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Θέμα: Mental health issues at sea: recent studies on seafarer wellbeing.

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ΘΕΜΑ

Mental health issues at sea: recent studies on seafarer wellbeing.

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ABSTRACT

The sea is emotion incarnate. It loves, hates, and weeps. It defies all attempts to capture it with words and rejects all shackles. No matter what you say about it, there is always that which you can't.”- Christopher Paolini, Eragon (Schmidt, 2014).

The aim of this work is to establish if mental health is affected by life on board.

Firstly, it presents the meaning of mental health, the early warning signs. Secondly, it presents what mental illness is and how to cope with it. Last but not least, it presents recent studies on seafarer well-being.

Key words: mental health, mental illness, seafarer, wellbeing, recent studies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Life at sea is known for its harsh conditions – both physically and mentally (Blake, 2017).

Mental health is a level of psychological well-being or an absence of mental illness - the "psychological state of someone who is functioning at a satisfactory level of emotional and behavioral adjustment".

On the other hand, mental illness is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behavior, resulting in an inability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines.

How can a mental illness have relevance in connection with seafarers? What have the recent studies shown?

This assignment is elaborating the definition of mental health, ways to remain healthy. Also, is analyzing the meaning of mental illness and how all these are connected with seafarers. Concluding, there are some results of recent studies on seafarer wellbeing.

2. DEFINITION OF MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood. Over the course of your life, if you experience mental health problems, your thinking, mood, and behavior could be affected. Many factors contribute to mental health problems, including:

- a) Biological factors, such as genes or brain chemistry
- b) Life experiences, such as trauma or abuse
- c) Family history of mental health problems (Mentalhealth.gov, 2017).

Mental health is essential for a person as he can realize his full potential, cope with the stresses of life, work productively with better results and make meaningful contributions to communities. According to the U.K. surgeon general (1999), mental health is the successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and providing the ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity. The term mental illness refers collectively to all diagnosable mental

disorders- health conditions characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior associated with distress or impaired functioning.

3. WAYS TO REMAIN MENTALLY HEALTHY.

There are countless of ways in order to remain mentally healthy. Namely, some of them are:

1. Getting professional help if it is needed
2. Connecting with others
3. Staying positive
4. Getting physically active
5. Helping others
6. Getting enough sleep
7. Developing coping skills (Mentalhealth.gov, 2017).

4. HOW CAN A MENTAL HEALTH ISSUE BE CONNECTED WITH SEAFARER WELL-BEING.

The World Health Organization (WHO) point out that depression is the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide, and seems to be on the rise. Its figures show that the number of people living with depression increased by over 18% between 2005 and 2015 and that more than 300 million people currently live with depression globally. It is indisputable that some of these people will opt for seafaring as a career path, making this an extremely important issue for us as an industry.

One of the biggest obstacles to be overcome is the negative stereotypes around mental health, which act as a barrier to open discussions of the problems and possible solutions. After all, who would want to talk to friends or an employer about their depression or seek help if they might be labelled “crazy” or “unstable”? Or even worse, if it could cost them their job? But this silence can have deadly consequences.

A recent crew welfare roundtable held by Safety at Sea and UK P&I, revealed that suicide rates among seafarers appear to be on the increase. The UK P&I insurance claim data suggested that 2016 accounted for a quarter of the number of suicide-related cases it has dealt with in the last decade. While

the data is not definitive evidence it is an indicator of a problem getting worse.

Other studies show similarly worrying data. A recently published study by the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC) found there has been an increase in psychiatric disorders amongst seafarers over the last five years. In 2011, responses to the SIRC questionnaire completed by 1026 seafarers indicated that 28% of respondents had some form of 'psychiatric disorder'. In 2016, the questionnaire, completed by 1513 seafarers, revealed respondents suffering from a 'psychiatric disorder' had risen "substantially" to 37%.

Furthermore, seafarers were more likely to say they were less healthy than they were in 2011, despite fewer seafarers on board actually being diagnosed with a specific medical problem. The report suggested that this could be due to a reported increase of fatigue and mental health problems, which could make crew feel less healthy in general.

As Black stresses, creating an open discourse about seafarer health is needed, just as it is onshore, so that awareness can improve and better mental health provisions and work policies to support and protect crew can

be put in place. These could range from having designated officers with training in mental health to improvements in recreation and leisure facilities on board. SIRC's Helen Sampson suggested that greater access to shore leave and more attention to "the elimination of environmental and work-related impediments to sleep" would all contribute to better seafarer mental health.

Safety at Sea wants to build a better picture of the mental health of the average seafarer, with the aim of sharing this valuable information with wider industry, including senior management that makes investment decisions. This information could shape the paths that investments in crew take and will act as a vital health check on the seafarers that are the lifeblood of the sector. It is important to share your experiences with mental health at sea. Also, a "no-blame" culture should be developed that encourages such sharings.

Mental health resources are available from Seafarers Hospital Society & Big White Walland Seafarer Helpline. If a seafarer feels the need to speak to someone urgently, they can contact Samaritans or Befrienders Worldwide. (Blake, 2017)

5. DEFINITION OF MENTAL ILLNESS.

A mental illness is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behavior, resulting in an inability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines.

There are more than 200 classified forms of mental illness. Some of the more common disorders are depression, bipolar disorder, dementia, schizophrenia and anxiety disorders. Symptoms may include changes in mood, personality, personal habits and/or social withdrawal.

Mental health problems may be related to excessive stress due to a particular situation or series of events. As with cancer, diabetes and heart disease, mental illnesses are often physical as well as emotional and psychological. Mental illnesses may be caused by a reaction to environmental stresses, genetic factors, biochemical imbalances, or a combination of these. With proper care and treatment many individuals learn to cope or recover from a mental illness or emotional disorder.

6. EARLY WARNING SIGNS

How can we understand that something is going wrong? There are narrowed down some early signs which are:

1. Eating or sleeping too much or too little
2. Pulling away from people and usual activities
3. Having low or no energy
4. Feeling numb as if nothing matters
5. Having unexplained aches and pains
6. Feeling helpless or hopeless
7. Smoking, drinking, or using drugs more than usual
8. Feeling unusually confused, forgetful, angry, upset, worried, or scared
9. Yelling/ fighting with family, friends, co- workers
10. Having persistent and unpleasant thoughts or memories you can not get out of your head
11. Hearing voices or believing things that are not true
12. Thinking of harming yourself or others
13. Inability to perform daily tasks like getting to work.

From personal experience, a vast majority of seafarers on board, due to the lack of proper rest or other factors such as problems that occurred with

senior officers or family affairs, experience problems related to mental health. Such problems have a gargantuan effect on the seafarers on board. This can affect the efficiency of the seamen at work or it can even lead as a corrugated effect to a marine accident such as Exxon-Valdez or Prestige.

7. TYPES OF MENTAL ILLNESSES

According to Golberg J. (2016): “there are many different conditions that are recognized as mental illnesses. The more common types include:

1. Anxiety disorders: People with anxiety disorders respond to certain objects or situations with fear and dread, as well as with physical signs of anxiety or panic, such as a rapid heartbeat and sweating. An anxiety disorder is diagnosed if the person's response is not appropriate for the situation, if the person cannot control the response, or if the anxiety interferes with normal functioning. Anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, and specific phobias.
2. Mood disorders: These disorders, also called affective disorders, involve persistent feelings of sadness or periods of feeling overly happy, or fluctuations from extreme happiness to extreme sadness. The most common mood disorders are depression, bipolar disorder, and cyclothymic disorder.
3. Psychotic disorders: Psychotic disorders involve distorted awareness and thinking. Two of the most common symptoms of psychotic disorders are hallucinations -- the experience of images or sounds that are not real, such as hearing voices -- and delusions, which are false

fixed beliefs that the ill person accepts as true, despite evidence to the contrary. Schizophrenia is an example of a psychotic disorder.

4. Eating disorders: Eating disorders involve extreme emotions, attitudes, and behaviors involving weight and food. Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder are the most common eating disorders.
5. Impulse control and addiction disorders: People with impulse control disorders are unable to resist urges, or impulses, to perform acts that could be harmful to themselves or others. Pyromania (starting fires), kleptomania (stealing), and compulsive gambling are examples of impulse control disorders. Alcohol and drug are common objects of addictions. Often, people with these disorders become so involved with the objects of their addiction that they begin to ignore responsibilities and relationships.
6. Personality disorders: People with personality disorders have extreme and inflexible personality traits that are distressing to the person and/or cause problems in work, school, or social relationships. In addition, the person's patterns of thinking and behavior significantly differ from the expectations of society and are so rigid that they interfere with the person's normal functioning. Examples include

antisocial personality disorder, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, and paranoid personality disorder.

7. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD): People with OCD are plagued by constant thoughts or fears that cause them to perform certain rituals or routines. The disturbing thoughts are called obsessions, and the rituals are called compulsions. An example is a person with an unreasonable fear of germs who constantly washes his or her hands.
8. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): PTSD is a condition that can develop following a traumatic and/or terrifying event, such as a sexual or physical assault, the unexpected death of a loved one, or a natural disaster. People with PTSD often have lasting and frightening thoughts and memories of the event, and tend to be emotionally numb.

Other, less common types of mental illnesses include:

1. Stress response syndromes (formerly called adjustment disorders):
Stress response syndromes occur when a person develops emotional or behavioral symptoms in response to a stressful event or situation. The stressors may include natural disasters, such as an earthquake or tornado; events or crises, such as a car accident or the diagnosis of a major illness; or interpersonal problems, such as a divorce, death of a loved one, loss of a job, or a problem with substance abuse. Stress

response syndromes usually begin within three months of the event or situation and ends within six months after the stressor stops or is eliminated.

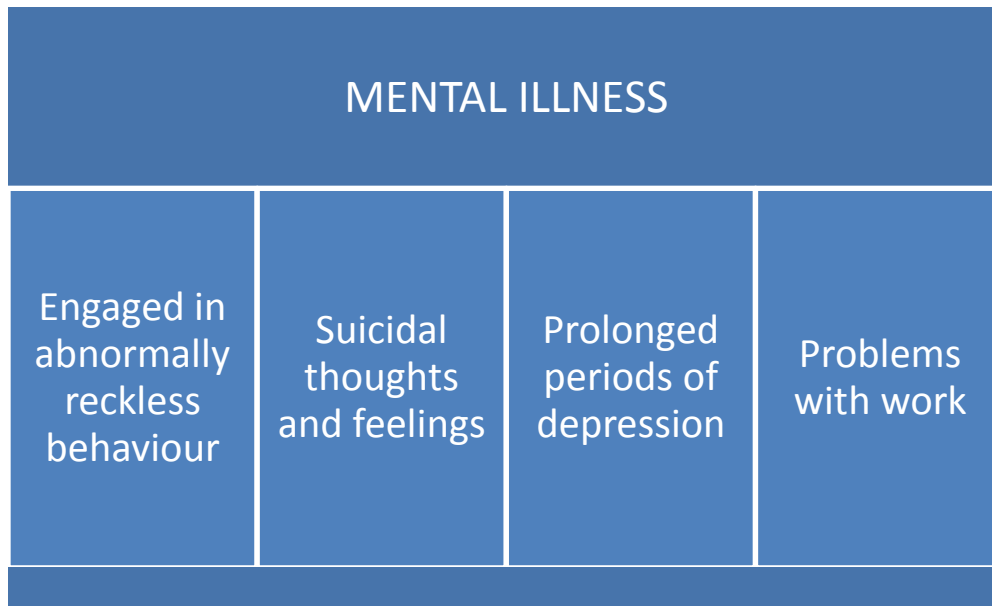
2. Dissociative disorders: People with these disorders suffer severe disturbances or changes in memory, consciousness, identity, and general awareness of themselves and their surroundings. These disorders usually are associated with overwhelming stress, which may be the result of traumatic events, accidents, or disasters that may be experienced or witnessed by the individual. Dissociative identity disorder, formerly called multiple personality disorder, or "split personality," and depersonalization disorder are examples of dissociative disorders.
3. Factitious disorders: Factitious disorders are conditions in which a person knowingly and intentionally creates or complains of physical and/or emotional symptoms in order to place the individual in the role of a patient or a person in need of help.
4. Sexual and gender disorders: These include disorders that affect sexual desire, performance, and behavior. Sexual dysfunction, gender identity disorder are examples of sexual and gender disorders.

5. Somatic symptom disorders: A person with a somatic symptom disorder, formerly known as a psychosomatic disorder or somatoform disorder, experiences physical symptoms of an illness or of pain with an excessive and disproportionate level of distress, regardless of whether or not a doctor can find a medical cause for the symptoms.
6. Tic disorders: People with tic disorders make sounds or display nonpurposeful body movements that are repeated, quick, sudden, and/or uncontrollable. (Sounds that are made involuntarily are called vocal tics.) Tourette's syndrome is an example of a tic disorder.

Other diseases or conditions, including various sleep-related problems and many forms of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, are sometimes classified as mental illnesses, because they involve the brain.”

8. CHARACTERISTICS

How can we recognize a person who maybe is mentally ill?



Much more specific, mental illness manifests itself in Adults, Young Adults and Adolescents through:

- I. Confused thinking
- II. Prolonged depression (sadness or irritability)
- III. Feelings of extreme highs and lows
- IV. Excessive fears, worries and anxieties
- V. Social withdrawal
- VI. Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits

- VII. Strong feelings of anger
- VIII. Strange thoughts (delusions)
- IX. Seeing or hearing things that aren't there (hallucinations)
- X. Growing inability to cope with daily problems and activities
- XI. Suicidal thoughts
- XII. Numerous unexplained physical ailments
- XIII. Substance use

9. HOW TO COPE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS



As we see on the chart above an important step in coping with mental illness is to accept your feelings and learn ways of handling unusual behaviour. What helps is also to establish a supportive network comprised of family, friends or health professionals. It is vital to seek counseling and take a time out from your daily routine to face the problem.

10. RECENT STUDIES ON SEAFARER WELLBEING

According to Health Promotion International, have been conducted several researches about seafarer wellbeing. Recent studies from Poland, France, Norway and Germany have indeed reported that cardiovascular risk factors such as high blood pressure, high triglycerides, diabetes and obesity as well as behavioral risk factors such as smoking and physical inactivity are highly prevalent in seafarers (Filikowski, 2003 Geving, 2007, Oldenburg et, 2008, Fort, 2009, Oldenburg, 2010). Further evidence is thus needed in this area, in particular studies which take into account mitigating factors. While different occupations within seafaring might share many features which in general set them apart from occupations on land, there are also many crucial differences within the seafaring business. Thus, work places on board differ depending on the general type of vessels, such as cargo and container ships, tankers, coasters, passenger ships, etc. and the work demands they involve, but also the more specific physical and social environments in terms of availability of leisure time facilities including exercise space and equipment, food provisions or smoking regulations. These specific settings are likely to provide dissimilar opportunities or discouragements for healthy or unhealthy lifestyles and thus might create important variance in health risks within the seafaring occupation. Another important differentiating factor might be

related to the educational and occupational status of the employees themselves.

The results had shown that forty-four percent of the seafarers stated that they were daily smokers. Within this group of daily smokers, 6% were light smokers (1–5 cigarettes), another 8 and 15% each smoked between 6–10 and 11–15 cigarettes a day, while the large majority, i.e. 71%, smoked >15 cigarettes per day, and thus could be considered heavy smokers. Looking at occupational status, the results showed that non-officers were significantly more likely than officers to be daily smokers. Also, they reported a high frequency consuming sweets, cake and sugared sodas. There were no significant differences between professional status groups or work places. The results further showed that only 25% of the seafarers were of normal weight. Last, but not least, one-third of the respondents reported having a largely sedentary occupation, another third that they had a job mostly requiring standing and walking, while the last third described their job as involving standing, walking and some lifting or weight bearing. Only a very small minority of ~1% said their job required very hard physical efforts. As for leisure time exercise, 32% claimed to do fitness training three times a week or more at sea versus only 24% at home, however, this difference was

not significant. In both settings at home and at sea, nearly one half (49%) exercised less than once a week or never.

How can seafarers wellbeing be boosted?

“Digital connectivity at sea has been one of the major talking points of the decade in the maritime industry, which has been slow to adopt technology enabling improvements in connectivity across the world’s commercial fleet,” said Dr Rikke Bjerg Jensen, one of the principal researchers from University of London. “While several studies have used surveys to try to establish the rate of these improvements and their wide-ranging implications, none - to our knowledge - has taken observations of crew behavior and conversations with seafarers as their starting point.” The results revealed the importance of reliable connectivity and the impact it has on mental well-being, operational efficiency and safety, as well as its critical role in attracting new talent to the industry. The report showed that access to Wi-Fi aboard ships - even if limited - helped reduce some of the emotional stresses that come with separation from families.

However, the research also showed that where there were weekly limits of connectivity, this forced seafarers to ration their allowance to certain periods

or to prioritize contact with friends. Restricting usage also meant that domestic issues could not be resolved immediately or in real time, adding to personal stress or anxiety. The ability to connect with family on a regular basis while away was also understood to ease transition into home life when returning from sea. In particular, being in frequent contact allowed people to keep up to date with everyday activities at home, minimizing the feeling that they were missing out on important life events.

In addition, one of the report's key findings was how connectivity is becoming a significant factor in recruitment, particularly for those entering the industry. Young people - who have been brought up with constant connectivity - are viewing an ability to get online as a significant deciding factor as to whether they commit to a career at sea. Many study participants said that they (or their colleagues) would view the quality of on-board connectivity as a key factor in future decisions about where to work.

One of the historic arguments from ship owners for not providing on-board connectivity has been that it disrupts work and rest patterns. However, this research shows that not having reliable on-board internet can impact such

patterns. It found that if the only method of digitally engaging with kin and friendship networks is through personal mobile phones, seafarers would connect when the ship was within mobile signal range, regardless of the time of day, external factors, work or rest hours. "Sometimes you don't want to go to sleep because there is a chance that you will have [a] mobile phone signal," one participant said.

“This study offers valuable insights into the huge impact that connectivity can have on seafarers’ well-being, which is of vast importance to the maritime industry,” said Sailors’ Society CEO Stuart Rivers. "We all have a duty of care to those who are the foundation of our businesses – and with mental health playing a key role in their decision-making abilities, if we neglect that duty the consequences can be deadly and costly.

11. INFERENCES ON THE STUDIES

To conclude, the response rate was only 43% for the health profile and 57% for the questionnaire survey. Two types of selection bias might be associated with this limited participation rate. For one, there might be an overrepresentation of more experienced and job-secure seafarers (officers), however, according to project managers of both companies, the distribution of gender, age and rank among the respondents reflected the actual division among the seafaring personnel. The second, and more serious, issue is that it is seafarers in better health and with more favorable health behaviors who are more likely to have taken part. This would imply that a more complete representation of all employees would have generated an even more alarming picture of their health status. Likewise, social desirability tendencies may have affected. As for measurement, the assessment of eating behaviors was based on very general single items, which are bound to generate less valid reports than more elaborate measures, such as food diaries.

The results, at most of the studies, indicate possibilities for improvement of the seafarers' lifestyle behavior and actions are recommended to promote healthy lifestyle. Suggestions about such actions include interventions on smoking cessation, systematic education of those who provide the food on

board, i.e. cooking classes for ship cooks as well as creation of attractive exercise facilities and physical activity programs to promote recommended activity levels. To stimulate and maintain such preventive action requires individual awareness about the necessity of behavior change, but if shipping companies aim to expedite a successful turnaround they also need to consider creating an infrastructure that would enable and support such individual behavior change.

12.EPILOGUE

Mental health is essential for a person as he can realize his full potential, cope with the stresses of life, work productively with better results and make meaningful contributions to communities. When the mental health of each individual is not protected, he is forced to deal with mental issues. Life at sea is most of the times related with mental issues.

To stimulate and maintain a better mental health, individual awareness about the necessity of behavior change is required. But, if shipping companies aim to expedite a successful turnaround they also need to consider creating an infrastructure that would enable and support such individual behavior change.

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