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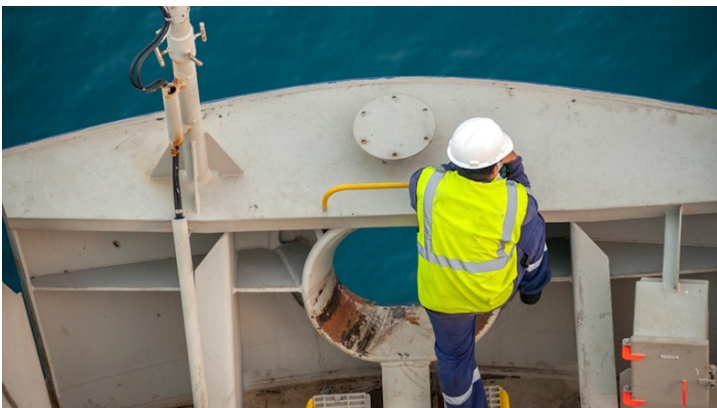
# Seafarer mental health issues on the rise, study finds

*Asian and Eastern European crews suffered most from burnout and depression in the study period between December 2020 and February 2021. Low-level incidents are being managed locally*

08 Mar 2021 | **NEWS**

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Mental Health Support Solutions managing director Charles Watkins said mental health directly impacts safe operations of a vessel. There could be dangerous consequences when incidents are tackled by the crew themselves



THE REPORT FOUND THAT ANXIETY AMONG THOSE ON BOARD SHIP REMAINED A SERIOUS ISSUE. *Source: Thierry Dosogne/Getty Images*

ISSUES surrounding seafarer mental health are growing, especially among Asian crew members, according to the findings of a report.

Analysis of data generated by Mental Health Support Solutions showed that anxiety among those on board ship remained a serious issue.

Burnout and depression were widely reported in the first month of the study conducted in the three months to the end of February.

The finding comes as industry reports cite an increase in master requests for counselling support.

According to MHSS, burnout and depression require a sustained and long-term approach to treatment, so these problems are likely to rise again as they are retriggered by events.

December saw an increase in counselling interaction and out of the three months, generated the highest level of critical incidents.

Reports during the pandemic related to anxiety, fatigue and worry about external factors are also on the rise — a correlation that has been confirmed through MHSS' interaction with masters.

There has also been increased reporting of incidents by Eastern European crew, with the incidents spanning all severity levels from critical to low.

MHSS managing director Charles Watkins, who is also a clinical psychologist, said there was a trend towards the end of the reporting period for more moderate to high-level incidents than previously seen.

“There is some positive news as low-level incidents are being managed locally by techniques learnt through training and high-risk incidents escalated to MHSS,” he said.

He cited a case last month when the group's Russian team assisted a serious case of psychological disablement, restoring the affected seafarer (on board) to full working capability, “preventing a deviation and loss of service or interruption to the vessel in question”.

According to the report, there is an increased continuous and repeated use of the MHSS mental health hotline from seafarers once initial contact is established.

It is thought likely that this diffuses many situations among those who engage, before they arise or escalate.

Young cadets are a risk group for many vessels as they have less experience to cope with stressors at sea. Therefore, older more experienced seafarers must offer this group guidance and support.

There is an increase in interactions from Eastern European ratings and officers. Given that this group is typically reluctant to interact, the underlying feeling of discontent is likely to be much higher.

MHSS encourages increased monitoring of these groups.

“We expect to see an increase in anxiety regarding coronavirus-related travel complications and limited crew changes,” said Mr Watkins.

The report issues several recommendations, including setting up a “buddy” system pairing young cadets with more experienced seafarers, running mental health courses at maritime academies and universities, and enhanced training for superintendents.

Mr Watkins stressed that mental health directly impacts the safe operations of a vessel, so organisations must have professional and confidential structures in place to treat mental health issues generated by work and external influences.

“Other factors such as religion, nationality and upbringing create additional stressors among crew interactions,” he said. “Without a consistent approach to mental health issues, these are dealt with locally by the crew themselves — without training and with potentially dangerous consequences. Access to on-demand professional psychological support welcomed by crew and onshore staff.”