

# Crew Health Advice: Living with lockdown at Sea

The sudden onset of Covid-19 and the unprecedented impact on our lives whether we are on a lockdown at home, stranded at sea, working in the first line, or on furlough can take an emotional toll on all of us. The experience of living through this outbreak will haunt us for a while, even after we return to some kind of normalcy. Being proactive and protecting our mental health is a priority that we all need to address.

A lot of the media coverage has focused on the vulnerability of first line respondents, and the victims of the pandemic, but limited coverage has been given to special populations like seafarers who may be stranded at sea unable to

return home due to travel restrictions and borders closings. The impact of this aberrant situation on thousands of seafarers can have unforeseen consequences on their mental health.

Organisations, authorities and shipping companies have collaborated to facilitate crew changes and repatriation, however, travel restrictions and border closings have made it almost impossible for seafarers, whose contract agreements are ending, to return home. According to the International Transport Federation, approximately 100,000 seafarers per month are unable to return home or be relieved by new crews. To the seafarers, who work endlessly and under strenuous

conditions, facing the precarious challenges of the pandemic can be overwhelming.

## Dealing with lockdown at sea

Being stuck at sea during such unprecedented times can trigger feelings of uncertainty about the future causing anger, fear, anxiety and sadness. Recognising these common symptoms and being proactive may not resolve the problem but can certainly mitigate the psychological effects experienced during lockdown.

Some common signs of anxiety and depression that people may be experiencing include:



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## Physical signs:

- Headaches, neck tension, gastrointestinal problems
- Sleep issues
- Decreased or no appetite
- Decreased energy, fatigue

## Psychological and emotional signs:

- Worrying about your health and the health of your loved ones
- Feelings of being overwhelmed by events, powerlessness
- Negative thinking or negative perception of daily events
- Feelings of discouragement, insecurity, sadness, anger

## Behavioral signs:

- Difficulty in concentrating
- Difficulty carrying our daily tasks
- Irritability, aggression
- Crying
- Withdrawal
- Difficulty making decisions
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs and/or medication

If you or someone onboard is experiencing any of these signs, do not hesitate to address them. Being proactive entails taking actions to protect your wellbeing. Instead of anticipating and worrying about when this will end, you can proactively engage in activities that will foster a sense of control and empowerment. Not all practices may be helpful or practical, just keep an open mind and experiment with whatever works for you to alleviate the burden of the lockdown at sea and protect your wellbeing.

## Some common practices include:

- Stay informed by using reliable sources to get information
- Limit the time allocated to seeking information; overload of information can aggravate anxiety and stress

- Be aware of your feelings, thoughts and reactions. We may not choose the way we feel but we can always choose how we react to those feelings

- Practice gratitude and kindness with your colleagues onboard. Research suggests that kindness improves your wellbeing, evokes positive feelings and gives you a sense of self-worth and purpose

- Connect with others with care and compassion.

- Stay in touch with your family and friends via social media, phone, email, FaceTime, WhatsApp, Messenger, Facebook, Instagram etc.

- Choose a 'touchstone friend' – a person that you trust and with whom you can freely voice your feelings, thoughts and reactions of what you are experiencing

- Establish a daily routine; this action is of paramount importance during lockdown! This includes daily physical activity, regulated sleep schedule and eating healthy meals

- Engage in one pleasant activity every day, like listening to your favorite music, reading a good book, watching funny movies, playing board/card games or doing puzzles with a colleague. A great source for puzzles is: <https://www.jigsawexplorer.com/>

- Practice Positive affirmations. These are positive statements we tell ourselves in order to shift our mindset especially during difficult moments when negativity prevails. By affirming to something we are stating it to be 'true'.

- Choose positive affirmations that are powerful for you, and repeat them throughout the day. You may also like write them down in a journal and read them aloud.

Below are some positive affirmations you can use (or make up your own) to tell yourself when stress, fear or anxiety hijacks you

"I am doing the best I can possibly do right now"

"This is the best I can do under the circumstances"

"I wake up today with strength in my heart and clarity in my mind"

"I believe in my ability to get through tough times"

"I will not stress over things I cannot control"

"I will be present and calm today"

"All of my feelings are okay"

"I take things one day at a time"

"I have everything I need within me"

"I have been through hard things before and have survived them"

"This will not break me"

"I let go of what I can't change and do my best with what I can"

- Practice mindful breathing, meditation or pray

The following breathing exercise is designed to help you relax whenever tension arises.

## The 4, 5, 8 breathing exercise:

Find a quiet place, close your eyes or focus on something peaceful. Lower your shoulders and sit comfortably on a chair with your back straight and feet on the floor.

1. Close your mouth and breath slowly through your nose silently counting to 4 (four)
2. Hold your breath silently counting to 5 (five)
3. Open your mouth and let your breath out through your mouth silently counting to 8 (eight)

- Repeat the cycle a total of 4 times. Do not perform this breathing technique if performing some activity or driving. This breathing activity is intended to induce a relaxed state of being.

- Practice the breathing exercise whenever you are feeling stressed and overwhelmed.

- At the end of the breathing exercise you may repeat a powerful affirmation

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## Resources

<https://www.marineinsight.com/shipping-news/sailors-society-launches-dedicated-covid-19-helpline/>

Seafarers and their family members can contact **Sailors' Society's** dedicated helpline by calling +1-938-222-8181 or instant chat via [www.wellnessatsea.org/covid-19](http://www.wellnessatsea.org/covid-19)

### National Center for Mental Health Crisis Hotline (NCMH-USAP)

Provides mental health support for all affected by COVID-19

- 0917-899-USAP(8727)
- 7-7-989-USAP (827)

<https://www.ncmh.gov.ph/>

### Befrienders Worldwide

An international network of over 350 crisis helplines active in 35 countries on 5 continents. This global organisation encompasses communities around the world all with access to lay volunteers trained to be available 24/7 for those in despair and suicidal. Befrienders Worldwide have a Help App which will allow users to locate their nearest emotional support help centre, wherever in the world they are. This Help App will run on a mobile phone or pc. <https://help.befrienders.org/>

### Philippine Mental Health Association Online Support

Provides mental health support for all affected by COVID-19

- PMHA Facebook Messenger
- pmhacds@gmail.com
- 0917-565-2036

<https://pmha.org.ph/>

Check the link below for list of hotlines around the world:

<https://www.mhe-sme.org/library/helplines/>

<https://www.seafarers.uk/helping-you/help-for-individuals/>

### Free telephone helplines

#### Seafarers Advice & Information Line

Free telephone service for seafarers and fishers on debt, housing, benefits, pensions, employment and relationships and family issues.

- FREEPHONE 0800 160 1842 or email [advice@sailine.org.uk](mailto:advice@sailine.org.uk).

<http://sailine.org.uk/>

#### SeafarerHelp

Provided by the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) – a free, confidential, multilingual helpline for seafarers of any nationality, religion, gender or sexuality, and their families available 24 hours a day, 365 days per

year. A list of COVID-19 related resources is also available on their website.

<https://www.seafarerhelp.org/>

#### Seafarer Support

SeafarerSupport is a UK free telephone and signposting service. Seafarer Support assesses the needs of the individual and then signposts you to the appropriate support.

- FREEPHONE 0800 121 4765.

<https://seafarersupport.zendesk.com/hc/en-gb>

#### Sailors Helpline

The Sailors Helpline is based out of Chennai, India. Its purpose is to serve the maritime fraternity of India with emergency social services. Confidentiality is of prime importance and all calls and emails in liaison with this organisation are kept completely private. It is an NGO and non-governmental in nature, attracting volunteers from the legal profession, the church and others involved in the industry

<http://sailorshelpline.org/>

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This advice was compiled with the help of our psychological and psychometric screening partners I.M.E.Q. You can watch their video at: <https://www.imeq-magazine.com/single-post/2020/05/08/Navigating-Safely-Back-Home>

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The Club was the first to launch a crew health scheme in 1996 due to increasing crew illness claims and a lack of accountability of clinics. Since 1996, the Crew Health programme has become one of the Club's leading loss prevention initiatives. The aim of the programme is to reduce the volume and value of crew illness claims which are caused by a pre-existing illnesses or disease. These underlying conditions often impact on the crew member's fitness for service and can endanger not only the health of the seafarer but also the onboard safety of other crew.

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Sophia joined Thomas Miller in 1992 and from 1994 worked as a claims handler dealing mainly with French and Spanish Members. In 2004, Sophia became the Crew Health Programme Director. Sophia has undertaken a large number of clinic audits, implemented the standard medical

form and clinic guidelines. She has also lead the scheme through the largest period of growth and development with a doubling of approved clinic facilities and a four fold member increase. Sophia is a Director of Thomas Miller & Co. Ltd.

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Saidul Alom joined Crew Health from the European Region Service Team in 2004. Saidul provides administrative support to the Crew Health programme and is responsible for liaison with the approved clinics on financial billing matters and ensuring prompt payment of all clinic fees.

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Stuart joined Thomas Miller in 1998 as a claims trainee for UK P&I Club's Greek Members. In April 2005 Stuart joined Crew Health as the Team Administrator. Stuart is responsible for co-ordination of Member entries and administration for the clinic approval process.