



International  
Chamber of Shipping

Shaping the Future of Shipping

# Handling a Mental Health Crisis or Emergency and Spotting Suicidal Behaviour in Seafarers

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## Handling a Mental Health Crisis or Emergency and Spotting Suicidal Behaviour in Seafarers

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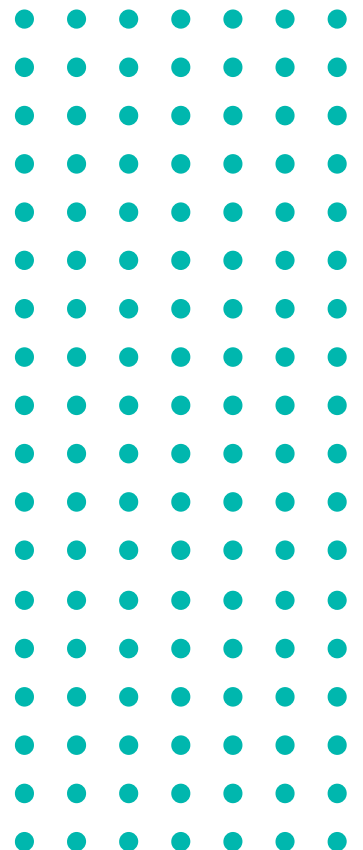
The International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) is the global trade association representing national shipowners' associations from Asia, the Americas and Europe and more than 80% of the world merchant fleet.

Established in 1921, ICS is concerned with all aspects of maritime affairs particularly maritime safety, environmental protection, maritime law, employment affairs and trade.

ICS enjoys consultative status with the UN International Maritime Organization (IMO) and International Labour Organization (ILO).



# Handling a Mental Health Crisis or Emergency and Spotting Suicidal Behaviour in Seafarers



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## Introduction

Shipping companies should take a mental health emergency as seriously as a physical one. A seafarer experiencing a mental health crisis might feel no longer able to cope. This is particularly true in the current pandemic. This document has tools to help shipping companies, Masters and seafarers handle such a situation and to spot suicidal behaviour.

If a mental health crisis occurs, the seafarer should seek immediate expert assessment and advice for the best course of action from a mental health professional. If under the care of a mental health provider, the seafarer should contact the specific advisor for advice.

## What Are Suicidal Feelings?

Seafarers can be more at risk of suicidal feelings due to major life events such as a bereavement or due to a multitude of stressors causing a decline in a person’s mental wellbeing.

### Suicidal feelings:

- Do not constitute a mental illness but are a potential consequence and are not always associated with a diagnosable mental health condition, particularly depression. A person might feel trapped and may not see a solution to their problems. Suicide may then start to seem like a potential solution for seafarers who may feel they are a burden to others who would be better off without them.
- Indicators include:

Excessive sadness	Emotional distress or anxiety
Inability to cope with daily life or work	Change in mood
Threatening self-injury	Experiencing or hearing voices (hallucinations)

- Can also mean thinking about methods of suicide or making clear plans to take one’s own life which can vary in intensity and duration;
- Can be experienced due to multiple factors contributing to lead the individual concerned thinking they can no longer cope;
- Can occur at any age but are most common in teens, young adults and the elderly;
- Are more likely to be experienced by women;
- Are more likely to lead to suicide when experienced by men; and



- Are also higher for seafarers who have:

Lost a spouse through death or divorce	Previously attempted suicide
A family history of suicide	A friend/co-worker who died by suicide
A history of physical, emotional or sexual abuse	Not married, are unskilled or unemployed
Long term pain or a disabling or terminal illness	Inclined to violent/impulsive behaviour
Recently left psychiatric hospitalisation	Substance abuse problems

## Abstract Suicidal Feelings

Suicidal feelings can be abstract, i.e. a seafarer may think about ending their life or feel that other seafarers would be better off without them. Such thoughts can be common and their severity can depend on whether their mental health has declined. Whether abstract or not, suicidal thoughts are not permanent and can pass but getting help is strongly recommended.

## Stressors That Can Affect Seafarers

On board	Shore side
Time spent away from home	News of a death of a family member or close friend
Sleep deprivation	Barriers to repatriation
Bullying and harassment	Concern about potential unemployment
Being requested to perform tasks without sufficient training	Travel restrictions
Lack of autonomy	



## How Companies Can Help

Several factors can impact seafarers' mental health, such as job stress, family pressures and limited shore leave. Being away at sea can also make it difficult to access support. Everyone reacts differently to events, and changes in thoughts, feelings and behaviour vary between people and over time. A seafarer must nurture their mind and body and seek further help if required.

Companies should create an on board caring culture to address mental health matters:

- Without fear of reprisal; and
- To help reduce the stigma that seafarers fear they will experience if they mention their mental health (including loss of employment).

However, help is available:

- Some companies have their own policies and confidential employee assistance programmes which should be well publicised so that crew are aware and can feel confident to seek help when required; and
- International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) has developed a range of resources to help seafarers manage and cope with low mood, stress and fatigue, to maximise psychological wellbeing wellbeing: [www.seafarerswelfare.org/seafarer-health-information-programme](http://www.seafarerswelfare.org/seafarer-health-information-programme)

The ongoing pandemic may pose extra challenges to seafarers and their families. Seafarers may become bored, frustrated or lonely and their families may also experience difficulties.

Someone who feels suicidal might also experience these feelings more intensely if they drink alcohol, take drugs or have chronic sleeping difficulties.

Different strategies to enhance mental wellbeing are provided in Annex C.

## Suicide Warning Signs

- **Excessive sadness or change in mood:** Long-lasting sadness and change in mood can be symptoms of depression, a major risk factor for suicide;
- **Sudden calmness:** Suddenly becoming calm after depression or change in mood can signal that a person has decided to end their life;
- **Withdrawal:** Choosing to be alone and avoiding friends or socialising can be due to depression such as loss of interest or pleasure in joining activities. E.g. a crew member who normally always participated in group crew mess dinners says they will eat later. They skip meals for a week and they go to their bunk as soon as they complete their watch;
- **Changes in personality and/or appearance:** Someone considering suicide may exhibit a change in attitude or behavior, such as speaking or moving very fast or slowly. Also, they may suddenly be less concerned about personal appearance;
- **Dangerous or self-harmful behaviour:** Such as reckless driving, engaging in unsafe sex and increased use of drugs and alcohol may indicate a person no longer values their life;
- **Recent trauma or life crisis:** A major life crisis may trigger a suicide attempt. Crises include death of a loved one, divorce or break-up of a relationship, diagnosis of a major illness, loss of a job or serious financial problems;



- **Making preparations:** Someone considering suicide may start to put their personal affairs in order, visit colleagues, give away personal possessions, make a will, tidy their cabin and may write a note before attempting suicide; and
- **Threatening suicide:** Not everyone considering suicide will say so, or who threatens suicide will pursue it. However, every such threat should be taken seriously.

A poster *Suicide Warning Signs* is included in Annex D.

## Suicide Prevention

Suicide can often be prevented by knowing risk factors, being alert to signs of depression and other mental health issues, recognising warning signs, and intervening before the person acts.

Seafarers receiving support from caring friends and family, with access to mental health services, are less likely to act on their suicidal impulses than those isolated from care and support. If someone exhibits suicide warning signs, ask if they are feeling depressed or considering suicide. A common form of suicide at sea is jumping overboard.

A person may just need to know you care and are willing to talk about their feelings and encourage them to seek professional help.

### **If a seafarer acts out of character and you think may be struggling, try to open a discussion:**

1. Ask how they are – if they say they are “fine”, ask again;
2. Listen to them, maintain eye contact and show that you care; and
3. Ask open questions (requiring a broader response than “yes” or “no”).

### **If a seafarer talks about wanting to end their own life:**

1. Take it seriously;
2. Don't avoid that they have mentioned suicide. Ask direct questions and if there is a plan to act on their suicidal thoughts;
3. Remain with the seafarer, if possible, seek help from friends or colleagues;
4. Ask how they feel after sharing with you. Reassure them that they are safe;
5. Respond rather than react;
6. Remove immediate objects that the individual might use to harm themselves. Jumping over board is a suicide method used by seafarers. If someone is on the edge of the deck, patiently and calmly ask them to step back explaining you wish to support them;
7. Try to keep the seafarer as calm as possible and remain calm yourself too; and
8. Refer the seafarer for professional clinical support, call Telemedical Maritime Assistance Service (TMAS) or, if in port, try to take them to an emergency room. Also seek out support from shore side welfare services and an International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) inspector if appropriate.

A seafarer might resist explaining what they have told you to others, particularly if they fear being judged or adversely treated as a result.





## Supporting Someone Who Feels Suicidal

Everybody approaches personal issues in their own way. Some seafarers may welcome suggestions regarding potential actions to take while others may react in a hostile manner and prefer not to be “lectured to”. The person is there not to advise but to keep the seafarer safe and to encourage them to seek advice from qualified medical personnel.

A seafarer:

- Feeling suicidal may feel very alone, lost, frightened, confused and that there is no alternative to their problem, difficulties, worries, feelings or reason;
- May be so overcome with feelings, sadness and despair, that it would be difficult to clearly identify other possibilities, solutions, alternatives or ways to cope;
- May find it difficult to recognise their feelings may only be temporary. Others in a similar position have found support resulting in a fulfilling life and future happiness;
- May feel that the pain is unbearable. Talking about their feelings with someone can reduce pressure. Suggest other options to help the individual thrive;
- May think nobody cares about them and need reassurance that this is not the case; and
- May not personally see a reason to remain alive and may need to allow others to help and identify such reasons. Suggest that there is no hurry or need for immediate action and to take a few days to discover alternatives such as talking to a friend, relative, helpline or counsellor and reviewing websites to discuss alternative solutions.

Discussing suicide is difficult as a seafarer experiencing suicidal thoughts might worry about judgement or fear losing their job if mentioning their mental health concerns. A seafarer experiencing suicidal thoughts may hide their feelings and try to convince others that they are coping. Identifying signs of suicidal behaviour is difficult so do not to blame yourself if you do not spot such behaviour.

## Managing Physical Symptoms Triggered by Stress and Anxiety

The following short-lived symptoms may arise for seafarers with a low mood or anxiety:

Faster, irregular or more noticeable heartbeat	Feeling lightheaded and dizzy
Headaches	Chest pains or loss of appetite

It can be difficult to know what causes these symptoms, but they are often experienced due to stress, anxiety or low mood and may worsen when seafarers focus on them. Seafarers concerned about physical symptoms should speak to the person(s) responsible for on board medical care and if necessary seek advice from TMAS.



## Managing Concerns

The following suggestions can be used as ways to help encourage a seafarer to manage their concerns:

<b>Financial concerns</b>	There may be concerns about work and money on return home. These can impact mental health. Find out what help is available in the home country.
<b>Caring responsibilities</b>	Seafarers may worry about supporting dependents at home or others on board. Contact the home community to seek help if needed for care or support.
<b>When being treated or taking medication for existing conditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue accessing treatment and support where possible;</li> <li>• Continue taking medication; and</li> <li>• Seek further support if necessary.</li> </ul>

## Myths Surrounding Suicide

A common misconception is that by talking about suicide, it will increase the chance of someone acting on their suicidal thoughts. This is untrue.

Health professionals discourage use of the word “commit” suicide – suicide is not a crime and discourages seafarers from talking about it. Alternative terms to consider are:

- Taking their own life;
- Die by suicide; and
- Complete suicide.

## Mental Health Tools

ICS has prepared several posters on mental health, which are included in the Annexes:

Annex A: *Coping with stress during COVID-19*

Annex B: *Helplines for seafarers*

Annex C: *How to enhance mental health and wellbeing*

Annex D: *Suicide warning signs*

ISWAN has prepared several seafarer friendly resources including self-help guides, various mental health and wellbeing infographics and an audio relaxation exercise:

[www.seafarerswelfare.org/seafarer-health-information-programme/good-mental-health](http://www.seafarerswelfare.org/seafarer-health-information-programme/good-mental-health)

The *Mentally Healthy Ships* guide provides information to develop and implement mental health policies on board:

[www.seafarerswelfare.org/seafarer-health-information-programme/good-mental-health/mentally-healthy-ships](http://www.seafarerswelfare.org/seafarer-health-information-programme/good-mental-health/mentally-healthy-ships)



Watch the video *Managing Your Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic*:

[www.seafarerswelfare.org/seafarer-health-information-programme/coronavirus-covid-19/managing-your-mental-health-during-the-covid-19-pandemic](http://www.seafarerswelfare.org/seafarer-health-information-programme/coronavirus-covid-19/managing-your-mental-health-during-the-covid-19-pandemic)

Take the Mental Health Awareness Training for the Maritime Sector course:

[www.seafarerswelfare.org/our-work/mental-health-awareness-training-for-the-maritime-industry](http://www.seafarerswelfare.org/our-work/mental-health-awareness-training-for-the-maritime-industry)

## Annexes

**Annex A:** Coping with stress during COVID-19

**Annex B:** Helplines for seafarers

**Annex C:** How to enhance mental health and wellbeing

**Annex D:** Suicide warning signs



# COVID-19

## Coping with stress during COVID-19

Feeling sad, stressed, confused, scared or angry during a crisis is normal. Talking to people you trust can help. Talk to your colleagues and contact friends and family.



When on board, maintain a healthy lifestyle – including proper diet, sleep, exercise and social contacts with other crew members and by email, social media and phone for family and friends.



Don't use smoking, alcohol or other drugs to manage emotions. When overwhelmed, talk to a colleague or contact SeafarerHelp. Have a plan, where to go to and how to seek help for physical and mental health needs if required.



Get the facts. Gather information to accurately determine risks and take reasonable precautions. Use a trusted credible source such as WHO or government agency website.



Reduce time spent watching, reading or listening to upsetting media coverage to limit worry and agitation.



Draw on past skills which helped you manage previous difficult situations to help handle your emotions at this time.



Contact **SeafarerHelp**, the free, confidential, multilingual 24 hour helpline for seafarers and their families, open 365 days a year for advice if necessary.

Dial **+44 20 7323 2737** or email **help@seafarerhelp.org**



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# COVID-19

# Helplines for seafarers

Companies which have their own employee support helplines are encouraged to remind their seafarers of how they can access these if necessary.

Additionally, the organisations listed below provide different useful services, including emotional support, and most are available 24 hours a day.

International and regional helplines are available for seafarers wishing to talk to someone wherever they are in the world. Please encourage your seafarers to feel free to contact the helplines below for guidance or support.

<b>SeafarerHelp</b>	24/7 multilingual and confidential helpline for seafarers' and their family - emotional support and practical help. Includes Russian and Asian languages <a href="http://www.seafarerhelp.org/">http://www.seafarerhelp.org/</a>
<b>Nautilus 24/7</b>	24/7 multilingual help available to Nautilus members <a href="https://www.nautilusint.org/en/assistance/nautilus-247/">https://www.nautilusint.org/en/assistance/nautilus-247/</a>
<b>NUSI Sahara</b>	24/7 psychological support for Indian seafarers and their family <a href="https://www.nusi.org.in/activities/360-nusi-counselling-helpline-for-seafarers-and-their-families.html">https://www.nusi.org.in/activities/360-nusi-counselling-helpline-for-seafarers-and-their-families.html</a>
<b>AMOSUP</b>	24/7 psychological support for Filipino seafarers and their family +63 2 3310 6641 +63 2 8527 8116 to 20 (local 2061) <a href="http://www.amosup.org.ph">http://www.amosup.org.ph</a>
<b>SAIL</b>	British seafarers – help with benefits, debt and housing <a href="http://sailine.org.uk/">http://sailine.org.uk/</a>
<b>Seafarer Support</b>	Central source of information on maritime charities support for seafarers and their families <a href="https://seafarersupport.zendesk.com/hc/en-gb">https://seafarersupport.zendesk.com/hc/en-gb</a>
<b>Seafarer Hospital Society</b>	24/7 online confidential advice and support service for all working and retired seafarers and families for seafarers in the UK <a href="https://seahospital.org.uk/mental-health-and-wellbeing-2/">https://seahospital.org.uk/mental-health-and-wellbeing-2/</a>
<b>Mission to Seafarers Chat to a Chaplain</b>	24/7 MtS & ICMA chaplains available to talk <a href="https://www.missiontoseafarers.org/contact-a-chaplain">https://www.missiontoseafarers.org/contact-a-chaplain</a>
<b>Sailors Society Wellness at Sea</b>	Emergency COVID-19 helpline <a href="https://wellnessatsea.org/helpline/">https://wellnessatsea.org/helpline/</a>
<b>Sailors Society India</b>	Helpline for Indian seafarers and their families 022-48972266 <a href="https://www.sailors-society.org/news/sailors-society-launches-dedicated-24-hour-helpline-for-indian-seafarers">https://www.sailors-society.org/news/sailors-society-launches-dedicated-24-hour-helpline-for-indian-seafarers</a>
<b>DSM.care</b>	24/7 online service to chat with a DSM chaplain <a href="https://dsm.care/">https://dsm.care/</a>
<b>Danish Seaman's Church</b>	Chaplains available for a chat <a href="https://www.samtaertilsoes.dk/">https://www.samtaertilsoes.dk/</a>
<b>Seahealth &amp; Welfare – Denmark</b>	Seahealth & Welfare offers crisis help and psychological assistance – crisis line +45 7240 2610 and Seafarer Helpline +45 6015 5824 <a href="https://shw.dk/kriser#kriser">https://shw.dk/kriser#kriser</a>
<b>Stella Maris</b>	To call Catholic chaplains worldwide for a chat <a href="https://www.stellamaris.org.uk/contact-us/chaplains-list/">https://www.stellamaris.org.uk/contact-us/chaplains-list/</a>



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# COVID-19

## How to enhance mental health and wellbeing

Connect with others, help and support them



Keep active and eat well



Learn how to manage panic and anxiety, for example by meditating



Ask for help when struggling with worry or stress



Learn how to cope with and manage difficult feelings



Contact a mental health support service



Maintain a good sleep routine



Take regular breaks from, and set limits on, social media and online information intake



Set goals and plan to keep mentally well



Do enjoyable things and keep an active mind



Relax and focus on the present



Spend time outside, or bring nature in



Drink less alcohol



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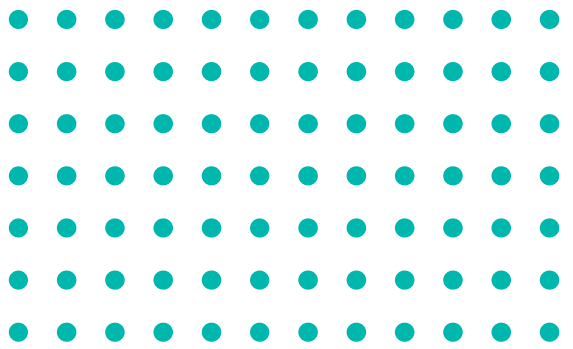
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# COVID-19

## Suicide warning signs





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