

# Seafarer Mental Health and Wellbeing: Beyond the Pandemic

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## SUMMARY

This paper highlights some mental health challenges for seafarers during Covid-19, what has been done, and the priorities going forwards for the maritime industry.

## KEYWORDS

Seafarer Mental Health, Maritime, Covid-19

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## Introduction

The maritime environment is a unique working environment. Seafarers spend a large proportion of their lives on board ships, away from their family and friends providing essential services within the global supply chain. Over the last two years, the pandemic has highlighted and posed additional mental health challenges for our seafarers worldwide.

Although Covid-19 shone a spotlight on mental health and wellbeing challenges within the maritime industry, little external recognition has been given. This paper aims to explore and raise wider awareness of some main challenges, what has been done, and what still needs to be addressed.

## Covid-19 Survey

A global industry- wide online survey (Stokes and Arslan, 2020) of maritime workers led by Lloyd's Register (LR) in collaboration with the UK Chamber of Shipping, the Mission to Seafarers and Safety at Sea provided some insight into key areas of focus for the industry. These key areas included both physical and mental health aspects and highlighted potential risks to onboard safety. Main seafarer concerns related to lack of social activities, exercise opportunities, worry about things beyond their control, appetite changes and signposting to mental health support. Some most notable human factors findings associated with seafarers' mental health and wellbeing are summarised in this paper.

Primarily, survey results showed only 8% of respondents strongly agreed that they felt valued in their role, and just 13% believed their role was essential. There are many reasons why seafarers may feel this way such as healthcare challenges e.g., access to professional support and vaccinations as well as ongoing crew change difficulties. Although many countries have designated essential worker status to seafarers, which provides improved access to ports and vaccines, this has not been adopted worldwide.

## The Neptune Declaration

The crew change crisis has resulted in extended periods working onboard ships (some more than a year without shore leave). Additionally, seafarers are experiencing increased fatigue and difficulties obtaining adequate sleep which may pose increased safety risk. At the time of the survey there were

estimated to be 400,000 seafarers stranded on vessels beyond their contract length. This figure is thought to have reduced by half, however it is increasing again with the emergence of new Covid-19 variants and vaccination challenges. In response to the pandemic, and as a direct result of the crew change crisis, more than 700 organisations signed up to the Neptune Declaration on seafarer wellbeing and crew change to resolve the current crisis. The key steps identified by the Neptune Declaration to achieve this are:

- Recognising seafarers as keyworkers and prioritising access to coronavirus vaccines.
- Implementing health protocols for safe crew changes.
- Increasing collaboration between ship operators and charterers to minimise onboard infection risk.
- Ensuring that air transport continues to operate between major maritime hubs.

### **Beyond the pandemic**

The most recent Seafarer Happiness Index report (Mission to Seafarers, 2021) highlights that beyond the pandemic the industry needs to:

- Ensure respectful, open and honest communication from employers to seafarers.
- Consider improved internet provision for seafarers and an assessment of the associated costs.
- Support seafarers to identify mental health issues and any changes they may be experiencing.
- Review reporting mechanisms and a zero-tolerance approach towards bullying, harassment, victimisation and intimidation onboard.
- Increase understanding of multinational crews, interaction and social inclusion.
- Include seafarer input and feedback into the development of rules or systems onboard.
- Apply further pressure to define seafarers as key/essential workers globally.
- Provide more vaccinations for seafarers at ports and share best practices in achieving this.
- Explore the challenges of recruitment and retention to understand why seafarers may not wish to return to sea, and how to make seafaring more attractive.
- Explore seafarer remuneration, e.g., rising costs of living and wages.

Many maritime organisations are already launching initiatives to raise awareness and encourage open communications surrounding mental health as well as tackling mental health stigma and developing increased social inclusion and activities for seafarers (e.g., ISWAN).

This body of work has highlighted the importance of seafarer mental health and wellbeing in Maritime. As a direct result the IMarEST Seafarer Mental Health and Wellbeing special interest group (SIG) comprising key Maritime organisations (e.g., LR, UK Chamber of Shipping, Maritime and Coastguard Agency, ISWAN, Maritime Charities Group, amongst others) has been formed. The SIG has translated these areas of focus into workstreams to explore wellbeing and safety, organisational culture and mental health, technology in Maritime, wellbeing policies, legislation and governance, recruitment and retention and the effectiveness of wellbeing initiatives. This is the beginning of a positive move for the industry towards improved seafarer mental health and wellbeing.

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