

Social Isolation of Seafarers

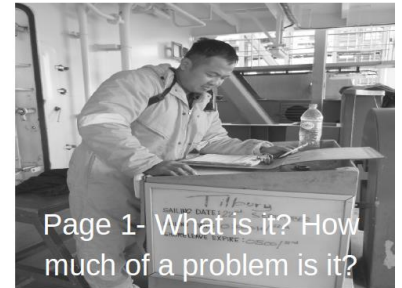
What is it? Why does it matter? What can be done?



Anyone working with seafarers will be familiar with talk of 'social isolation'. They will know that seafaring is an inherently isolating occupation – being away from land for many months with few faces for companionship.

They will know too that seafarers have become increasingly isolated as a knock-on effect of wider changes in the industry. What they might be less sure about is what, precisely, is meant by 'social isolation', how much of a problem it is and what can and should be done about it. This article tries to clarify these questions.

DR OLIVIA SWIFT



What is social isolation?

Put simply, social isolation is a state of separation from others, which is often involuntary and experienced negatively. It is one form of the psychological state of alienation and can cause feelings of boredom, marginality, exclusion, anger, despair, sadness, frustration and especially; loneliness.ⁱ It is worth noting that loneliness and social isolation are not the same thing – the two can exist apart from each other: loneliness is the subjective emotional state of a person, whereas social isolation is the objective state of deprivation of social contact and content.ⁱⁱ

How much of a problem is social isolation at sea?

Social isolation is hence not, in itself, a diagnosis – it is an objective reality to which modern-day seafarers are particularly prone. The reasons for this are well established: crew numbers have fallen; working hours, responsibility and paperwork have increased. Close friendships and talk of emotional and personal subjects have never been common at sea where social life is rigidly hierarchical and senior ranks (in particular) feel the need to maintain social distance.

Crew cohesion has been eroded all the more by the rise of multinational crewing, such that seafarers often lack the shared background and command of a common language required for both banter and a deeper understanding of one another. A lack of sufficient space and resources for communal eating and recreation can further social isolation, as can a separation of these spaces and resources based on rank, along with restrictive

alcohol policies. Faster turn-around times have made shore leave brief and infrequent, while the ISPS code has made it burdensome to cross port boundaries to access welfare facilities, which are often located further inshore. Shore leave is needed so that seafarers can enjoy activities denied at sea, socialise together in a 'normal' setting and feed future 'storytelling' back onboard.ⁱⁱⁱ According to one study, 76% of seafarers reported never or rarely going ashore (of whom many were officers).^{iv}

It is not just in the maritime sector that workers have become more isolated from one another. Increasing flexibility in the organisation of labour and the rise of home-working have played their part in the fragmenting of workforces across industries. But the specifics of our industry mean that seafarers are unusually isolated, physically and socially. *Social isolation among seafarers is less a problem than a fact. What makes it problematic is that social isolation is both a cause and symptom of a range of mental health conditions. And these conditions make it harder to both retain crew and maintain safety.*



Mental health at sea

Interest in the mental health of seafarers has been gathering pace in our sector, as it has in the world at large. As more people are open about mental ill-health, awareness of just how common it is increases and stigma falls. One in five people in advanced nations of working age suffer from a mental condition each year – about a quarter of those suffer from schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or other severe conditions while the remainder experience less debilitating ones such as mild anxiety and depression.^v Mental illness causes more premature deaths and suffering in rich countries than heart disease, strokes and cancer,^{vi} the economic cost being estimated at 3-4% of GDP. (Figures for countries in the global South, from where many seafarers originate, are unfortunately harder to come by.)

Employers have begun to take notice. Almost a third of companies surveyed by the World Economic Forum in 2010 had some kind of stress-reduction programme in place. In 2014, a group of large European businesses formed a charter to address the effects of depression at work. In 2013, Canada published voluntary psychological safety standards.^{vii} So what about the maritime industry?

In spite of being healthier than the general population (the 'healthy worker effect' of seafarers' medical screenings), seafarers are more likely to experience mental health problems,^{viii} especially mild anxiety and depression,^{ix} which is linked to increased workloads and working hours, decreased crewing levels and high levels of monotony.^x Being away from home and family has also been linked to high levels of stress among seafarers.^{xi} Other causes of poor mental health among seafarers include: harassment and bullying, fatigue,

addiction to alcohol and drugs, loneliness, the precariousness of seafaring labour, piracy, the criminalisation of seafarers and factors that also underlie social isolation, such as lack of shore leave and lack of social cohesion onboard.^{xii} Here at ISWAN, we are all too aware of the feelings of loneliness and despair felt by many seafarers who call into our [SeafarerHelp](#) hotline.

In severe cases, depression results in suicide and seafaring is one of the occupations in which workers are most at risk.^{xiii} According to one study, between 1969 and 2009 at least 13% of seafarer deaths classified as from illness, and 6% of deaths overall, were suicides. Some studies^{xiv} suggest suicide rates among seafarers - while still unusually high – to have fallen slightly but the fact remains that too many seafarers take their own lives. In 2011 this is estimated to have cost shipowners between \$50,000 and \$100,000 due to delays and diversions.^{xv} Occupations associated with high rates of suicide have two main factors in common: easy access to a means of committing suicide (such as drowning) and social isolation.^{xvi}

In spite of the risk of mental ill-health among seafarers, particularly those affected by violent piracy incidents in recent years,^{xvii} neither the MLC nor traditional maritime law specifically address mental health care. Court decisions, however, have made it clear that a seafarers' right to free medical care includes mental health care.^{xviii} More than legal hurdles, stigma, concerns about rehiring and a lack of provision-infrastructure are likely to be the main obstacles preventing seafarers accessing the help they need.

Lessening social isolation

So what then can and should be done to lessen social isolation among seafarers? Here are some of the key actions that can make seafarers more connected.^{xix} Needless to say, some of these are easier to implement than others and some are already taking place within reputable companies:

- Provision of adequate and affordable means of communicating with private access to all seafarers, especially internet. Reports that 45% of seafarers has no or only occasional access to some form of crew communications at sea are concerning.^{xx} While telephone remains the most common form of crew communications (an average of 76% of seafarers have access), internet is now available on average in 36% of all sectors – particularly Passenger, Offshore and Gas Carriers. This compares to only 20% of Container, Bulk Carriers and General Cargo sectors having internet access.^{xxi}
 - Adequate periods of shore leave for all ranks.
 - Encouragement of onboard social life. What is expected of the Master/others in this regard? How can these expectations be better met?
 - Fostering mentoring onboard which nurtures team building – see this advice from the [Nautical Institute](#).
 - Careful consideration for cultural factors in crewing. Crew cohesion can be stronger among single-nationality crews, for example.^{xxii}
 - Restrictions rather than total bans on alcohol.
 - Provision of adequate communal space and consideration of whole-crew dining.
 - The continued provision of port seafarers' centre facilities and of ship visitations.
- While recognising that not all seafarers are religious, providing 'spiritual care' also remains important. The 'bigger picture' religion and spirituality provide can help provide meaning and reduce the experience of isolation.
 - Provision of daily news bulletins and a regular supply of documentary style magazines.
 - Video recordings of major sports and news events worldwide.
 - Continuity of employment – which avoids the stress of uncertainty and fosters a sense of shared belonging within a company. It also helps crew forge longer-term bonds if working together more than once.
 - Flexibility in the length of contracts and in periods of leave between contracts – which helps seafarers maintain relationships with family and friends on land. This includes enabling seafarers to curtail contracts should they need to return home unexpectedly.
 - Company involvement with families, including enabling seafarer partner voyages where possible.
 - Since women seafarers are more susceptible to social isolation than their male counterparts,^{xxiii} enabling more than one female seafarer to be employed on the same voyage wherever possible.



Treating poor mental health

Practical measures to reduce the state of social isolation need to exist alongside efforts to treat the effects of existing social isolation on seafarers' mental health.

These might include:

- Providing confidential counselling in seafarers' centres and training more ship visitors in basic counselling skills.
- Web-based counselling such as that provided by [The Big White Wall](#), which is used by employees of a number of public-sector institutions including the British Ministry of Defense. The Australia-based [MoodGYM](#) similarly offers anonymous online Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for depression sufferers and operates in an increasing growing number of languages. Some seafarers already benefit from counseling via email,^{xxiv} phone and text – see for example the services provided by [Hunterlink](#) in Australian ports.
- Expanding training of senior ranks in detecting and supporting mental ill-health among colleagues. See for example the [Sailors' Society's Wellness at Sea](#) programme. In particular, Masters need to supervise crew members with mental health conditions who have been given clearance to work aboard. Related, the threshold used for denying work to seafarers with mental health problems needs reviewing.^{xxv} Seafarers must ensure they have sufficient amounts of any prescribed medication for the length of their voyage.
- Expanding the provision of onboard printed information about mental health such as that provided by [ISWAN](#) and also that initiated by the [Rotary Club of Melbourne South](#). Related, expanding ship libraries to contain 'books on prescription' and mood-boosting books might be pursued in partnership with an organisation such as [Reading Well](#), which promotes reading for health and wellbeing.
- Ensuring food and leisure facilities onboard provide quality and variation – a good diet and exercise are known to assist in the prevention and recovery from mild mental health problems. Similarly ensuring seafarers of all ranks are able to get sufficient rest. Fatigue is a familiar issue at sea and one of the main contributing factors to poor mental health.
- Keeping mental health on the industry's agenda. Recent projects such as the [Mental Health Onboard](#) project and the [Crewtoo Seafarers Happiness Index](#) have provided research and discussion and should be part of a wide-reaching and ongoing effort.
- Employers should make use of existing guidance on supporting employees with mental health problems, much of which is relevant to seafaring even though geared towards standard workplaces on land. See for example resources from the [European Commission](#), the [European Network for Workplace Health Promotion](#), and [Trades Union Congress](#) in the UK.

Doubtless these lists could be extended. The point is that 'social isolation' – like other key issues affecting the welfare of seafarers – has become so familiar a term that it seems monolithic – a solid entity that is nigh on impossible to change. By breaking down social isolation – reminding ourselves what it means, what it does, why it matters and what can be done about it, step by step – we open it up so that different industry players can select areas they are best able to address. In coming months ISWAN will be developing its part in the response to social isolation and we urge our partners to join in the effort. To discuss further, please contact Caitlin Vaughan, ISWAN Project Manager: caitlin.vaughan@iswan.org.uk.

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