

Information Updates KISHPNI-IU-NOV-2022

(Suicidal thoughts onboard & Understanding seafarers' suicide under-reporting)

The following are extracted from a research conducted into the mental health of seafarers and, specifically, suicide among seafarers.



Research shows an increase in suicide attempts among seafarers since the beginning of 2020, in a time when COVID-19 pandemic left thousands of seafarers stranded onboard for prolonged periods away from family, adding to the already emerging issue of crew mental health.

According to a 2019 study by ITF Seafarer's Trust and Yale University, positive correlations for depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation in seafarers are:

- Lack of adequate training
- Uncaring work environment
- Exposure to violence or threats of violence
- Co-existing medical conditions (including cardiac disease and sleep disorders).
- Low job satisfaction
- Ill health (self-rated)



However, the unprecedented situation shaped by the pandemic created new grounds for the global discussion on maritime health issues. Global organizations, seafarers' unions and associations have repeatedly rung the bell on governments to end the crew change deadlock and enable the safe transport of seafarers as key workers. Calls denounced that seafarers' medical conditions were going untreated, ship visits by port chaplains and welfare workers were severely restricted, and access to free communication with families and friends was typically infrequent.

The calls reached a tipping point after reports of seafarers stranded on cruise ships taking their own lives. The death of a Filipino crew on the cruise ship 'Harmony of the Seas' made headlines in June, as she was found dead outside her cabin in a suspected suicide case. Amid these calls, a new study came to confirm an increase on suicide attempts.

Key statistics on suicide among seafarers:

- **Every 40 seconds, someone in the world loses their life to suicide**, said the World Health Organization, who shed focus on suicide prevention on the occasion of the World Mental Health Day 2019.
- A 2018 study by Sailor's Society and Yale University to more than 1,000 seafarers showed that **over 25% of seafarers suffered from severe depression** and nearly half of them (45%) had not asked anybody for help.
- A 2020 wellness survey by Filistos ASCOT SA and partners on 4,989 seafarers revealed a significant increase in depressive symptoms and showed that the percent of people that have seriously thought about ending their own life in 2020 has more than doubled amongst seafarers. Preliminary data show **there is an increase on suicide attempts since the beginning of 2020**, especially since March. This number is extremely high, and interventions must be planned and put into action.
- A compilation of 20 published reports covering the years 1960–2009 showed that **1,011 seafarer deaths out of 17,026 total seafarer deaths were by suicide** – for a percentage of 5.9% of all deaths. They ranged from a low of 3.1% to a high of 18.0%.
- A second compilation of 12 reports of deaths due to illness from 1992–2007 showed **590 seafarer deaths by suicide out of 4,573 deaths due to illness**, or 13.1% of deaths. In these 12 studies the percentages ranged from a low of 5.7% to a high of 27.5%.

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► **What can a person do?**

For anyone coping with suicidal thoughts, the Mental Health Foundation issued an infographic in 2019 under the theme 'WAIT', providing four simple tips:

W– Watch out for signs of distress and changes in behaviour

A– Ask: 'Are you having suicidal thoughts?'

I– It will pass, assure your loved one that, with help, the suicidal feelings will pass with time

T– Talk to each other, encourage your loved one to seek help from a GP or health professional.

► **What can others do?**

Better observing and identifying behaviors of others is particularly important for preventing suicides. In its latest mental health guide, AMSA identified the following signs in crew, if they are out of character:

- Withdrawing, isolating, or being quieter than usual
- Appearing distressed
- Appearing agitated or irritable
- Having difficulty managing the work or workload
- Being argumentative, aggressive or getting into conflict
- Being confused, unusually forgetful, or having trouble concentrating.



 World Health Organization
Western Pacific Region



Who is at risk of suicide?

- People who have attempted to take their own life
- People who experienced war, violence, trauma, abuse, or discrimination
- People struggling with depression and other negative feelings
- People who are socially isolated
- People suffering from severe emotional distress, and chronic pain or illness
- People with an alcohol or drug problem

 PreventSuicide

www.who.int/westernpacific

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► What can the industry do?

Moving forward, there needs to be a unified approach that looks at protecting the mental health of seafarers at government level, organizational level and individual level.

For example, more research is needed to identify the many causes of fatigue and stress and for ship owners to reduce the factors causing fatigue and stress in the seafarers that crew their ships. Further research into seafarers' mental health, its connection to working conditions, and the prevalence of suicide would continue to benefit the industry's response to this issue. Last July, ISWAN called ILO to consider steps in line with MLC, to ensure that all seafarer suicides are accurately identified.

A cooperation of employers with P&I clubs, unions, and other interested parties to prioritize strategies to mitigate the risks of poor mental health outcomes in seafarers, could be helpful for the future. Governments can also shed particular focus to ensure that cadets receive effective training on building resilience and mental health awareness so that they are adequately prepared for life at sea.

On its part, the maritime industry as a whole should strive to de-stigmatize mental health matters and foster an inclusive, supportive environment in the maritime workplace. It may be difficult to talk about suicide. But talking openly about suicide can help prevent it!



Further info:

The International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) recognizes World Suicide Prevention Day on September 10th every year, with the overall objective of raising awareness around the globe that suicide can be prevented.

The research findings aim to help fill the gaps in knowledge on this important issue, and feed into the discussions about the mandatory recording of suicide at sea.

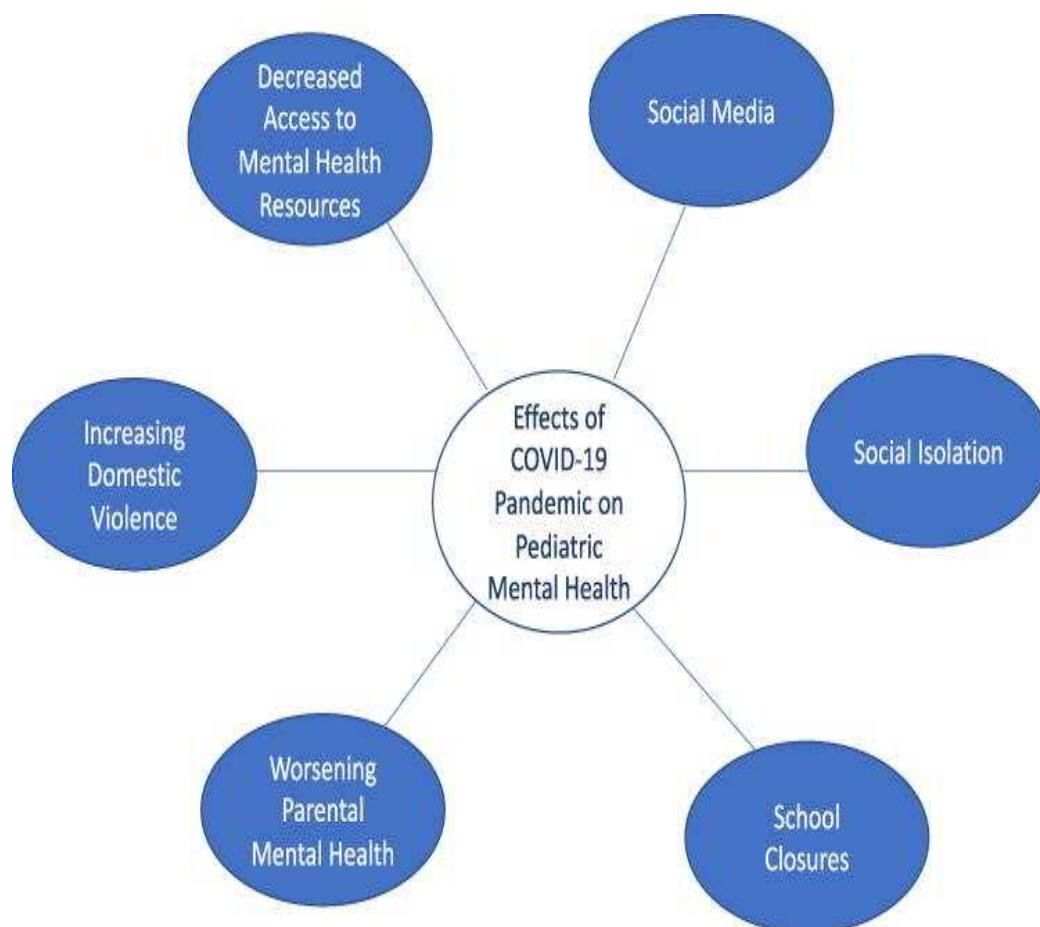
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In total, 20 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted between 7th March 2022 and 1st April 2022. Given the sensitive nature of this project, it was decided that seafarers themselves would not be interviewed, as it would be challenging to obtain all the necessary ethical approvals in time and given that it might be distressing for seafarers to discuss the issue of suicide among their colleagues. Instead, participants who work with or have expertise on seafarers were purposively sampled from across the industry. This ensured that a diverse range of perspectives were represented. These included: company representatives / ship owners, shipping management companies, insurers, maritime charities / chaplains, unions, and academics.

Key research findings:

No.1-Mental health of seafarers:

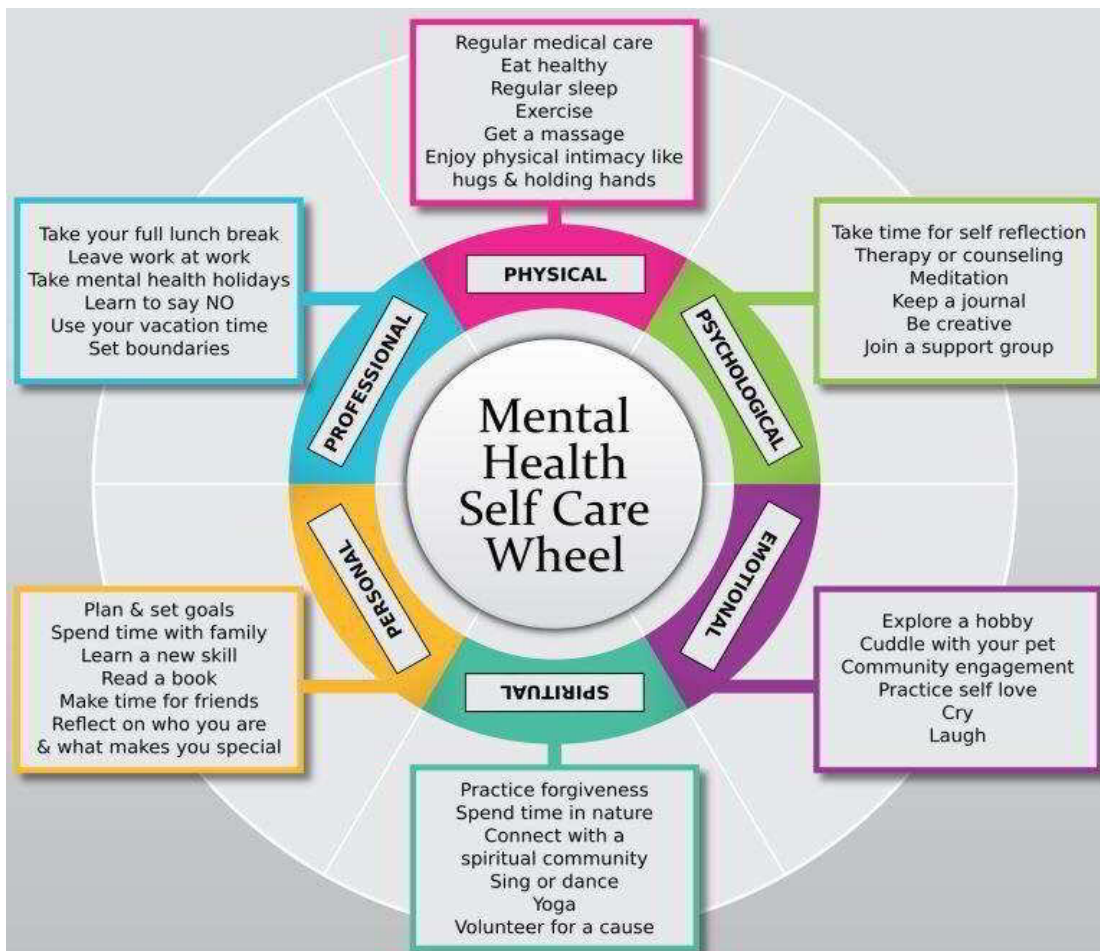
The occupation was portrayed as extremely challenging, being based in a unique social environment. In fact, a range of structural issues were seen to impose strain on seafarer’s mental wellbeing, including long working hours, isolation, fatigue, and financial instability. Furthermore, it was widely felt that COVID-19 has contributed to further strain among seafarers. More specifically, mental health issues were described as poorly understood, both among seafarers and across the industry more widely.



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No. 2- Mental health support for seafarers:

- Larger shipping companies were believed to offer more comprehensive internal mental health support services than smaller companies – services included employee assistance programmes, telephone helplines, and wellbeing days/weeks.
- Participants described chaplains providing mental health support by either making themselves available to talk to seafarers while the seafarer was at sea, or when they arrived at port.
- Unions were described as providing education programmes on seafarers’ mental wellbeing and often publicize mental health support services to raise awareness.
- Participants described how charities provide online, telephone, and face-to-face support for seafarers.
- Not all seafarers feel comfortable about accessing mental health support services, in part due to cultural stigmas around mental health and concerns over confidentiality.
- Mental health support is not consistent throughout the seafaring industry.



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No.3-Suicide among seafarers:

Participants widely acknowledged that this is a self-evidently serious issue, about which the industry can and should do more. It was believed to be inherently rooted in the mental health challenges faced by seafarers, and not an isolated phenomenon.

Specifically, suicide occurring on ships was described as a traumatic experience for crew, who often blamed themselves, further contributing to worse mental health. However, the report notes that it is a poorly understood issue, with seafarers reticent to discuss it, mostly for cultural and religious reasons. As for organizations and employers, a death on board is costly, both financially (due to changes in schedules and having to replace crew) and reputational (as it could make seafarers less likely to work for that organization).

Nevertheless, participants raised a significant “uncertainty problem”, as they questioned the viability of ever being sure a particular case is definitively suicide.

No.4- Recording suicide:

- Participants described how there are a variety of non-standardized ways of recording incidences of suicide, which are rarely shared across the sector.
- They identified several key challenges beyond the “uncertainty problem” – especially raising questions about how best to define the population of seafarers (i.e. just those onboard a ship, to include retired seafarers, etc.)
- There was a sense that suicide is probably under-reported for several reasons. Primarily, this is driven by the difficulty in knowing for certain if a death is suicide and, on a related note, a desire to protect surviving family, both emotionally and financially.
- Perceptions of how insurance does – or doesn’t – work around suicide leads seafarers to do what they can to ensure families receive pay-outs.

What could be done differently:

There was a real desire to see the industry tackle mental health among seafarers in a more holistic and preventative manner, rather than the reactive way it is believed to be dealt with at the moment. This was widely considered key to addressing the issue of suicide specifically.

In addition, including mental health ‘fitness’ from the top down – through organizational and onboard culture – and from the bottom up – through cadet training and recruitment approaches – was believed to be central to addressing this issue.

That said, despite the challenges around uncertainty, there was also a belief that more could be done to collect better data on suicide – both in terms of the data quality itself but also the wider impact it could have in normalizing the discussion around mental health.

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