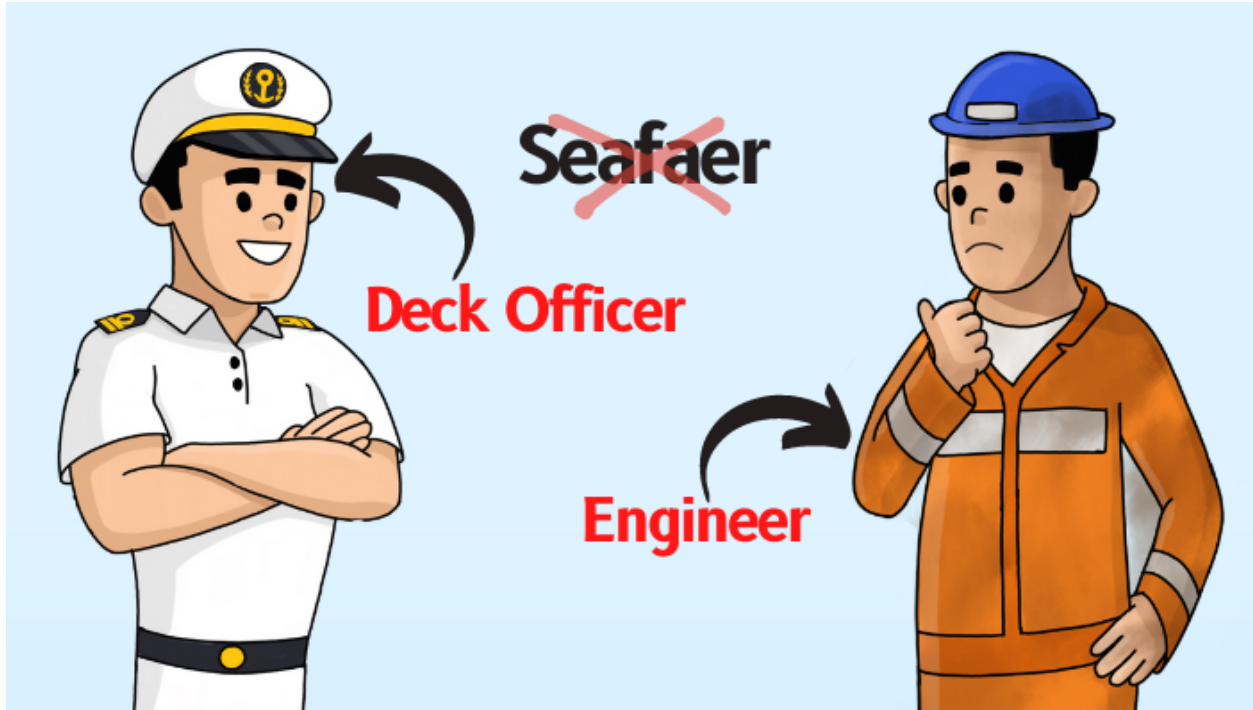
Also, since most studies use surveys, questionnaires or interviews, it could result in self-reporting bias, as a few seafarers might not be comfortable talking about their mental health issues for numerous reasons.

Studies usually focus on a particular nationality or ethnicity if conducted by a specific organisation. For instance, a study on seafarers mental health by a Japanese University would most likely consider Japanese seafarers.

Hence, most studies have an individualised and limited nature and cannot be seen as representative of the entire seafarer population. Most studies include 500-1000 participants, which translates to small sample size.

Many studies consider onboard crew as 'Seafarers' without distinguishing between job departments, vessel types, and shipping routes or dividing them into categories like deck officers, non-officers, engine personnel etc. This highlights more in-depth research in the maritime industry regarding

mental issues faced by different officers, or those working on cargo ships or passenger vessels and so on.



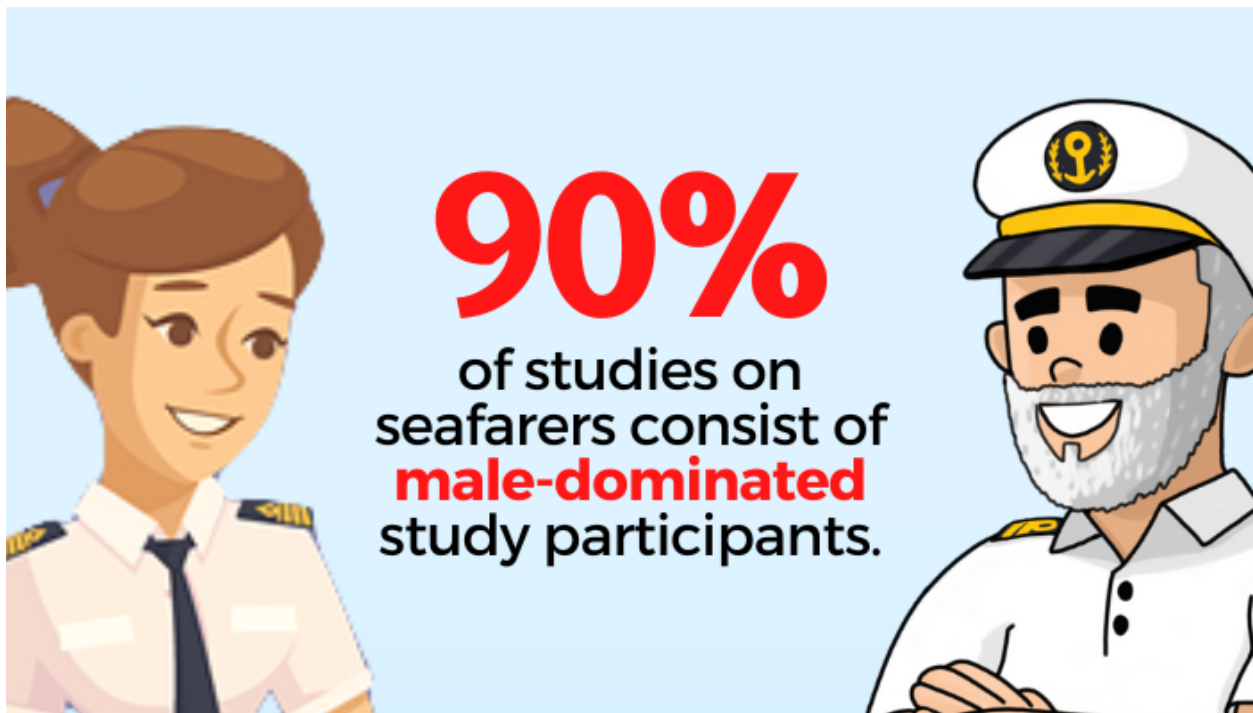
Several studies do not consider non-responders. Hence the results of such studies cannot be taken as fully representative of the sample population. Hence, caution should be taken, and the results of such studies should not be generalised.

Most reputed journals publish research and studies conducted only in the English language, which means potentially relevant papers in other languages do not make it to the readers and are excluded.

Sometimes publication bias might also hamper results. Future review could consider reviewing grey literature to study unpublished research findings. Lastly, many authors should be involved in writing a research report or bringing together the results. However, usually, it's the work of one or two

people, which might lead to personal bias as well. Hence, double screening of research data and results could help solve the problem to an extent.

Studies on seafarers consist of male-dominated study participants. There is a lack of research on female seafarers or the problems faced by them in the maritime industry.



They should also be included in major studies on seafarers as they are an equally important part of the seafarer community.

Lastly, while there is much to do, the present studies can surely pave the way for more detailed research on the issue of mental health among the seafarer group.

Chapter 6

Impact of Covid-19 on Seafarers' Lives and Mental Health

The last three years have been hard for the transportation sector, especially the maritime industry. As of May 2020, there was a decline of 60-62% in port capacity utilisation across the world, particularly in passenger calls. However, most ports are now resuming normal functioning.



The outbreak of covid and the present situation between Russia and Ukraine has impacted seafarers' well-being and morale. This is serious because 15% of the global maritime workforce hails from these two countries.



The trends were visible in the 2022 Q1 Seafarers Happiness Index Report published by Mission to Seafarers. It decreased from 6.41 to 5.85, with levels of happiness decreasing in overall categories, the lowest in eight years. It highlighted the variety of challenges faced by seafarers on the mental front, augmented by a turbulent start of the year.

However, the recent Q2 Seafarer Happiness Index Report showed that after attaining a record low last quarter, the seafarer happiness score has risen, evidence of recovery in the maritime domain and improving the mental well-being of seafarers. The latest report showed that overall happiness increased from 5.85 to 7.21/10, and levels rose across all categories.

Nonetheless, 2019-2021 were surely hard times for the seafaring personnel.

How has Covid-19 disrupted the working of the Shipping Industry?

The Covid-19 outbreak in 2019 truly reflected the intertwined and interdependent nature of the global economy. As countries closed their borders with more than 7 million reported cases and over 511,000 deaths as of 1 July 2020, the shipping industry was badly hit, and so were the 2 million seafarers who make shipping possible.

The repercussions of the worldwide covid-induced shutdowns are still felt today. Many ports were congested with containers and vessels, while goods lay in warehouses waiting to be delivered. The Covid situation led to supply shortages accompanied by a worldwide economic slump.

One of the most global sectors, around 80% of world trade depends on it and is crucial for the supply chains. One of the most efficient and effective



means of transport, shipping ensures the delivery of essential goods and services to nations, particularly in times of crisis, such as Covid-19, which engulfed the entire world.

At any time, there are over 1.4 million seafarers on the waterways, delivering fuels, foodstuff, and humanitarian supplies worldwide. However, during the pandemic, as travel restrictions were imposed, up to 400,000 seafaring personnel were trapped in their vessels at sea, per the figures from the International Chamber of Shipping.

Issues Faced by seafarers during the Covid-19 Pandemic

They faced several issues like port closures and border closures, additional quarantine requirements and restrictions on crossing borders in some nations, crew changeover and difficulties in repatriation, including those employed on cruise ships and yachts, issues regarding certifications and licencing, problems in getting resupplies, repairs, and ship surveys. Increased incidences and reports of mental stress, hunger strikes, conflicts and suicide were reported.

The Crew Change Crisis

To keep the global supply chain running smoothly, it is important that crews are changed at proper intervals, so they can rest and replenish themselves and work efficiently.

By mid-June 2020, around 300,000 seafarers needed international flights for the crew change. Also, about 70,000 personnel on cruise ships still await repatriation. However, only 30% of governments across the world allowed for crew changes.



The crisis situation came to the forefront in 2020 when the Chief Human Resources Officer at Thome's Ships revealed that 12% of their 5500 seafarers were still on the ships despite expired contracts.

Seafarers in most nations faced extensions in contracts and extended working days, which negatively impacted their mental well-being. It was also impossible to replace them after long tours or send them home. Such situations are unsustainable for their well-being; however, they had to endure these during the pandemic.

According to the article '*Shipping and COVID-19: protecting seafarers as frontline workers*' published in the WMU Journal of Maritime Affairs, seafarers onboard cruise vessels also suffered a lot as most ocean liners were barred from entering territorial waters. For instance, Canada banned cruise ships till the latter half of 2020. Thousands of seafarers were stuck on their vessels for months, not allowed to disembark in ports to go back



home. Most were also not paid and suffered great anxiety, isolation and stress, which impacted their mental health severely.

Per Standard A2.4 of the MLC 2006, seafarers have the right to annual leave of at least 2.5 calendar days per month of employment. The maximum period of service onboard a vessel for seafarers for which they are entitled to repatriation, in accordance with Standard A.2.5, must be less than a year/12 months.

The Mission to Seafarers rallied for changes to address the crew change crisis. Hence, after discussions at the Global Maritime Forum's Virtual High-Level Meeting in 2020, The Mission to Seafarers collaborated with several maritime organisations. They signed and adopted *The Neptune Declaration on Seafarer Wellbeing and Crew Change*.

It was also signed by the ICS, ITF and Global Maritime Forum. The declaration recognised the seafarers as key personnel and granted them first access to Covid-19 vaccinations. It also decided to implement the best health protocols for seafaring personnel. Most importantly, it argued for facilitating crew changes through joint efforts of charters and shipping companies.

No Shore Leaves kept them trapped inside their ship

“Shore leave is a big source of being able to replenish energy,” said clinical psychologist Charles Watkins, the managing director of Mental Health Support Services (MHSS), which offers one-to-one therapy, training and a confidential 24/7 hotline run by clinical psychologists to 5,000 ships.

He also mentioned increased incidents of depression, burnout, anxiety and panic attacks, especially among younger seafarers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

He said that they were the worst affected since young professionals were not used to extended stays at sea and didn't get a chance to develop coping strategies, they were the worst affected. He also pointed out that Covid had exacerbated the existing mental health issues.

Usually, once a ship docks at the port, seafarers could take shore leave for some hours to get a respite from their work and get a change in the scenery. However, getting shore leave has become difficult, even in normal circumstances.



Vessels are notified about berth availability before they arrive at ports. Port turnarounds have been reduced from 18-36 hours to just 8 hours, making it difficult for seafarers to get shore leaves.

During the Covid-19 outbreak, seafarers could not get shore leaves at all, as some companies denied them leave altogether while others left it to the ship captain.

However, it is essential that seafarers go ashore for some time. A valid SID and a passport allow seafarers to transit and transfer to another ship or join a vessel in another nation and be repatriated. While public health concerns are a valid reason to deny shore leaves to seafarers, refusing to allow them to come ashore for transits, transfers, or crew replacements is inhumane.

During covid, officials coming to the port were limited. Chaplains Mission to Seafarers reported they could not embark on a vessel and delivered essential supplies through a bucket lowered down from the ship via a rope.

Increased Incidences of Seafarer Abandonment

Seafarer Abandonment was one of the main concerns during the pandemic. Some companies abandoned the seafaring personnel working for them, as they were running on losses, e.g., a Spanish-flagged vessel with Spanish seafarers.

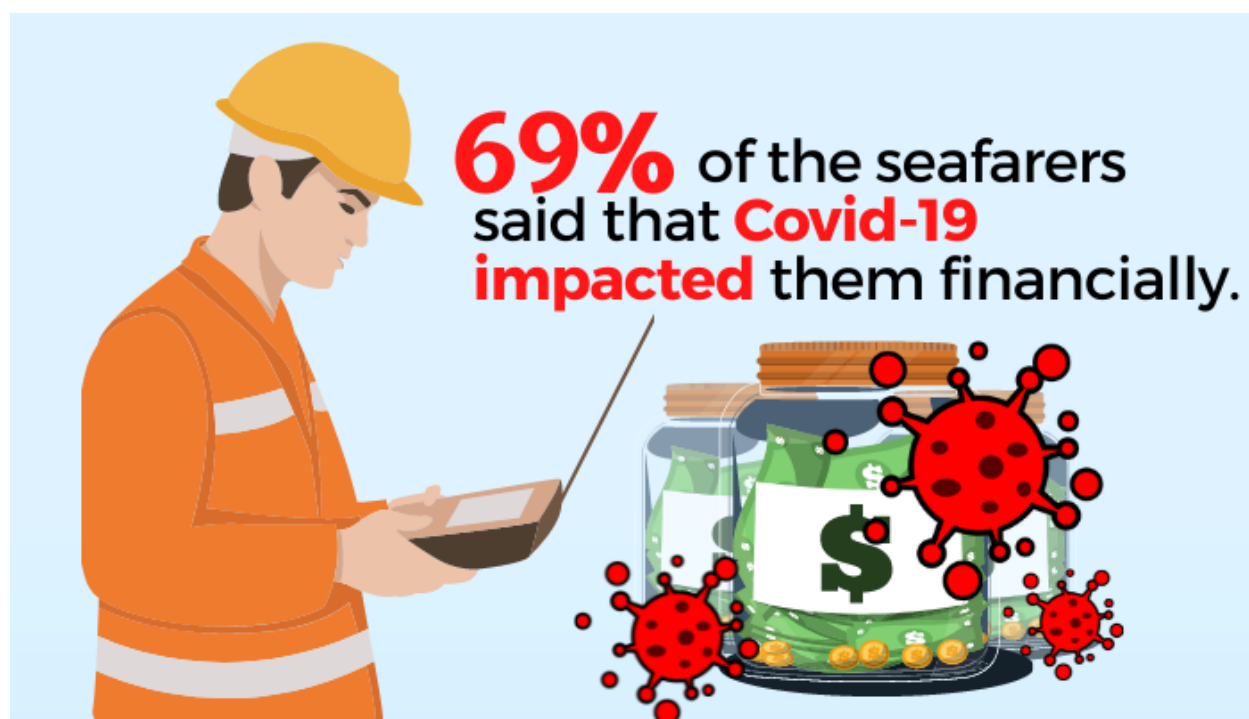


Some governments tried to repatriate their seafarers, like the Indian government, which repatriated 200,000 seafarers in three phases by the end of 2020.

Many international organisations like the International Transport Workers' Federation, which represents seafarers worldwide, protested for seafarers' dignity and basic rights during the pandemic.

Findings of the Key Surveys published in 2020

A total of 363 seafaring personnel, ranging from deck officers to engine crew, responded to the global maritime charity Stella Maris's questionnaire, the majority of respondents from the Philippines.



Majority of the respondents said that Covid-19 also impacted their emotional health badly.



When asked about their immediate concerns, more than half replied that it was to secure a new contract and get back to work. They were also worried about depleting savings and providing for parents and family.

ISWAN also evaluated the well-being of seafarers during the Covid-19 outbreak with the help of a special questionnaire. It revealed that over 50% of seafarers felt unsafe while doing their jobs and didn't think that their health issues were taken care of. 30% reported insomnia, and 26% reported feeling gloomy and unhappy.

A Ray Of Hope: Bettering Times

The last two years have been challenging on many fronts. However, many organisations came forward to help seafarers in any way they could.

The Netherlands-based Jumbo Maritime won the International Marine Contractors Association 2020 Safety Award for its Mind Saving Rules Campaign. The company sent postcards from seafarers to their families back home, weekly well-being tips via emails, shared personal stories on their internal QHSE newsletter, provided individual help, and rolled out a special mental health program to support their sailors.

After two years of mental strain and social isolation, companies allow their workers to organise social events onboard vessels while taking necessary precautions to boost the morale of seafarers. Hence, weekly gatherings, karaokes, sports and other games, barbecue nights and movie nights with colleagues onboard ships have added some happiness.

The latest seafarer index report showed seafarer satisfaction with food onboard vessels, and the survey shows that stakeholders are making efforts to improve seafarers' quality of life. The data shows that much

needs to be done for seafarers struggling with bad mental health who feel frustrated and need help.

Seafarers are **more satisfied** with food onboard vessels.



Chapter 7

Conclusion and Key Recommendations

The issue of seafarers' mental health is vast and manifests due to various reasons. Hence, all stakeholders and seafarers must spend more time analysing it to handle it more effectively.

Firstly, it is essential to understand that seafarers face the same challenges in their everyday lives as those in other professions. Additionally, they are also constrained in their working environment for long durations, away from friends and family.

Mental Health is important for physical health and vice versa. Depression could result in suicide or self-harm. It is important to surpass the stigma that forces seafarers to suffer in isolation and talk about mental health and treat it with compassion which is shown in other health concerns.

Mental Health should be discussed regularly in office meetings and safety meetings onboard vessels to bring normality to the issue and provide help to those in need.

There is clear evidence that mental health problems are higher in seafarers than in non-seafarers, and recent-onset psychiatric disorders have become common on cargo vessels in the past few years.

Gard Study highlights that strategies to lead to mental well-being among seafarers should ***“be orientated towards proactive ship-board improvements designed to stimulate positive social interaction (with***

those onboard and those ashore) and to improve opportunities for seafarers to relax, recharge and uplift their mood”.



Most studies identified free and unrestricted internet access could improve seafarer happiness and mental well-being onboard vessels, followed by improving conditions at work, relationships and accommodation.

Apart from stakeholder guidance, self-help strategies such as resilience training and counselling are also important. Employers should invest resources in building a healthy working environment for their seafarers.

Many seafarers identified a range of areas where shipping companies could come to the rescue, such as helping to create a better work-life balance by having their employers spend shorter durations onboard vessels, providing free internet access, having bigger crews and more social activities, allowing for shore leaves and provision of sports facilities like gymnasiums.



Key Recommendations

Most studies reviewed in this paper identified the following potential benefits for improving the mental well-being of seafarers:

- Training staff members, both senior and young cadets, regarding ways to identify mental health issues among peers and colleagues onboard ships.
- Regularly monitoring the well-being of seafarers, particularly young, unmarried and single staff members with a past history of trauma and those suffering from physical ailments like diabetes and other ailments.
- Senior staff could act as role models, supporters and friends to the junior cadets in times of need.
- Increased awareness and training about how to maintain a healthy lifestyle onboard ships.
- Shipowners should ensure the availability of good quality, nutritious and healthy food onboard their ships.
- Increased quality and availability of exercise equipment on ships.
- Provision of excellent noise cancellation systems to reduce noise, hence helping seafarers to sleep better.
- Big crews to spread the workload could help reduce the duration of stay onboard and decrease the number of working hours.

- 
- Managers should promote safety behaviour and reassure employees that their physical and psychological issues are taken seriously.
 - Foster good relations and communication among team members by promoting effective conflict resolution techniques and organising social events.
 - Managers should also encourage an inclusive culture and reassure seafarers that reports of negative workplace behaviour will be taken seriously.
 - Onboard and Shore-side managers should be given effective leadership and management skills training to support seafarers.
 - Shorter and more regular shifts and shore leave for all ranks, whenever possible.
 - Involving employees in the work-related decision-making process.
 - Allowing seafarers more autonomy over their tasks while maintaining supervision.
 - Provision of training for managing stress onboard vessels.

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