

## Seafarers' Isolation

Isolation has always been an aspect of life at sea, and the main drivers of that sense of isolation are more extreme with the realities of COVID-19.

There are many positives to working as a seafarer; good wages, meeting and working with different people from all over the globe, seeing different places and experiencing different cultures.

The downfalls however are that you must cope with long periods away from home and missing your family and friends. In the worst-cases, some seafarers must spend so much time away from their families they may miss quality time spent with their children as they grow up.

Increased workloads, fatigue, work-related stress as well as a lack of interaction and bonding among crew members are the additional factors that can worsen the mental pressure and sense of isolation for seafarers while they're on board a vessel.

### **Factors of isolation for seafarers**

#### • **Poor connectivity**

A lack of communication with loved ones was the most regular cited problems experienced by seafarers.

While everything around us becomes more connected and the internet is an increasingly crucial and increasingly present aspect of our everyday lives, it is not guaranteed for seafarers, due to the low bandwidth available and the significant up-front and ongoing costs of equipment that works off-shore.

This makes instant-messaging, video calls and social media access difficult, unreliable or impossible for many seafarers.

#### • **Lack of teambonding**

The more crew members lack friendship and interaction, the more they feel alone, homesick and depressed, with long-term consequences for their emotional wellbeing.

On the one hand, there are concerns that many crew tend to retreat behind closed cabin doors, which results in too little social cohesion onboard. On the other hand, this may occur because they lack opportunities for a fun and engaging social activity they can share with their mates.

This is where the role of the shipowner comes in. Recreational activities and adequate social interaction onboard is a crucial component in maintaining the good mental health and wellbeing of the crew.

### **Seafarers' isolation and COVID19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the concepts of socialisation and isolation under new perspective for every single one of us.

From isolation as a potentially adverse consequence of their job, to isolation as a mandatory requirement, seafarers now have an even greater burden to shoulder, as now their one and only reprieve from social isolation at sea is an often unreliable and inefficient internet connection.

Seafarers are also now restricted in their ability to disembark when docked or to change over with other crew and fly home.

Some 400,000 crew members around the world remain onboard their vessels far longer than expected due to pandemic restrictions at various Ports and they also have to adhere to social distancing with their shipmates while aboard.

The issue of social isolation and the mental health impacts it causes must be a focus of the shipping industry's examination of seafarers' health and mental health in the post-COVID-19 era.

This of course needs to be done as part of the industry's adaptation and evolution in the wake of the pandemic's huge impact on the maritime industry for the foreseeable future.



## Seafarers' Isolation

### ***How can I ease the loneliness on board***

- **Keep some traditions**

It is not always practical while onboard, but maintaining some of the habits and traditions of your family can provide some level of comfort without realising it.

- **Talk as much as possible to your loved ones**

If you find a good connection, do not miss the opportunity to call your friend, husband, wife, parent and children, or simply send them a message/photo or a video card.

- **Surround yourself with pictures of family and friends**

We may live in the digital era, but printing some photos to decorate the space above your bed will provide you with warmer feelings and bring your loved ones a little bit nearer. It will also remind you each morning and evening why you're away and who you're working so hard for.

- **Take care of your physical health**

When we are tired, a small problem feels like the end of the world; this proves the great impact of the body on the mind. So take care of yourself! Eat well, sleep regular hours and maintain a basic exercise regime and the feelings of isolation will be softened.

- **Talk to your mates**

When you're at sea, the people you have around you are your companions; choose some of them to discuss and share your problems with. If you feel lonely, reach out to others, do something together. This can give anyone a sense of time out and can be a good distraction.

### ***What Hunterlink can do for seafarers***

Hunterlink is a specialist welfare and support service for seafarers and maritime workers and we remain the leading Employee Assistance Provider for these unique workplaces. We work in partnership with the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) to provide early intervention, ongoing support and proactive outreach services to international seafarers while visiting Australia or working in remote locations.

We know it can be a daunting process to pick up the phone when you are already in distress, but please know that we are here for you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with our fully qualified and registered counsellors ready to help you anytime of the day or night.

**Our 24/7 support service is available by phone and online via teleconferencing software or Instant Messaging apps**, depending on the preference of individual seafarers.

All calls and text-message conversations are 100% confidential and secure.

We also provide an interpreter service for seafarers who would prefer not to use English when speaking to our support staff.

**Hunterlink is also available to support the immediate family members of Seafarers** who might be struggling with the impact of loneliness and isolation caused by their loved-one being at sea.