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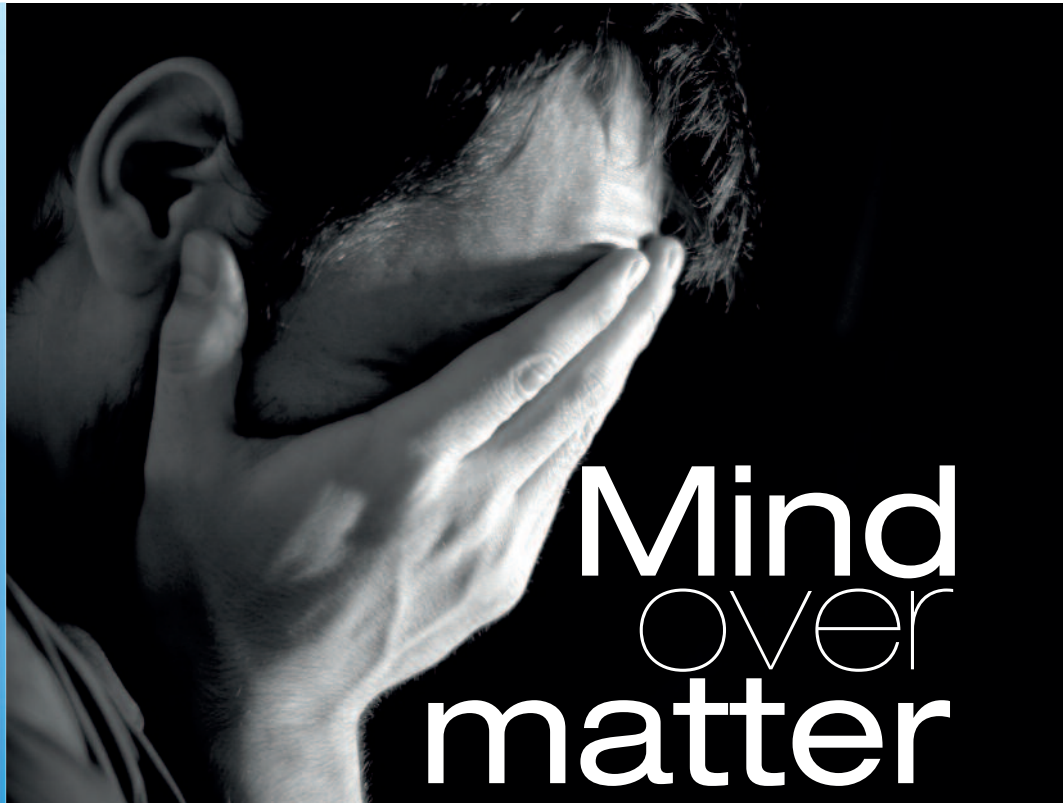
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Mind over matter

Dear Seafarer,

Welcome to Issue 4 of Health Watch.

Depression is something we all have to deal with from time to time. It can range from being a bit low to feeling as if life is really not worth living. Grief at the death of a loved one is a form of depression. Grief and depression share many symptoms, but while grief is a perfectly natural reaction to loss, depression is an illness.

The problem with depression is that the symptoms are not always readily apparent. Many people continue to try to cope with their symptoms without realising they are ill. This edition of Health Watch tries to explain some of the symptoms and gives guidance on the steps that can be taken to help to alleviate the problem.

Extreme depression can lead to thoughts of suicide. Contrary to the popularly held belief, people who commit suicide rarely leave a note explaining their actions. There are a number of reasons for this. For many cultures and religions, suicide is considered a sin, or may be illegal in the eyes of the law. Suicides do not like to admit to the feelings of misery or hopelessness they have endured, or to feel they have let down their family and friends by committing such an act.

Statistically, men are more likely than women to commit suicide. Men suffering

from depression are more likely to go unrecognised and untreated, in part because men are less likely to seek help because they view it as a weakness. It is a sad fact that, of the cases of apparent suicide reported to us, the victims rarely manifest any outward signs of depression, so little is done to prevent them from taking their lives. There are of course cases where the victim may demonstrate unusual behavior which may be totally out of character. In such cases the person may be suffering from a more serious underlying mental health problem and immediate medical attention should be sought.

The purpose of this issue of Health Watch is to convey the message to you that if you are feeling depressed and recognise any of the symptoms described in the articles, seek help. That may involve speaking to your section head, or the ship's medical officer. If you prefer not to speak to one of your colleagues, why not have a word with the port chaplain at your next port call? It is far better to share your problem with someone than try to deal with it yourself.

If you have any questions or comments about any of the articles in this issue, please do not hesitate to contact us at the email address on the back cover.



Many people suffer from some degree of stress at some point in their lives.

Work pressures, money problems, relationship issues, bereavement and even life-changing moments such as becoming a new parent, moving house or getting married can all leave a person feeling unable to cope.

Short bursts of stress are not harmful as we are designed to cope with our 'fight or flight' reaction and adrenaline and other stress-linked hormones kick into action to allow us to deal with the immediate problem.

It is long-term or chronic stress that can be dangerous as although it never kills, it can be a risk factor for developing more health problems later in life. Many studies have

looked at the effects of stress on the individual and it can contribute to minor health complaints such as migraines and stomach ulcers through to more serious problems such as mental illness, coronary heart disease and even certain types of cancer.

Stress can affect how you feel, think, behave and even how your body works and it can manifest itself in many different ways, emotionally, mentally and physically.

It can cause a reduction in job-satisfaction, make you more prone to accidents, encourage poor lifestyle habits such as increased drinking and smoking and affect your home and private life, putting a strain on relationships.

Then there is the added cost to employers of medical expenses and absences, as workers take time off sick.

A study by the International Stress Management Association found that more than half of people in work had suffered from stress over a period of a year and statistics have also shown that a quarter of working people have taken time off sick due to stress, adding huge costs to employers.

The most common causes of stress at work include heavy workloads, long hours, responsibilities, role expectations, bullying or harassment, lack of job security and a poor working environment.



ht Steering clear from the pitfalls of stress

Warning signs

Stress can manifest itself in many different ways, both physically and mentally. Common signs include:

- + Sleep problems
- + Sweating
- + Loss of appetite
- + Difficulty concentrating
- + Headaches
- + Muscle tension or pain
- + Dizziness
- + Chest pain and rapid heartbeat
- + Frequent colds
- + Upset stomach
- + Breathlessness
- + Dry mouth
- + Decreased sex drive
- + Feeling anxious
- + Moodiness
- + Feeling low
- + Worrying constantly
- + Imagining the worst
- + Losing your temper easily
- + Drinking/smoking more
- + Nail biting

Main stress factors

Stress suffered by seafarers can be very different to that experienced by those working on land. The main causes for this are:

- + Being away from family and friends for long periods of time – often seafarers have no one to talk to and lack the support which they would usually receive at home
- + Concern over leaving loved ones behind
- + Lack of good quality sleep
- + Poor diet
- + Port inspections
- + Changing crew every few months
- + Working under time pressures
- + Extreme temperatures
- + Claustrophobia

STRESS BUSTERS

Pinpointing exactly what is making you feel stressed is the first step in helping you to manage it.

Here are some other stress busters which could help:

Exercise – physical activity can get you in the right state of mind to be able to identify the cause of your stress. It will also help to clear your head.

Reach out – speak to others about how you are feeling as a problem shared is often a problem halved.

Laugh – believe it or not laughing has health benefits! It can stimulate lymph movement and boost your immune system and also brings more oxygen to your brain and body.

Breathe deeply – those who meditate have lower blood pressure, increased circulation and tend to be happier.

Massage – tension often gets to the muscles in your neck and back along with other areas, so a massage will help reduce this.

Get support – when stress becomes unbearable speak to someone such as your Master, doctor or trained therapist – there is no shame in asking for help.

Socialise – don't be a loner, spend time with others.

Don't over commit – no one is Superman or Superwoman.

Eat well – a good, balanced diet really does play a vital role in our wellbeing.

Get enough quality sleep.

Take a deep breath



Relaxation starts with breathing. Many people – especially those under stress – have a tendency to take shallow breaths, using only the top part of their chest and not their stomach muscles. Learning to deep breathe can make you feel calmer and increase your wellbeing.

To improve the way you breathe, try this simple exercise:

- Sit down, or lie on your back. Make sure you are comfortable, and loosen any tight clothing.
- Notice how you are breathing, how fast, how deeply, and how regularly.
- Put one hand on your upper chest and one on your stomach, just below your belly button.
- Slowly breathe out (count to 11)
- Gently breathe in (count to 7), so that you feel your stomach rise slowly under your hand.
- Breathe out again (count to 11), feeling your stomach fall.
- Pause for a few moments and then repeat the process again.

Make time to relax



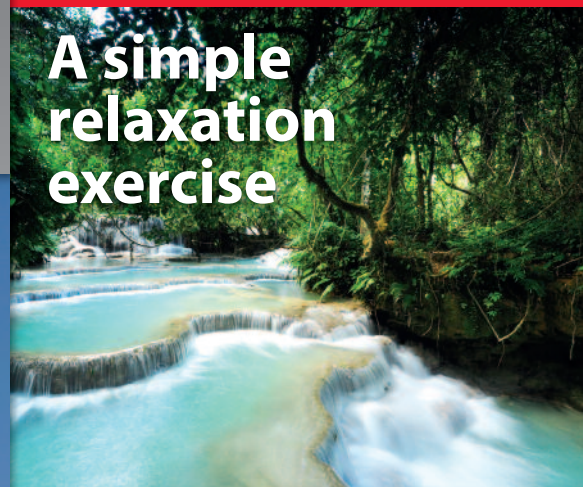
Everyone should make time in the day to relax, whether we feel under stress, or not.

People often confuse relaxation with recreation. However, if hobbies or other activities – including exercise – become excessive, and make you feel even more pressurised, they stop being relaxing.

The first thing is to become more relaxed in daily life and not to waste energy on things that don't matter.

The second is to learn some breathing and relaxation techniques.

A simple relaxation exercise



Try this every now and again, especially when you feel under pressure. It should take you no more than five to 10 minutes.

- Have a stretch. Then let your shoulders and arms relax into a comfortable position.
- If you are sitting in a chair, or on the floor, allow yourself to feel as if the chair or the floor is supporting your whole weight.
- Try to be peaceful; loosen your jaw and face.
- Follow the breathing guide on the left.
- Close your eyes and imagine a peaceful scene, then imagine that you are really there.

Like many other things, relaxation takes practice, but it is possible to learn how to relax, even for short periods, during your working day.

Eating your way to harmony



Diet plays a vital role in our mental as well as our emotional wellbeing. Here are some eating tips to help you stay stress-free:

- + Limit coffee and caffeine intake and don't drink caffeine after 6pm
- + Don't skip meals, particularly breakfast
- + Drink eight glasses of water a day
- + Try to avoid high fat (especially saturated fat), sugar, white flour and salt
- + Avoid fried foods
- + Skip snacking on unhealthy biscuits and

cakes and grab some nuts or a piece of fruit instead

- + Eat sensible portions
- + If you plan to diet, make sure it's balanced with fruits and vegetables, protein and healthy carbohydrates
- + Eat 30-40g of fibre per day
- + Eat plenty of omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins B, C and antioxidants. Flavonoids are also helpful. They can be found in 80% pure dark chocolate, green tea, blackberries, onions, apples, grapes and red wine.

Top tips to help you sleep



Most healthy adults need eight hours' sleep but if you're stressed you could well be suffering sleep problems. Here are some ways to help you snooze:

Avoid eating at least two hours before you go to bed – as you lie down, acids in the stomach level out making heartburn and indigestion more likely. If you must snack keep it small and avoid high-fat foods as they take longer to digest. Opt for something like cereal or toast instead.

Avoid caffeine later in the day – it is a stimulant and likely to keep you awake.

Have a hot, milky drink – it can encourage drowsiness because milk contains sleep-enhancing properties. This is thanks to its calcium content, which sleep experts claim can help you relax. It is also rich in tryptophan, which the body converts into serotonin – a natural hormone in the body that can make you sleepy.

Consider herbal teas – some herbal teas like chamomile can help relax you.

No napping for long periods – if you nap for longer than 20 minutes between bedtimes it can make it harder for you to fall asleep.

Practise meditation or yoga – just 10 minutes before bed can be enough.

Exercise – 20 to 30 minutes a day can help you sleep and is good for your health but make sure you do it in the morning or afternoon as exercise stimulates the body.

Take a hot shower – it will relax tense muscles.

Read a book – but avoid anything frightening or violent.

Stick to a sleep schedule – it allows your body to set its own rhythm so you can get up when you want.



Focusing on your mental health

When aiming to keep healthy, it is important to eat well and keep fit, to keep our bodies in good physical shape, but a good state of mental health is just as important for our overall wellbeing.

Everybody has times where they may feel emotionally 'low' or 'down', stressed, anxious or frightened and although these feelings are usually temporary, for some people they stay and can become a more serious health issue for the sufferer and for those close to them.

Everybody reacts differently to problems in life and also to their own state of mental health – one person may easily "bounce back" after a negative event or personal problem, but for someone else, such an event could mean lasting mental health problems.

It's important to know that mental health problems can have a serious impact on the life of the sufferer and those around them, but mental illness can happen to anybody, at any stage in life and can be triggered by a specific problem or event or may be unexplained.

Unfortunately, there is often a 'stigma' associated with mental health problems whereby people may feel uncomfortable talking about such problems or feel negative towards sufferers of mental illness. But talking about thoughts and feelings is actually a very healthy thing to do.

A person's state of mental health can change through time and can be impacted by factors such as their personal circumstances and home environment.

Someone in a good state of mental health is able to:

- Cope with everyday life
- Fulfil their potential
- Be a full and active member of society, whether with colleagues on board, with family and home community or with friends



Rough seas or calm waters?

As a seafarer, you may be especially vulnerable to mental illness for the following reasons:

- Distance from your home country may cause upset as you are away from your normal support network of friends and relatives
- Seafaring is often a very 'male' environment, where colleagues may find it difficult to talk about their thoughts and feelings – but talking can be an important way of helping to overcome your worries and problems
- Long voyages away from land can give a sense of isolation. If you have a lack of access to communications, you may be out of regular contact with your loved ones and this could make you homesick
- Work, rest and play all take place on board the ship, meaning it can be difficult to take a break from your situation if it is making you feel depressed
- If you are not exercising or following a healthy diet, this can lead to poor body image, which can make you feel depressed. A poor diet can also affect the balance of serotonin – which contributes to feelings of well-being – within your body
- You may be worried over the threat of piracy although the chances of this happening may be small, the thought of it may still cause upset.



Cause for concern

Recognising the signs of depression

Depression amongst men in their 30s, 40s, and 50s is rising and many seafarers are within this age group. Unfortunately, there is also a higher risk of suicide for men within this age group. It is important to recognise the signs of depression because whether it is yourself or a fellow seafarer who is affected, no one should suffer from depression in silence.

Some common signs of depression are:

- You experience negative thoughts which are hard to ignore
- A poor sleeping pattern, sleeping too much or not enough.
- You feel hopeless
- You often feel guilty or experience self-loathing
- You are lacking in energy
- You find it hard to concentrate and to perform tasks which you used to find easy
- Your appetite has changed – you eat too much or not enough
- You are aggressive and have a short-temper which is out of character
- You may behave recklessly or drink too much alcohol
- Unexplained aches and pains can also accompany depression
- You feel despair and believe life is not worth living (you must get help straight away if this is the case)

Feeling hopeless?

When depression and feelings of hopelessness grow in intensity this, unfortunately, can lead to suicidal thoughts.

A maritime medical specialist with extensive experience as a ships' doctor, said seafarers should look out for the warning signs of suicide: "Just being aware that the problem exists is hugely important, as is knowing who to tell." They added that a crew welfare officer would be a good person to speak to about thoughts concerning suicide, or another trusted individual such as the Master, port physician or port chaplain.

"Making crew aware that a fellow seafarer might have a problem and looking out for this is vital. We saw a case where someone jumped overboard who was known to be depressed – he had tried to kill himself once before. It is so easy to lose people."

But what if you are afraid of losing your job if you admit to having a mental illness or suicidal thoughts? The Doctor said you should not allow such fears to stop you from seeking help, as if you deal with an illness early on, you are far less likely to lose your job.

"It's not so much a question of losing your job because of a bad medical certificate but if you're not well and cannot do your job properly, you may be more at risk of losing your job anyway. To deal with problems early, to talk about them and overcome them, is vital, instead of suffering and allowing things to get worse. Keeping your health in good shape is the most important thing," the Doctor said.

Suicide warning signs include:

- Talking about suicide. Many people who have taken their own lives will have talked about these feelings with someone
- Isolation and withdrawal from crew mates
- A perceived 'failure' such as not passing an exam or a relationship break-up
- Someone behaving out of character. A person may seem calm, peaceful or even euphoric before committing suicide but it is more common for them to be withdrawn and uncommunicative
- Sleep problems, especially rising early
- Low self-esteem
- Not taking care of one's appearance, eating badly
- Feeling useless and wondering "what's the point?"

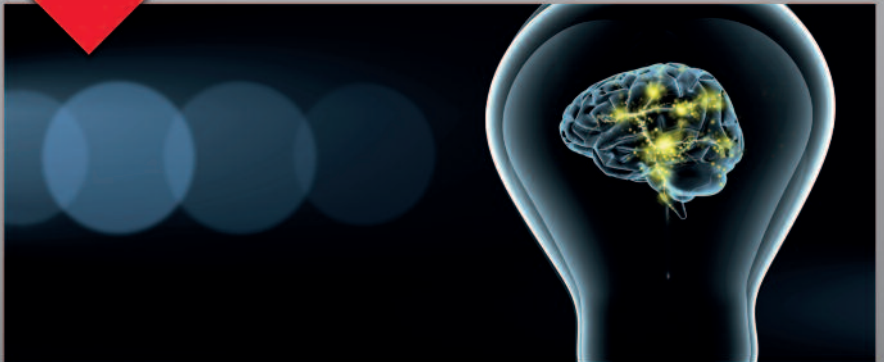
Beating the blues

What can you do to help fight depression on board?



Getting help

Depression is unlikely to go away on its own – sufferers should tell a medical professional about their difficulties as counselling from a doctor or therapist is a proven method of helping to change negative thought patterns and help with recovery. The first step would be to inform your ship's medical officer, or a port physician, of your difficulties. Although it can be tough to talk about depression, the road to recovery can be speeded up with proper medical help. Thankfully, depression is a treatable condition and medication and psychotherapy treatments can help.



Be mindful

We all get negative thoughts – this is entirely natural, but it is how you choose to react to these thoughts which really matters.

As a seafarer, you have a broad range of duties and sometimes, you may rush through them on "auto pilot". Many people can go through life without paying full attention to their surroundings, or even to what their own body is trying to tell them, while worrying about negative thoughts and regretting the past. This can be a negative force in our lives but 'mindfulness' is a technique which can help you to overcome this negative behaviour.

Practise mindfulness by really focusing on the present moment, rather than getting distracted by thoughts of the past and future. If you pay purposeful attention to the present moment, this can increase awareness and acceptance of your surroundings and everyday life and help you to be "present" in the moment.

If you are more aware of your thoughts, feelings and sensations with each moment or situation, this can help you to avoid getting stuck in existing negative thought patterns which can have a depressing influence.

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HealthWatch

Keep active

Exercise can be an important method of keeping your mind focused and your body healthy, whilst giving you a break from depressing thoughts and feelings.

By exercising, you may feel like you are in better control of your body which can also be a powerful mood booster – keeping fit can give you a more positive body image, which can help improve your feelings of confidence and self-worth.

Exercising on board can be challenging – if there is a gym or exercise equipment that's a great help but if there isn't you may have to think of some inventive ways of exercising.

Press ups and sit ups can be effective, but take care to stretch properly before you begin and take it slowly, particularly if you have not exercised very much before. If there is room onboard (and provided health and safety rules are followed), you could find some colleagues to exercise with you. Star jumps, jogging on the spot or using a skipping rope are all effective methods of exercising when space is limited.

You can also work to be more active during your daily tasks – stretch your body regularly throughout the day and go for a brief walk around the room in between tasks. What you eat can have an impact on your mood so remember to follow the diet tips on page 5.



Help is at hand

If you have any problem – no matter how big or small, you might want to consider speaking with a port chaplain. Chaplains are trained to offer you support and comfort in a non-judgmental way and it doesn't matter what background you come from or whether you are religious or not, chaplains can be a great source of support for seafarers – whether you are experiencing a personal crisis or simply feeling homesick.

You may also like to consider accessing a help service from a distance. SeafarerHelp is a confidential service, available by telephone, email, SMS, live-chat or even by traditional post! Staff are available to speak with in 27 different languages so, whether you are feeling depressed over a personal issue, health or home worries, or perhaps you are concerned over your own mental health or that of a fellow seafarer – SeafarerHelp works to help seafarers solve their problems through practical advice and solutions.

Call **00 44 20 73232737** (this is not a toll-free number but staff can call you back). Alternatively, send a text to: **00 44 7624 818 405**, email: help@seafarerhelp.org or visit www.seafarerhelp.org

It's good to talk

Remember that it's okay to talk about your thoughts and feelings – though it's important that you trust and are comfortable with the people you choose to confide in. Even if you don't want to discuss your depression with your fellow seafarers, getting involved in regular conversations with your colleagues, even about trivial things, can help to take your mind off your worries and depression and will help you to build friendships on board.

It's important that you also use opportunities to keep in touch with your friends and family back home as this can help you avoid feelings of homesickness and those close to you can offer comfort if you are feeling down. If your ship offers internet and phone cards, these are great resources which can help you keep in touch but if you have more limited contact with your relatives while on board, you may find it therapeutic to keep a diary, or to write letters for home to be posted at the next port of call.

Time for you

If you are suffering from depression, you must make time for yourself and spend your spare time wisely. Taking up a relaxing hobby can help to take your mind off negative thoughts – some suggestions are card games and puzzles (socially or alone), reading, table tennis, painting and drawing, crafts and model building, music (listening to or learning an instrument), watching comedy or films. Try to relax and enjoy your free time as this can help you to counteract negative thoughts.



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