Mental health is an important part of physical wellbeing at sea. Depression or serious mood imbalance can jeopardise the safe operation of the vessel, the wellbeing of fellow seafarers, and in the most serious cases can lead to suicide.

Incidents resulting from high levels of stress and poor mental health of seafarers not only occur at a high rate, but can have tragic consequences for those involved. The three cases described below highlight how important proactive and preventative conversations surrounding mental health and wellbeing are, and indicate the need for further training, education and adequate resources to promote wellness at sea.

**Causes**

There are many different triggers for an increase in stress and a decline in the mental health and wellness of seafarers. These can range from personal issues on board the vessel or at home; feelings of fatigue, isolation or loneliness, or existing mental health issues that are exacerbated by the nature of life at sea.

**Impact**

**Case 1**

A crew member, who was feeling isolated at sea and bullied by co-workers, approached the ship’s Master informing them that their bank and social media accounts had been hacked. The Master gave the crew member a free internet card to regain control of their accounts and to alleviate their agitation and concerns.

Later that day a meeting was requested by the crew member for all the ship’s staff. During the meeting, the crew member left and the Master followed him to the Foc’sle. The crew member proceeded to assault the Master with a wooden stick, and the Master requested the accommodation spaces be secured as a result.

The crew member then started a number of fires around the ship, all of which were extinguished, before jumping overboard with all efforts to recover their body unsuccessful.

**Case 2**

A Ship Master received a letter from a Deck Cadet stating that he was feeling depressed after a month of being onboard the vessel. According to the Master, he was a quiet member of the crew who completed his duties as required.

Three days later the Deck Cadet approached the Master and submitted an early relief form, citing that he was no longer interested in a career at sea. When the Deck Cadet left the conversation, he appeared to
be in a normal mood. At this point in time the vessel was at the anchorage awaiting loading, and the repatriation of the Cadet had been arranged in the port.

A few hours later the Deck Cadet did not report for duty and a search of the vessel was conducted. The cadet’s body was recovered from the water the next day.

**Case 3**

A vessel experienced a non-serious incident during arrival mooring operations. The ship managers provided all documentation required for the investigation, including a Root Cause Analysis report.

From the investigation, it was determined that one of the main causes for the mooring incident was a lack of command or management on the forward mooring station. Further investigation revealed that the 2nd Mate who was in charge of this station was having personal issues at home. He felt unhappy, agitated and unfocused following a telephone argument with his girlfriend the day before, and his situational awareness at the time was diminished.

The mooring operations were affected as a result of the poor state of mental health & wellbeing of the crew member.

**Taking action**

Through greater awareness and a more proactive approach to addressing issues of mental health and stress, these tragic deaths and operational issues could have been avoided. When seafarers are feeling stressed, unhappy or suffering from poor mental health, or notice that their crew mates may be struggling with similar issues, the importance of discussing these issues with a trusted contact is paramount. A trusted contact might be the Master, a fellow crewmember, port chaplain or somebody on board who is empathetic to their colleagues’ needs.

**Best Practice Preventative Actions**

Outside of addressing symptoms of stress and mental health issues with the immediate crew, there are external not-for-profit organisations that not only provide assistance when issues arise, but offer training and resources to proactively address seafarers’ mental health issues and high levels of stress while at sea.

The *Sailors’ Society* run a highly regarded Wellness at Sea program that provides training sessions on seafarer welfare and management of crisis situations. They also have an online resource & seafarer support portal that can be accessed through an app or via the web.

*Mission to Seafarers* organisations run a number of programmes to aid in seafarer welfare, including:

1. **WeCare** programmes that have been developed to help seafarers and their families navigate some of the challenges they may face, including social communication & financial literacy

2. **Continuity of SeaCare** programme which aims to support seafarers to tackle issues including:
   - improving crew mental health and wellbeing
   - helping seafarers and their families with any problems or concerns that arise – such as financial, health and relationship issues.

*rightship.com*
If seafarers require spiritual support, they can connect with a chaplain and get help through the Mission to Seafarers [contact a Chaplain form](https://www.missiontoseafarers.org/wecare).

If seafarers need help and support on a welfare or justice issue, they can get in touch with the Mission to Seafarers team at [crewhelp@mts@mail.org](mailto:crewhelp@mts@mail.org).

RightShip strongly encourages vessel managers to connect crew members with these organisations and their resources, and to provide opportunities for awareness and response training when it comes to optimising their own health & wellbeing and that of their fellow seafarers.

**Additional References**

- [https://www.sailors-society.org/ourprojects/wellness/](https://www.sailors-society.org/ourprojects/wellness/)
- [https://www.mywellnessatsea.com/](https://www.mywellnessatsea.com/)
- [https://www.sailors-society.org/ourprojects/crisis](https://www.sailors-society.org/ourprojects/crisis)
- [https://www.missiontoseafarers.org/continuity-of-seacare](https://www.missiontoseafarers.org/continuity-of-seacare)
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