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Editorial

Seafarers' Psyche

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Seafarers live and work in one of the harshest environments on earth, the ocean, and their workplace is the ship while their home is the vessel, and their daily lives are marked by isolation, long hours, and constant risk. This reality has been documented for more than fifty years with researchers consistently raising concerns about their mental health[1-3]. The evidence shows that seafarers experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness compared to land-based workers, and this pattern has remained steady across decades even as the shipping industry has changed[2,3]. In the 1970s surveys in Europe and Asia revealed that about 20% of seafarers suffered from chronic fatigue and sleep problems while 15% showed signs of depression[3]. Homesickness was especially severe in Asia with nearly half of respondents reporting it as a major issue. Communication was limited to letters and only a small fraction maintained regular contact with family. Cultural differences shaped coping strategies as collectivist societies encouraged silent endurance while individualist ones allowed more open expression though stigma remained. Ships were often seen as floating factories where discipline and silence were valued more than emotional expression, and this created a culture where mental health problems were hidden rather than addressed[2]. The decade marked the beginning of awareness, but solutions were scarce and seafarers continued to suffer in silence, often enduring months at sea without any outlet for their emotions. The lack of recognition of their struggles meant that their pain remained invisible to the outside world.

The 1980s brought globalization which shortened port stays and increased workloads to seventy hours per week while reducing sleep to five or six hours daily[3]. Depression rates doubled among those with severe sleep deprivation while suicide rates were twice the global average[5]. Scandinavian seafarers had better access to union-led counseling while Asian seafarers relied mainly on peer support. Financial stress dominated in India while loneliness was the main concern in Norway. The decade showed that economic pressures and long working hours were directly linked to worsening mental health, and cultural and regional differences shaped the way seafarers coped with these challenges[2,6]. Ships became faster, ports became busier, and seafarers had less time to rest or socialize, and the rhythm of life at sea became harsher with the mental toll becoming more visible though still rarely addressed by employers. Many seafarers described feeling like machines, expected to work endlessly without rest, and the lack of recognition for their emotional needs deepened their sense of isolation. The 1980s revealed that efficiency came at a cost borne

by the mental health of those who kept global trade moving, and the industry's focus on productivity left little room for compassion or care.

In the 1990s multinational crews became common and cultural clashes over communication, food, and religious practices added new layers of stress, with about 40% of seafarers reporting stress from cultural misunderstandings[6]. Economic pressures intensified with many in Asia citing family financial responsibilities and job insecurity. Depression rates were 25% higher than in comparable land jobs[2]. The decade highlighted how globalization brought not only efficiency but also cultural conflict, and how seafarers had to navigate not only the dangers of the sea but also the complexities of multicultural living[6]. Ships became microcosms of the world with people from different backgrounds forced to live and work together in confined spaces. While diversity enriched crews in some ways it also created misunderstandings and tensions that added to the mental burden. The 1990s showed that mental health was not only about isolation and fatigue but also about the challenges of living in multicultural environments where differences could easily turn into sources of stress, and where seafarers had to learn to adapt or suffer in silence. Many crews struggled to find common ground, and the lack of structured intercultural training meant that conflicts often went unresolved, leaving seafarers feeling alienated even among their colleagues. This sense of alienation compounded the loneliness already inherent in life at sea.

The 2000s introduced satellite phones and internet which improved connectivity but also heightened stress as seafarers received constant updates from home without being able to help, and suicide rates rose to three times the global average[4,5]. European crews increasingly used counseling services while Asian crews continued to depend on informal support. Homesickness remained severe in the Philippines while loneliness was widespread in Norway. The paradox of technology was clear as communication improved but also brought new forms of stress, and seafarers were reminded daily of problems at home without being able to intervene, creating a new kind of psychological strain where knowledge without action deepened feelings of helplessness[4]. Ships became more connected to the world, but seafarers remained trapped in their vessels, powerless to act on the information they received. The 2000s showed that progress in technology did not automatically mean progress in wellbeing, and mental health required more than just better communication tools. Seafarers needed real support systems to cope with the emotional burden of life at sea. Many described the pain of hearing about family crises without being able to return home, and this constant reminder of distance made their isolation even more unbearable.

In the 2010s mental health became a recognized global issue, with around 40% of seafarers reporting significant anxiety or depression and suicide rates still remained three times higher than average[4,5,7]. Structured rest, counseling, and training were shown to reduce mental health problems by up to 30%, and this decade marked a turning point as mental health was finally acknowledged as a serious issue and interventions began to be tested and implemented[2,7]. Shipping companies, unions, and international organizations started to talk

openly about seafarers' wellbeing though progress was uneven. While recognition was important implementation remained slow, showing that awareness was not enough and action was needed. The 2010s demonstrated that with proper interventions mental health outcomes could improve, but the lack of consistent enforcement meant that many seafarers still worked under conditions that harmed their wellbeing. Some ships became models of good practice, while others ignored the issue entirely, leaving seafarers dependent on luck rather than policy. This inconsistency highlighted the need for stronger global standards.

The 2020s brought the COVID-19 pandemic which worsened conditions dramatically, stranding nearly four hundred thousand seafarers at sea with contracts extended illegally[1,8]. Surveys showed 70% suffered severe anxiety, 60% depression, and suicidal thoughts rose by 25%[1,8]. Seafarers from countries with strong support systems coped better while those from weaker economies faced extreme distress. Homesickness, financial pressure, and loneliness were widespread across regions, and the pandemic revealed the fragility of seafarers' rights and the vulnerability of their mental health in times of global crisis[8]. Ships became prisons where crews were trapped for months beyond their contracts with no certainty about when they would return home. The sense of abandonment was profound as many seafarers felt invisible to the world even though they kept global trade moving during the crisis. The 2020s showed that seafarers' mental health could collapse under extraordinary circumstances and that global systems were not prepared to protect them.

Across five decades seafarers have consistently shown depression rates between 25% and 40%, rising anxiety, and suicide rates three times higher than the global average[2,5,7]. The story of seafarers' mental health is one of resilience in the face of adversity but also of neglect by an industry that has often prioritized efficiency over wellbeing. The lessons are clear that mental health must be treated as seriously as physical safety and ships must become places where wellbeing is supported not ignored[2,4,7]. Seafarers have carried the burden of global trade on their shoulders, yet their emotional struggles have too often been overlooked, and the time has come to recognize that their wellbeing is essential not only for their own lives but also for the functioning of the world economy.

The conclusion is clear that seafarers' mental health is a global challenge shaped by cultural differences and occupational pressures. Addressing it requires reforms in working conditions and culturally sensitive approaches to support wellbeing at sea[6,7]. Ships must not only be safe physically but also provide counseling services, structured rest, intercultural training, and stigma reduction. The ocean will always be a harsh environment, but with proper support seafarers can face its challenges with greater resilience and hope. The industry must recognize that seafarers are not machines but human beings whose mental health is as important as their ability to navigate storms or operate engines[2,4,7]. Only then can the maritime world truly honor the people who keep global trade alive, and only then can seafarers live and work with dignity, strength, and the assurance that their wellbeing matters as much as their labor.

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