NorthStandard

My Mind Matters at Sea

A mental health framework

Seafarers are at the heart of global shipping, enabling safe, efficient and sustainable operations and keeping global trade moving. Life at sea, however, presents challenges such as extended periods away from home, isolation, fatigue and demanding working conditions, which can affect mental wellbeing.

Supporting seafarers helps them remain resilient, perform effectively, maintain a positive mindset and return home safely to their families.

My Mind Matters at Sea brings together practical guidance, resources and training to address the factors that influence mental wellbeing onboard. It is designed to support both seafarers and Members, strengthening existing Safety Management Systems (SMS).
The programme also helps shipowners and operators to manage mental wellbeing as part of operational risk, recognising that this can present itself as a new and evolving challenge.

While life at sea can be challenging, it is also a rewarding career built on teamwork, pride and shared experience. Supporting mental wellbeing helps sustain these positive aspects.

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Insights from crews at sea

NorthStandard are proud sponsors of the Safety4Sea SEAFiT Survey. The 2025 survey, available here, surveyed over 20,000 seafarers and returned a lower crew wellness score compared with 2024. Results indicated that mental wellbeing is one of the weakest areas and participants expressed that they wanted improved mental health support onboard with the top barriers shown below.

Rank	Mental health Barriers by order of importance (TSL*=70.1%)	SL%**
1	My healthcare does not cover mental health issues	**57.4%**
2	There is no information on the symptoms associated with mental health issues	**58.0%**
3	There is no information on strategies to cope with mental health issues	**60.5%**
4	There is no information/ access to a mental health app	**61.2%**
5	There is no access to a mental health service onboard	**62.6%**
6	There is no time to relax and recharge onboard	**63.4%**
7	While on duty, I do things that I do not like to do	**68.3%**
8	There is no privacy onboard to talk to someone	**69.1%**
9	There is no crew member that I can talk to and understand me	**70.0%**
10	I do not get on well with my fellow crew members	**72.4%**

For the past five years, we have sponsored the **Seafarers Happiness Index (SHI)**, a quarterly report produced by The Mission to Seafarers, and continue to strongly support their work. Findings from these quarterly surveys highlight the reality of how seafarers feel with particular emphasis on the importance of crew social time for mental health.

This feedback highlights the need for increased social interaction, as well as greater awareness and practical skills to support mental health.

> The **importance of social time** should not be underestimated. On vessels where work eclipses social life entirely, crews work, eat, sleep, and work again with little time for the interactions that make confined living bearable. Protecting time for crew recreation and social activities is not a luxury but a **necessity for mental health** and crew cohesion.
>
> SHI, Q1 2026

*TSL (Total Satisfaction Level) and **SL% (Satisfaction Level) are measures of satisfaction derived from the survey responses. Scores below 65% may indicate an area of concern. For further information on how these scores are calculated and interpreted, please refer to Appendix 2 of the survey

Lives behind the numbers

In the most serious cases, mental health issues can increase the risk of self-harm, harm to others, or suicide.

It is widely recognised across the maritime industry that the true causes of many seafarer deaths are not always fully understood. Amendments to the Maritime Labour Convention in 2024 now require improved investigation and reporting of seafarer fatalities, marking an important step forward.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) carried out its first experimental global data collection on seafarer deaths, with 51 countries participating. The findings showed that suicide accounted for 6.5% of reported deaths in 2023.

Our claims data reflects a similar and concerning pattern. In the 2025 policy year, suicide was a causative factor in 9.2% of all death claims within the club, highlighting the substantial role that mental health plays in seafarer fatalities.

Comparative data also highlights the relative risk. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that suicide accounted for 1.1% of all deaths globally in 2021, with over half (56%) occurring in individuals under the age of 50. As a result, suicide accounts for approximately 3% of deaths within this age group.

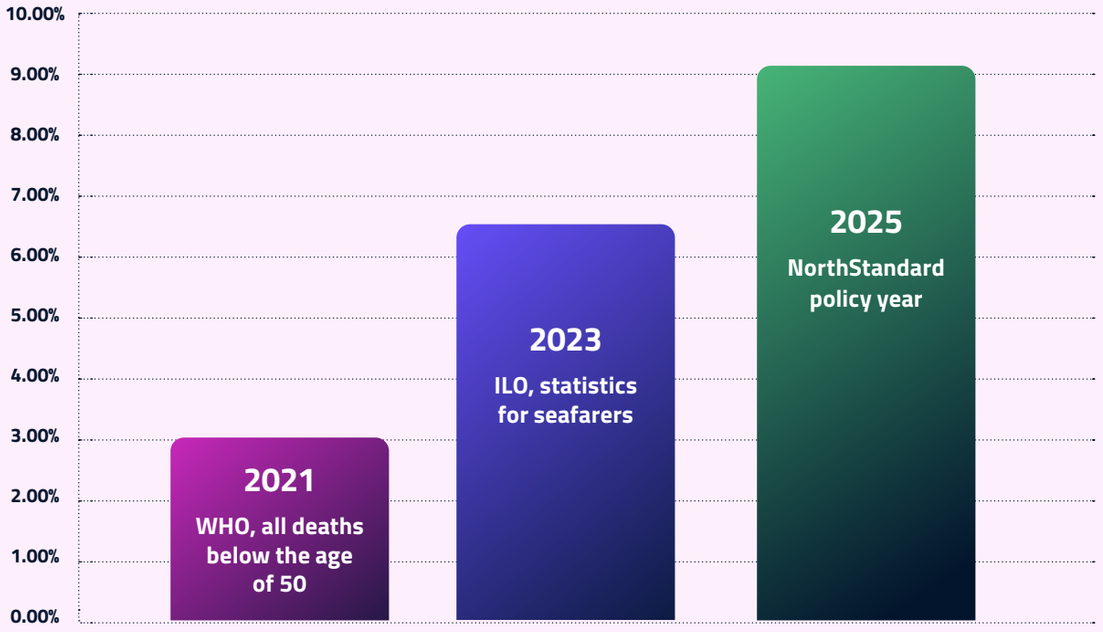
This age group broadly reflects the typical seafarer demographic. When compared with our data and statistics from the ILO, it suggests that seafarers may be exposed to a disproportionately higher risk of suicide.

However, statistics alone do not tell the full story. Categories such as persons overboard or undetermined causes may include cases where there is no conclusive evidence of what happened. It is recognised that some of these deaths may have been influenced by underlying mental wellbeing challenges. Behind every data point is a person, a family, and a crew affected by loss.

In practice, problems with mental wellbeing can contribute to a wide range of incidents at sea, not only those recorded as suicides. Psychological strain can reduce focus, impair decision making, weaken motivation and compromise adherence to procedures. All of which increases the risk of errors and serious incidents.

These statistics reinforce the importance of adopting structured mental health frameworks across fleets. They also highlight the need to identify and address mental wellbeing risks before they escalate.

Suicide as a percentage of reported deaths



Percentages represent the proportion of reported deaths attributed to suicide within each dataset and should not be interpreted as total numbers of deaths or claims.

A practical framework for mental health at sea

To support Members in taking a structured and proactive approach, mental health at sea can be understood through five organisational drivers of mental wellbeing.

These drivers can be viewed as the blades of a propeller. Each contributes to overall balance and performance. When functioning effectively, they drive crew resilience, safety and operational efficiency. If one becomes weak or overlooked, it can create imbalance, reducing effectiveness and increasing risk. Together, these drivers help create the conditions in which crew resilience can develop and be sustained throughout a voyage.

These drivers are designed to be embedded into existing Safety Management Systems (SMS), helping to move mental wellbeing from a reactive concern to a proactively managed operational risk.

> **"Together, these drivers help create the conditions in which crew resilience can develop and be sustained throughout a voyage."**

1 Awareness

Building understanding and reducing stigma

Creating awareness is the foundation of any effective mental health approach. This includes improving understanding of common challenges at sea and encouraging open, stigma-free conversations.

Members may wish to consider:

- Providing basic mental health awareness training for all crew
- Helping crew recognise early warning signs (e.g. withdrawal, fatigue, behavioural change)
- Promoting open discussion through safety meetings and onboard culture
- Reinforcing that mental wellbeing is part of overall safety performance
- Providing accessible onboard and online materials (posters, digital displays, guides and resources) on maintaining wellbeing
- Sharing case studies which highlight the impact that mental wellbeing can have
- Recognising that mental health concerns may not always be visible and can be more difficult to identify than physical conditions

2 Capability

Equipping crew to respond with confidence

Awareness alone is not enough, crew must also feel confident in how to respond when concerns arise.

Members may wish to consider:

- Appointing trained onboard Wellbeing Officers or Mental Health Champions
- Providing practical training focused on real onboard scenarios
- Supporting crew in managing wellbeing issues and decision-making
- Ensuring shore-based teams understand seafarer-specific challenges
- Incorporating mental health scenarios into drills, workshops or tabletop exercises
- Providing clear guidance on when and how to escalate concerns

3 Support

Providing access to help, onboard and ashore

Effective support requires both formal and informal pathways, recognising that not all seafarers will feel comfortable raising concerns onboard.

Members may wish to consider:

- Promoting access to confidential support services (e.g. helplines, welfare organisations)
- Ensuring multiple routes to seek support (peer, onboard, shore-based, confidential)
- Providing access to support in multiple languages to reflect diverse crews
- Promoting an inclusive onboard environment that recognises and celebrates cultural diversity
- Maintaining confidentiality and trust in support systems
- Providing continued support following incidents or periods of stress
- Treating mental health with the same level of importance as physical health and safety

4 Environment

Creating conditions that support wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is shaped by daily life onboard, including social interaction, leadership and working conditions.

Members may wish to consider:

- Encouraging onboard social interaction and shared activities
- Promoting inclusive, respectful working environments
- Managing fatigue, rest, and workload effectively
- Recognising the impact of connectivity, isolation and multicultural crews
- Encouraging and supporting opportunities for physical exercise
- Promoting and supporting access to a balanced diet
- Facilitating shore leave whenever feasible
- Recognising the impact of extended contracts, high workloads and operational pressures
- Recognising and promoting the positive aspects of life at sea, including teamwork, achievement, and connection with the natural environment

5 Leadership

Embedding mental health into systems and decision-making

Sustainable change is driven by leadership and reinforced through policies, procedures and accountability.

Members may wish to consider:

- Integrating mental health into existing Safety Management Systems (SMS)
- Establishing clear escalation and intervention guidance
- Monitoring trends in crew wellbeing, retention, and incidents
- Carrying out crew surveys to understand experiences and identify areas for improvement
- Using seafarer feedback to shape and refine wellbeing policies, ensuring they reflect real onboard experience
- Conducting ship visits to better understand onboard conditions and crew experience, beyond technical or compliance-focused activities
- Demonstrating visible leadership commitment onboard and ashore
- Ensuring policies and onboard practices clearly support confidentiality and appropriate handling of sensitive health information
- Allocating dedicated budget to support the ongoing development, implementation and continuous improvement of mental health initiatives across the fleet

"These drivers are not standalone initiatives. When functioning together, they create a balanced system that supports crew resilience and underpins safe, efficient and sustainable ship operations."

Sea Mate

Our partnership with Sailors' Society supports key elements of the five-driver framework by giving Members access to the Sea Mate training programme, including complimentary courses and discounted rates.

While not covering the full framework, the training aligns with key elements and provides practical support tailored for seafarers.

Mental health champion

Existing users have benefited from having a dedicated onboard mental health champion or wellbeing officer, a role supported in Sea Mate's training course.

This is not about creating onboard professional counsellors, but rather:

1. **Awareness** Raising awareness and reducing stigma around mental health
2. **Capability** Training crew to recognise early signs of concern and respond appropriately, including when and how to escalate
3. **Support** Providing a visible, approachable point of contact
4. **Environment** Promoting social interaction, shared activities and informal conversations
5. **Leadership** Providing seafarers with mental health training demonstrates a clear leadership commitment to mental wellbeing and helps embed it within onboard culture. It can also act as an effective early intervention point, bridging the gap between informal peer support and formal escalation.

Participants who complete the Sea Mate programme gain access to follow-up support, a shared network for wellbeing initiatives, and broader contacts for assistance.

Shore-based personnel can also benefit from courses such as Sea Mate, which help them recognise and understand the unique stressors that may affect a seafarer's mental health.

Every crew member counts

Raising awareness across the whole crew, not just designated individuals, is an important step. We encourage training as many crew members as possible to help them recognise common signs of distress and feel more confident to support one another when challenges arise.

Whilst appointing one mental health champion per ship is valuable, wider crew awareness creates greater resilience. This is particularly important during crew changes and rotations, when relying on one individual may not be practical. Some seafarers may also feel more comfortable speaking to someone from their own department or rank, so having several trained contacts onboard across different ranks and departments can be beneficial.

Further consideration might be given to:

- Including mental health awareness in routine training or safety meetings
- Helping crew recognise behavioural changes such as withdrawal, fatigue, or reduced engagement
- Encouraging simple, supportive actions such as checking in with colleagues

Creating a culture where crew feel comfortable speaking up is as important as recognising the signs themselves. Seafarers are not only recipients of wellbeing initiatives, but an important part of the solution, playing a key role in looking out for one another, sharing concerns, and supporting early intervention. Their feedback and experience can also help ensure that policies and initiatives are relevant and effective in practice.

Why mental health matters operationally

Mental wellbeing at sea is not just a welfare issue, it is a safety and performance priority. In many cases, mental wellbeing factors may be present, even where they are not formally identified, and can contribute to a wide range of incidents onboard.

Although Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW) does not yet mandate mental health training, recent amendments and ongoing reviews signal a clear shift towards recognising psychological safety and wellbeing as fundamental to safe operations.

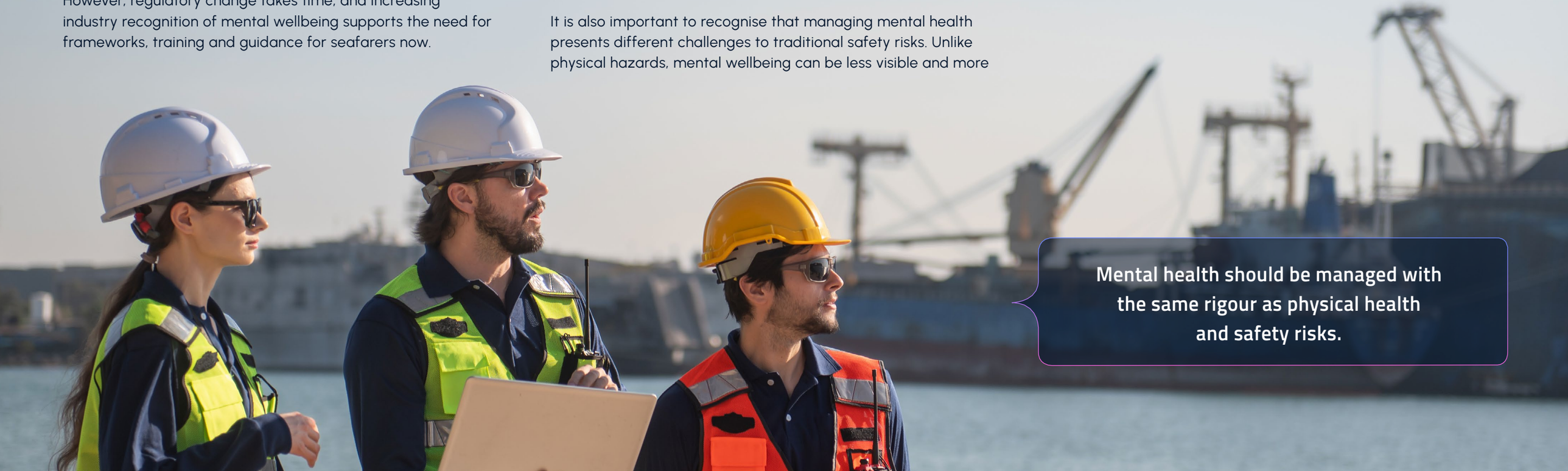
However, regulatory change takes time, and increasing industry recognition of mental wellbeing supports the need for frameworks, training and guidance for seafarers now.

In addition, a range of vessel assurance and assessment programmes, including those from RightShip, Oil Companies International Marine Forum (OCIMF) and Dry Bulk Management Standard (DryBMS), increasingly consider how crew wellbeing is supported. This reflects a growing expectation across the industry, where mental wellbeing is becoming an important factor in operational performance and risk management.

In practice, these assessments can influence a vessel's overall rating and how it is perceived commercially, with potential implications for chartering opportunities.

It is also important to recognise that managing mental health presents different challenges to traditional safety risks. Unlike physical hazards, mental wellbeing can be less visible and more difficult to identify, and many shipowners have historically focused on technical operations and physical safety. As a result, we recognise this can be a challenging area to address, and that building capability takes time and requires a structured, practical approach.

Mental health should be managed with the same rigour as physical health and safety risks. Just as shipowners implement controls such as procedures, training and personal protective equipment (PPE) to manage physical hazards, similar structured measures should be applied to mental wellbeing.



Mental health should be managed with the same rigour as physical health and safety risks.

This includes identifying potential risk factors in the onboard environment, such as:

- Fatigue
- Working in isolation
- Social and cultural factors onboard
- Progression through contracts, where focus may shift towards returning home
- Ongoing conflict or poor interpersonal relationships between crew
- Recent exposure to incidents or high stress situation
- Limited experience in carrying out tasks, which can increase anxiety or uncertainty
- Complex or high-demand tasks requiring increased mental effort
- High cognitive demand when managing multiple tasks or operations simultaneously, particularly where additional pressures are present (e.g. surveys, inspections or external attendance).

Treating mental wellbeing in this way reinforces its role as a core element of safe and effective ship operations. A supported, resilient crew is more focused, more effective and better equipped to operate safely.

Supported crew are more likely to:	Mental health concerns can contribute to:
Communicate effectively	Increased fatigue, stress and isolation
Act proactively rather than reactively	Danger to themselves and others
Identify and report risks early	Poor decision-making
Work cohesively as a team	Breakdown in teamwork
Minimise disruption to operations	Increased likelihood of incidents
Maintain situational awareness	Reduced situational awareness
Build a lasting career at sea	Low morale and reduced crew retention

The consequences of overlooking mental health at sea

CASE STUDY

A recent case illustrates the significant impact mental health can have at sea.

A Chief Engineer, whose family was anticipating his return from sea, tragically took his own life onboard because of mental health challenges. This incident impacted the wellbeing and morale of the remaining crew and caused significant disruptions to vessel operations and scheduling.

Notably, there was no clear point of intervention. However, individual crew members observed changes in the Chief Engineer, such as:

- the Second Officer observing increased withdrawal,
- the Master detecting behavioural changes,
- and the Chief Cook identifying a significant loss of appetite.

However, these concerns were not raised until after the incident and their significance was not recognised at the time. This may have stemmed from uncertainty in recognising the signs or a lack of confidence in how to respond and provide support. While it is impossible to know what might have changed the outcome, earlier recognition and action can create opportunities for support and intervention. Awareness Capability

This case illustrates an important challenge: mental health concerns can be difficult to identify early. Seafarers may struggle to express distress, particularly when working alongside crew members that do not know them well on a personal level. Isolation, fatigue, cultural differences and the confined nature of the shipboard environment can all act as barriers to open conversation and early support. Environment

In addition, they may have been unaware of the support available, Support or reluctant to share concerns due to uncertainty around confidentiality. Where individuals are unclear how sensitive information will be managed once disclosed, they may be less likely to report early signs of distress. Leadership

Further club experience

Across other cases, similar patterns emerge, where crew are either unable to recognise early warning signs or unsure how to act. Mental wellbeing can be influenced by a wide range of factors, including isolation, family and financial pressures, and demanding operational requirements. These challenges can be further compounded by the unpredictable nature of the maritime industry itself.

Unlike physical injuries, which are often visible and addressed quickly, mental health challenges can remain hidden beneath the surface. As a result, they may go unnoticed or unaddressed until they have more serious consequences. Increased onboard social interaction will allow these challenges to surface.

The diagram below shows the hidden and visible signs that may indicate an underlying mental health challenge.

The wider pressures shaping life at sea

Seafarers are often affected by global events beyond their control, including geopolitical tensions, conflict zones, piracy and the lasting impacts of crises such as pandemics. Situations such as the COVID-19 crew change crisis, or the geopolitical conflict, can leave crews onboard for extended periods, often with limited ability to return home, while managing concerns for their own safety and the wellbeing of their families ashore.

Increasing operational demands, such as administrative workload, regulatory change, new technologies and alternative fuels, can increase pressure for crew.

Improved onboard connectivity has greatly helped reduce isolation by enabling reliable contact with family and friends ashore. While this supports mental wellbeing, it may also introduce additional pressures, as seafarers can become more aware of challenges at home without being able to provide direct support.

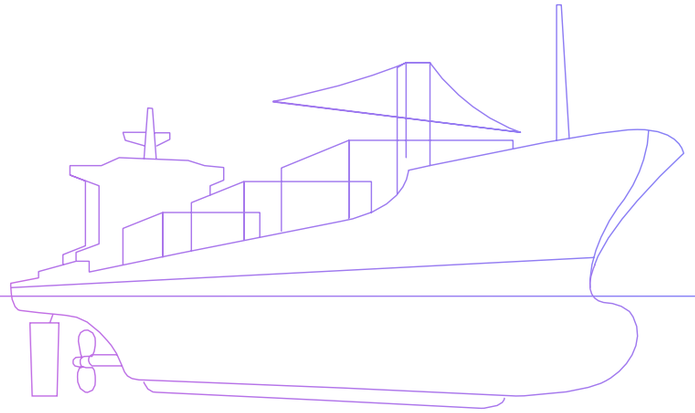
Seafarer charities provide resources for families, helping them understand the realities of life at sea and how best to communicate with and support seafarers while they are at sea.

At the same time, increased use of personal devices can reduce face-to-face interaction, and exposure to the online environment may distort perceptions of life ashore. This can weaken social cohesion and informal peer support onboard. Encouraging positive social interaction and a strong sense of community therefore remains essential.

Regardless of the source of mental health challenges, early recognition and timely intervention are critical. Prompt access to support, guidance and, where necessary, repatriation can help protect both the individual and the wider crew, reducing the risk of issues escalating into serious incidents.

VISIBLE: ABOVE THE WATERLINE

- Changes in mood or behaviour
- Reduced engagement or motivation
- Difficulty concentrating



- Reporting late for work
- Missing work
- Missing meals

HIDDEN: BELOW THE WATERLINE

- Family pressures
- Financial concerns
- Contract extension

- Stress about performance
- Poor sleep
- Feeling isolated

Beyond the vessel

Access to independent, confidential support can be particularly important where seafarers may feel unable to speak openly within the onboard environment.

We also sponsor other leading maritime welfare charities and initiatives to support seafarers and our Members. These are outlined below:

Mission to Seafarers

> Website

Stella Maris

> Website

ISWAN

> Website

These organisations offer services that can:

- Offer confidential advice and emotional support
- Provide assistance in multiple languages
- Act as an additional layer of support beyond the vessel
- Support seafarers' families
- Arrange chaplain visits to vessels visiting ports

In addition, our dedicated My Mind Matters at Sea page provides useful resources and guidance for seafarers.

> My Mind Matters at Sea

More broadly, companies can support onboard wellbeing by ensuring vessels are equipped with appropriate facilities, resources and recreational opportunities, as well as by introducing fleetwide initiatives such as friendly competitions or wellbeing challenges.

Working with qualified health professionals and welfare organisations can further strengthen wellbeing programmes, ensuring they are informed by expert knowledge and aligned with best practice. This helps ensure approaches are both practical for onboard use and grounded in recognised professional standards.

24/7 Seafarer Helplines available in multiple languages

Sailors' Society

> Website

+1 938 222 8181

ISWAN

> Website

+44 2073 232737

+44 7909 470732 via WhatsApp

Next steps

Supporting mental wellbeing is not only the right thing to do; it is a fundamental part of delivering safe, reliable and sustainable ship operations.

By taking a structured approach, such as the five-driver framework, Members can strengthen crew resilience, improve onboard performance and reduce the risk of incidents.

Sea Mate training is available to Members now and provides practical support in key areas of the framework. Alongside this, the guidance set out in this document is intended to provide a high-level overview. NorthStandard will continue to support Members and develop further guidance, resources and tools to help address these areas in practice.

To learn more about the support available, including Sea Mate training, please contact your usual Loss Prevention representative or club contact.

> Sign up to Sea Mate

Appendix

Mental health resources

Organisation	Service	
World Health Organisation (WHO)	Mental health guidance	> Website
	Global suicide statistics	> Website
	Global health statistics	> Website
International Labour Organisation (ILO)	First global data collection on seafarer fatalities	> Website
	Mental health at work guidance (not seafarer specific)	> Website
Intertanko	Crew welfare management and mental wellness (2nd edition)	> Website
UK Chamber of Shipping	Practical guidance for shipping companies on improving mental wellbeing	> Website
IMarEST & Guild of Benevolence	Transforming mental health at sea: a vision for wellbeing	> Website
Sailors' Society	MyWellness platform and mobile app including mental health topics	> Website
	Wellness at sea	> Website

Organisation	Service	
Mission to Seafarers	WeCare	> Website
	Seafarers happiness index	> Website
	Mental health resources in multiple languages	> Website
ISWAN	Family outreach programme (FOP)	> Website
	Mental health guides	> Website
		> Website
	Mental health posters	> Website
		> Website

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