

# HEADWAY ON MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES MUST BE MAINTAINED

Addressing crews' psychological and emotional well-being should be viewed as an investment, not a cost

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London

Concern about seafarers' mental health has been significantly boosted by the pressures they have been under during the crew-change crisis, but there is still a long way to go.

Mental Health Support Services (MHSS), which provides support for shipping companies, reported this month that problems among seafarers are getting worse not better.

Crew on ships reported that anxiety was a growing issue, with burnout and depression also cited over the three months to the end of February, MHSS said.

Asian seafarers topped the list of nationalities most affected, according to masters' requests for counselling support.

MHSS provides services — one-to-one therapy, training and a confidential 24/7 hotline run by clinical psychologists — to about 5,000 ships.

Chief executive Christian Ayerst, a former shipping lawyer, said: "It is vital we don't just pay lip service to the term mental health."

"We must ensure it becomes a lasting conversation, even as we look ahead to vaccine hopes to push us out of this pandemic."

## STRESS INCREASING

Clinical psychologist and MHSS managing director Charles Watkins, said mental health issues on ships are not new, but the stress on seafarers has increased with the crew-change crisis.

"Tending to emotional needs and health is just as important as physical health," Watkins told TradeWinds.

Seafarers' isolation can make it more difficult to recognise problems and in the past people tended to suffer privately, he said. But he added that there is now "more readiness among seafarers and management to change the environment".

After being stuck on board for long periods, seafarers may leave ships without telling management about their problems because they



## MIND MATTERS:

MHSS managing director Charles Watkins believes mental health is as important as physical health. Below left, CEO Christian Ayerst

Photos: MHSS



It is vital we don't just pay lip service to the term mental health. We must ensure it becomes a lasting conversation — Christian Ayerst, MHSS

are frightened of being seen to be unfit, Watkins said.

"Mental health is a normal part of life. We all suffer, and it is nothing to be ashamed of," he added.

Recognition of harmful processes is necessary before they can be stopped through raising awareness and setting clear boundaries.

MHSS runs training courses on bullying designed to change harmful cultures and to help other peo-

ple step in to stop incidents where necessary.

MHSS aims to train seafarers to spot behaviours and be alert to personality types and leadership styles to prevent systematic issues.

During the pandemic, seafarers have struggled with additional issues such as being unable to transfer wages to their families, quite apart from being stuck on vessels for extended periods with no

way home. In the past, they could leave a ship at an upcoming port.

Ayerst aims to challenge the idea that mental health is a cost centre, to make it an investment.

Watkins added that the goal is to give seafarers the tools and responsibility to help themselves so that "they don't need us".

"Creating a more caring and compassionate environment is better and more productive for everyone," he said.

## Crew-change crisis also put toll on shore staff

Seafarers were not the only ones to suffer during the crew-change crisis — onshore crewing staff also worked long hours with constant stress, frustration and pressure.

"One of the biggest fallacies of this pandemic is to think that there are only stresses and strains on board," Columbia Shipmanagement chief executive Mark O'Neil said.

"It is so frustrating and mentally draining to go through all the arrangements for a crew change and then have them fall down at the last hurdle and have aggravated crew screaming down the phone that you are not doing enough."

Mental Health Support Services clinical psychologist Charles Watkins said it is important to acknowledge the extra work shore staff are having to do to get crews off ships.

There is a mental toll from feelings of failure for crewing department staff when arrangements are not possible to see through due to no fault of their own, he said, adding that training can help redefine definitions of success.

Extra calls were made by crewing departments, fleet managers and directors to discuss how to cope with port calls in addition to regular day-to-day calls between superintendents and ships, and well-being services were introduced alongside upgraded online training systems.

Crewing departments also contacted families to keep them up to date with situations, and ship managers collaborated to share the cost of arranging charter flights for crew changes as well as chartering planes.



**SUCCESS:** Seafarers returning home

Photo: Danica Crewing Services

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