



Psychological Wellbeing at Sea

A Good Mental Health Guide for Seafarers



Photo by: Artem Radchenko



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Psychological Wellbeing at Sea is part of ISWAN's series of Good Mental Health Guides for Seafarers.

It aims to explain what positive mental health and psychological wellbeing are, and help you to recognise the risks to wellbeing that you may face as a seafarer. In this guide we have drawn together some of the best evidence available to give you some practical ideas about how to maximise your psychological wellbeing.



ISWAN is an international charity which is dedicated to the relief of hardship or distress amongst seafarers of all nationalities, races, colour and creeds irrespective of gender.

www.seafarerswelfare.org



SeafarerHelp
The lifeline for seafarers

We run the free 24 hour multilingual helpline – SeafarerHelp – which aims to assist seafarers and their families whatever the problem, wherever they are in the world.

www.seafarerhelp.org



POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

We all like to be happy! But did you know that psychological wellbeing is beneficial for your overall health and can even mean that you live longer?

People who score higher on wellbeing measures live longer and have a 50% lower chance of a heart attack or stroke. They make better decisions and have higher work performance, take fewer risks and have a lower risk of accidents or injuries¹. Paying attention to your wellbeing can really make a difference and mean that you can learn to limit the risks of working at sea and keep yourself fit, healthy and happy.

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as a *“state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”*².

Psychological wellbeing is about being well psychologically, which means that we can function well, we feel generally good about ourselves and about life, we feel a sense of life satisfaction, a sense of purpose and a sense that our lives are on the right track.

Psychological wellbeing is not only about the times when things are going well but also about how we cope when things are more difficult. It is about both feeling good and functioning well³. If you feel good then you function more effectively, and if you function more effectively then you feel better about yourself. But it is difficult to function well if you aren't feeling good. How you feel on a day to day basis can change and is affected by all kinds of things in our lives and environment. Our sense of psychological wellbeing is not fixed, it includes how happy we feel but is more than just our sense of happiness or the mood that we are in right now. Some people have defined it⁴ as the point of balance between the day to day challenges we face and the resources and skills we have to meet those challenges.

WELLBEING AT SEA

It is fully acceptable - and often expected - that we should look after our physical health. Many ships have gyms or exercise equipment and many companies encourage healthy eating and lifestyle choices to keep seafarers healthy. One of the first things we do if we are in physical pain is to tell someone close to us about it. We might even contact a doctor. However, this is often not the case when it's our mood that's low and our discomfort is psychological rather than physical.

As a seafarer, being away from family and friends may mean that you're less likely to talk about a low mood or feelings of unhappiness than someone ashore who sees their loved ones every day.

Just as means of communication with home can be limited, seafarers may face other restrictions to their wellbeing such as limited shore leave, monotonous routines, long working hours, shift working, and few opportunities for exercise or socialising.

It is vital we pay attention to our mental health because it affects how we think, feel and act.

¹ Lyubomirsky, S., & Layous, K. (2013). How do simple positive activities increase well-being? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22, 57-62.

² WHO http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/

³ Huppert, F. A. (2009). Psychological Well-being: Evidence Regarding its Causes and Consequences†. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 1: 137-164.

⁴ Dodge, R., Daly, A., Huyton, J., & Sanders, L. (2012). The challenge of defining wellbeing. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2(3), 222-235.

HOW CAN WE ENHANCE OUR PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING?

In a study of more than 3000 people in the US, only 20% were found to have high psychological wellbeing or be 'flourishing'⁵. The good news is that there is a large and growing body of evidence about what makes people happy and what enhances their wellbeing, and that we can control many of these things. We now know that there are several critical factors which characterise people with high wellbeing; people who 'flourish' in their lives. These include positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships and a sense of meaning, purpose and accomplishment⁶. There is a strong body of evidence⁷ that suggests that intentionally engaging in activities to strengthen our psychological wellbeing will have a positive effect, and if we can make them into habits they will have a long lasting impact on our wellbeing and physical health.



Take a look at the information and exercises on the following pages to start to enhance your wellbeing.

⁵ Keyes, C. (2002) "The Mental Health Continuum: From Languishing to Flourishing in Life." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 43: 207-222.

⁶ Seligman, Martin. *Flourish: A New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being - and how to Achieve Them*. Hodder & Stoughton. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Sin, N. L., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2009). Enhancing well-being and alleviating depressive symptoms with positive psychology interventions: A practice-friendly meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session*, 65,467-487.

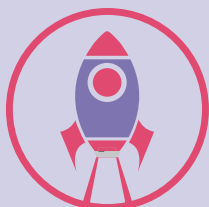
POSITIVE EMOTIONS

We don't often deliberately make time for and put effort into doing things that make us feel good, or bring us peace, contentment, calm, fun, happiness, enjoyment, pleasure and so on. However, it seems that this is exactly what we can and should do.

When we feel good we have the energy to do all kinds of things, but when we are busy and especially when we are feeling stressed or low, we forget to do the things that make us happy. We lose motivation to do things and very quickly we find that we are not doing the things we enjoy. Evidence suggests that actively and intentionally making time to engage in things we like to do can have a real and positive impact on our wellbeing. It doesn't matter what you choose but **make time for activities which you enjoy.**

DO MORE OF WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY

SPORT, PAINTING AND DRAWING, MAKING THINGS, READING, SOLVING MENTAL PUZZLES...
WHAT DO YOU LOVE TO DO?



Be ambitious

What activities that you love to do could you do whilst you are at sea? Try to think of a range of activities, some which may be quiet and solitary and others which may be more active or can be done with others.



Plan ahead

for your next voyage and take the materials with you that you need; whether it is for creative projects or games, puzzle books, or a library of DVDs on your hard drive.



Enhance the effect

of the pleasurable activities you do:

- Schedule time for pleasurable activities in advance, so you can look forward to them
- Savour the moment when you are involved
- Remember it later or tell others about it

GRATITUDE

Research suggests that gratitude is particularly important. Studies have shown that fostering a sense of gratitude enhances our wellbeing and reduces depression and anxiety. Below are some ideas where gratitude could have a positive impact on how you're feeling:



- Three Good Things⁶

Every night for the next week, set aside ten minutes before you go to sleep, at the end of a shift or after a meal. Write down three things that went well today and why they went well. You can use a pen and paper, your phone or computer to write about the events, but it is important to keep a physical record. The three things can be small things or they can be important things, it doesn't matter. Writing about why the positive events in our life happened may seem awkward at first, but please stick with it for one week. It **will** get easier. The odds are that you will be less depressed, happier, and addicted to this exercise six months from now.



- Stop and count your blessings

When we're busy, or we're not feeling at our best, we often take for granted the good things in our life. It's important to give some attention to thoughts about what we treasure. At any moment of the day, just notice what you appreciate around you. Perhaps the sunset over the sea is breath-taking or you have a pod of dolphins swimming alongside the ship. It may be something like having work that means you can provide for your family at home, or simply a good cup of coffee.



- Express Gratitude

Make a point of saying thank you to people who are important, kind or helpful to you.



- The gratitude Letter / Visit⁶

Can you think of someone who did or said something that has made a positive difference to your life in some way? It may be someone who you never properly thanked, or maybe they don't know what difference they made. Your task is to write a letter of gratitude to this individual. The letter should be specific about what they did or said that made a difference to you and how it has affected your life. If possible, send it to them or even better, arrange to visit them and read it to them.



FLOW

Have you ever... been lost in the moment, entirely present, completely in the zone, on a roll, wired in, in the groove, on fire, in tune, centred, or so focused that you lose a sense of yourself and of time passing?

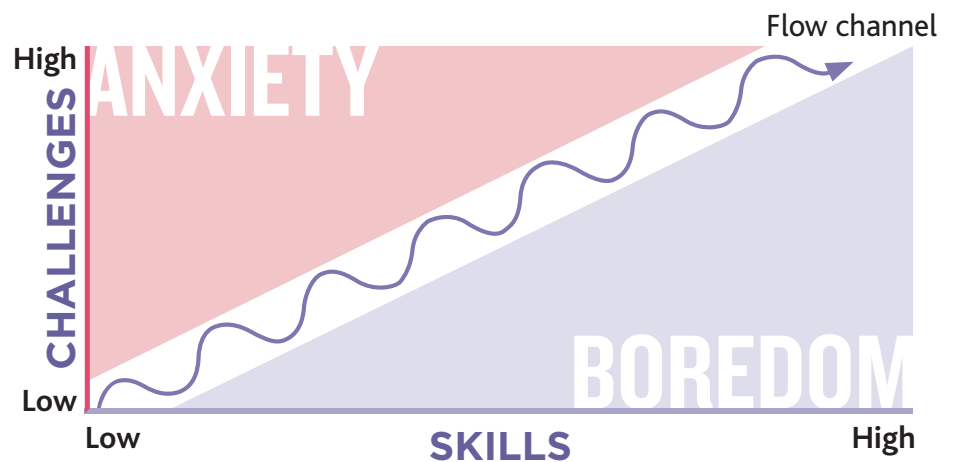
This is

Flow

The times we are happiest are when we are in *Flow*.

Flow activities that have this effect are those that you enjoy just for the sake of doing them, but are also challenging....they involve achieving something and stretching your skills and so they give you a long lasting sense of personal development and satisfaction.

"The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something we make happen."
(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.3)



Can you think of examples of *Flow* activities?

Research now suggests that engaging in *Flow* activities not only gives you pleasure while you are doing them; but also leads to a happier life, a sense of achievement and personal development and higher satisfaction with life in the long term.

We're all different.... We all have a unique combination of talents and skills....

- Have you ever experienced a sense of *Flow*? What activities give you a sense of *Flow*?
- How can you increase the amount of time you spend doing *Flow* activities that give you a sense of satisfaction?
- Could you make *Flow* a regular feature of your life?

POSITIVE RELATIONS WITH OTHERS

The times when we are truly happy or joyful often involve other people. Relationships are an essential part of our psychological wellbeing. Close confiding relationships have a very significant impact on your mental health and even how long you will live. Social isolation has increasingly been identified as problematic for seafarers and so it is not surprising that if people feel isolated their wellbeing is likely to be affected. This means that nurturing our relationships with friends and family at home and connecting with the people around is important.

FRIENDS AND FAMILY

One of the most pressing concerns for seafarers is being away from the people who are most important to you. Communication is not always easy and often depends on time differences, the connectivity on board and how much shore leave you have. It is important to remember that more communication is not necessarily better communication. Decide how much and how often you can talk or skype or email. Try to discuss and agree your expectations of each other before you go away.



What ways can you nurture your relationships with people who are important to you?



How can you be part of family celebrations and events, even when you aren't there?



What does your family need from you, when you are at home and when you are away?



What do you need from them, when you are at home and when you are away?



SeafarerHelp
The lifeline for seafarers

SeafarerHelp: The lifeline for seafarers

If you or a family member want to talk through a problem you're dealing with at home or at sea, SeafarerHelp is here for as long as you need.

Call now on: **+44 20 7323 2737**

Email: **help@seafarerhelp.org**

Live chat: **www.seafarerhelp.org**

Free, confidential, multilingual helpline for seafarers and their families available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year.

If you don't have regular access to phone, email or social media, try getting into the habit of writing letters to send and receive at your next port. This can keep your sense of connection with family and friends even if you aren't able to make immediate contact. Although it may seem old fashioned, people take more time over a card or letter and it can feel more special to receive communication that way.

Remember: if you have children, your partner is a single parent whilst you are away and they have to manage all the problems of daily life. Coping when the roof leaks or the children are having problems at school can be difficult. Try to be understanding if you are faced with a barrage of complaints that you can't do anything to help with. Try to listen and sympathise. Although it is tempting to feel that you should be able to solve the problem, often it is someone who will listen and understand that is just as important. Equally, unless your partner has been to sea with you, they probably don't have much sense of what life at sea is like. How long your hours are, how tired you get or how lonely you might feel away from your family. Talking openly with loved ones back home about any difficulties you're experiencing may help you see your options more clearly and may also help to strengthen your relationships. Remember, if you want someone else to talk to, SeafarerHelp is available and their details can be found at the end of the leaflet.

Constantly shifting between different ways of living, from being on your own with a lot of work responsibilities to being back in the family, can be difficult for both you and your family. You may be tired at the end of the voyage and need some time to rest and recover, but your children, parents, friends and partner may all expect you to be as excited to see them as they are to see you. This too needs some discussion, to set expectations and work out how to manage your needs.

COMMUNITY

A sense of community is also an important part of wellbeing. At home, this might be your family, your faith community, your village or locality, or you may have a community built on shared interests or perhaps a virtual community. You might feel that being a seafarer is part of your sense of identity that others don't share, so you can have a sense of community with other seafarers.



What communities do you belong to?

How can you enhance your sense of belonging to your communities?

PEOPLE AROUND US

Whilst community, close friends and family are important; research suggests that just interacting with others is also beneficial for your mental health. A single act of kindness has the biggest impact on our mental wellbeing⁸. Being concerned for others' welfare, doing something nice for someone, helping them, thanking them, being kind or even a simple smile can all contribute to your wellbeing.

Although the ship's crew may be made up of people from different countries and cultures, and everyone has different roles and responsibilities, connecting with the people around you can benefit the wellbeing of everyone on board.

Communal activities are a good way to increase social interaction. Electing a social hub to organise events and activities can be effective or perhaps a couple of people can just try something new.

Maybe the following will help inspire some of your own ideas:



Competitions such as group sports or timed exercise events



Two or multi player computer games



Social events: karaoke, general knowledge quiz nights and movie nights



Shared cultural celebrations and religious feasts. Introduce your crew mates to some of your favourite dishes, music or other entertainment from your home countries



Organise learning programmes or study groups in professional skills, hobbies or perhaps a new language

Don't expect everyone to want to get together, but don't let it stop you if only a small number want to be involved at first. It might not be easy, but investing in building these connections will have a positive impact on your wellbeing and theirs.

⁸ M. E. P. Seligman, T. A. Steen, N. Park, and C. Peterson, "Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions," *American Psychologist* 60 (2005): 410–21..

MEANING AND PURPOSE

Ancient philosophers and modern scientists agree that there are three kinds of life to aspire to –

The Pleasurable Life in which you enjoy day to day pleasures.

The Good Life in which we are aware of our individual strengths and skills and use them to the best of our ability to accomplish our goals and achieve our aims.

The Meaningful Life in which we use our skills, our strengths and our resources in belonging to and serving something that is bigger and more important than ourselves.

Whilst positive emotions, good relationships and doing well in our work or hobbies are all key elements of our psychological wellbeing, we also need to find meaning and purpose in life. Meaning or purpose may be different for each of us and lies in the things that we give greatest value to in our lives. There is considerable evidence that a higher level of spirituality goes hand in hand with greater wellbeing, less mental illness, less substance abuse and more stable marriages as well as better performance at work⁶.

For many people, their religion or faith brings a strong sense of meaning to their lives. It gives them an ethical code to aspire to and live their lives by, it shapes the way they view the world and gives them strength and comfort through difficult times. Practising your faith both alone and with others is important. It can be more difficult to practise your faith if you are at sea but look for opportunities to do so. Take time to keep connected to your faith, go to services if or when you can, spend time alone in prayer or meditation. There are many apps you can download and use offline to support you in your spiritual life. Search for one that suits you. Celebrate your religious feasts and share them with people around you who may not know much about your culture and religion.

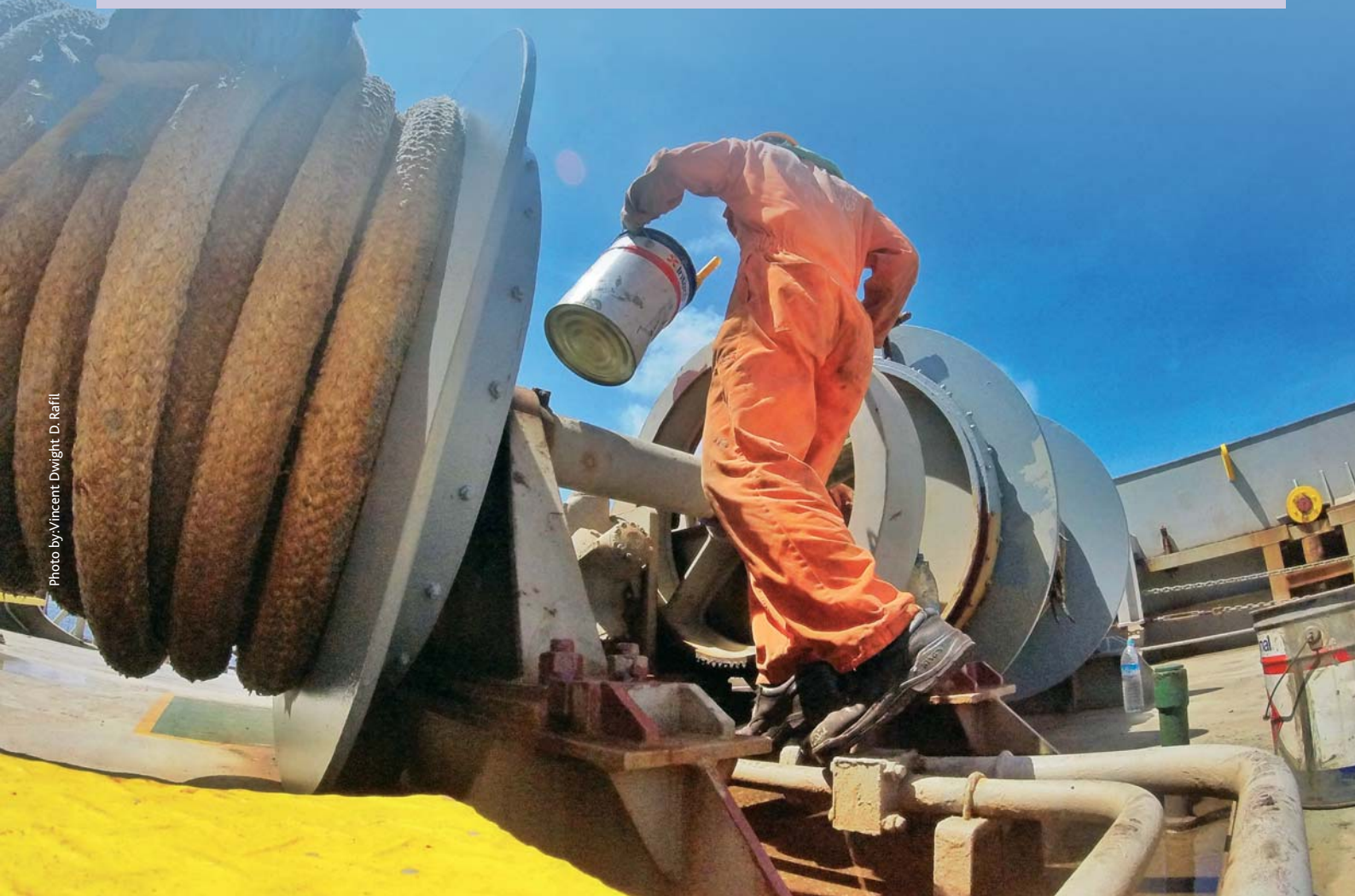
- **When was the last time you sensed profound meaning and purpose?**
- **What were you doing?**
- **Which of your values were most at play during that time?**



Spirituality, meaning and purpose is not confined to people who have a faith. We derive meaning in our lives from many sources such as belonging to a particular political party, being concerned about the environment and our families. It relates to our core beliefs, principles and the values which motivate us in our work and how we live our lives. A purposeful life is one in which we live in ways that fit with our values and what is most important to us.

Often the things we get stressed about, care about or are more passionate about, all point to the things we give most value to. **Becoming more aware of the reasons we do what we do, or what we feel strongly about can give us a greater sense of fulfilment and wellbeing.** For example, your work may be something you choose to do because you can support your family best in that way.

- What is the most important thing in your life?
- What are the top 5 most important things in your life?
- How much priority do you give them?
- Do you give them the time and attention they deserve?
- If you gave the most important things in your life more priority – what would that look like?
- What difference would it make to you?




ACCOMPLISHMENT

A sense of accomplishment can contribute a great deal to our overall happiness. However, we often overlook the things that we achieve. Once we reach our goals we can soon discount them as unimportant. Paying attention to our achievements, and new goals we can work towards, can have a very positive impact on our wellbeing. A seafarer's time away at sea may be a good opportunity to work towards personal goals, either long term or short term. They could be related to anything, for example, reaching a certain level of fitness or acquiring a new qualification.


- **Think about goals that you can work towards on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis on board. Make sure they are clear and well defined.**
- **Break your goals down into achievable steps or actions.**
- **Schedule the time to work on each step or put it into action.**
- **Track and review your progress, note down what you have achieved.**

If you are not making progress, don't give up! Review your goal... are you focusing on the things that are important to you? Are the actions you've set achievable? How can you adjust what you are doing to work better?

At age 120, when your life is made into a film, what will be your 10 proudest achievements or your fondest memories?⁹



How many of those achievements are already in your past today?




What will you do today to get closer to making the rest of them real?

STRENGTHS

Your strengths (for example talents, knowledge and skills) help you succeed in any situation, whether it is personal, social or professional. They help you to complete tasks, form relationships with others and achieve your goals. Everyone has different strengths and different strengths are beneficial for a range of situations. You may not be fully aware of all of your strengths but taking some time to identify where your strengths lie can help you know when and how best to use them.

First identify your 'signature strengths'...

- a. Think about your past accomplishments. They may be large or small, or challenges that you have overcome. What were the personal strengths that helped make those achievements?
- b. What do you consider your greatest strengths?
- c. If you have good internet access the VIA Survey of Character Strengths is available online  [click here](#). It asks 250 questions and gives you a personalised breakdown of your top 5 character strengths. A brief version of strengths is available on the same website.

Then:

During the next week set aside a time when you will use one of your top 5 strengths in a new and different way. Take some time to think about how you can do it. Afterwards write down how you felt doing that, was it easy or difficult? Did you enjoy it? Will you carry out this exercise again?



PHYSICAL HEALTH

All seafarers know that remaining fit and healthy is essential to their career at sea, but it is also essential for our psychological wellbeing. Three key areas we can focus on to become fitter and maintain a healthy body are exercising regularly, eating healthily and ensuring we get enough rest.



EXERCISE

Like many workers ashore, seafarers can lead very sedentary lives, but seafarers are generally more limited in the ways they can exercise. All the same, it is still possible to keep active at sea. Here are some general tips:

- Aim to do 30 minutes of exercise a day in addition to any other physical activity which is part of your normal routine.
- There are many exercises you can do in a small space, or with limited equipment.

[Click here](#)

- Get some inspiration from the following:

a. Workout Plans & track your fitness

[Click here](#)

b. Fitness on board guidance

[Click here](#)

c. Sailors Society Wellness at Sea Mobile App

[Click here](#)

Support can help: ask if any of your crew mates would like to exercise together to help motivate each other. Team sports are great if you have the space.



DIET

It is also important you pay attention to your diet on board (and when you get home!). A balanced diet is key.

Some general tips:

- Eat plenty of fruit (3 servings per day) and vegetables (approx. 300g per day)
- Favour lean meats, fish, lentils and beans over red meat
- Reduce fats, sugar and salt
- Drink plenty of safe drinking water

To find more information on healthy eating

[Click here](#)



REST

Finally, fatigue has been recognised as a significant problem for seafarers and a recent report¹⁰ is spurring the industry into action. It is important to be aware that seafarers are entitled to the proper rest periods (a minimum of 10 hours in any 24 hour period¹¹). Are you getting enough good quality sleep? Are you able to make the most of rest times?

¹⁰ Project Martha: the final report (2017) retrieved from www.warsashacademy.co.uk/about/resources/martha-final-report.pdf

¹¹ Maritime Labour Convention 2006 (MLC 2006) Regulation 2.3, Hours of work and rest.

FINDING SUPPORT

Everything in our lives has an impact on our mental state. If things are generally going well, and we have good relationships, fulfilling work, enough money to pay our bills and so on, then things are OK. But if things are not going so well and we have problems in one or more area of our lives then we can start to feel worried or down.

Human emotions are natural and normal, they indicate to us when something is amiss and lead us to rectify the situation. Worry kick-starts us into problem solving, anxiety leads us to think about how to prevent a problem which we anticipate, sadness helps us come to terms with a loss in our lives.

Remember; throughout the course of our lives we all feel a range of positive and negative emotions. One of the ways we manage our problems and our emotional response on a day-to-day basis is to talk to our friends and family or the people we work with. We don't even really think about it. That kind of normal everyday sharing helps us to gain perspective and process events and experiences and if there is a problem to be solved it might help us to come up with a solution. Your opportunities for that normal everyday interaction may be limited at sea.



Try writing – it can really help. Writing can help you identify what is affecting your wellbeing, and writing about any problems you're facing can help give you a sense of perspective in the same way that talking can.



Be kind and compassionate to yourself. Quieten the critical voice - what would you say to someone you love in this situation?



Some self-help strategies are available in our guide Steps to Positive Mental Health:

[Click here](#)



Prepare for your time in port by locating local welfare organisations. If you're unable to leave the ship, there may be a ship visitor who can bring you whatever you need. Take a look at our directory:

[Click here](#)

or download the Shoreleave App

Sometimes things can get on top of us. We can start to feel overwhelmed by problems and we can't see a way forward. If you are worried about yourself or someone else – help is available.



Contact SeafarerHelp 24 hours a day – 365 days per year. Our multilingual team is here for you for as long as you need. Everything you tell us will be kept confidential, and we will not pass your details on to anyone else if you don't want us to.

Visit the website: www.seafarerhelp.org to find out how to get in touch or request a call back from **+44 207 323 2737**

