

WELCOME TO WELLNESS AT SEA CYCLE 3: WEEKS 7-9



Dear Friend,

How are you doing? I trust that you've found the information that we've shared up to now meaningful and that you now feel confident to reach out to our crisis response team should you feel the need.

These are challenging times for us all. The current pandemic has plunged the world into uncertainty and it is only natural to feel stressed, concerned, angry or anxious.

Unlike before, this letter is addressed to every seafarer, family member or member of shore staff out there because, we are all in this together. Also, it is important to recognise that we are all experiencing unique challenges. At sea, at home or in the office - mental health is relevant to every one of us.

Over the next few weeks, we want to partner with you to talk, discover and learn about mental health. Positive mental health allows us to realise our full potential, cope with the stresses of life, work productively and make meaningful contributions to our communities.

As a starting point to this discussion we want to achieve four things in this cycle:

1. Help you understand what we mean by the term 'mental health'. We use it very generally, so having a clear definition is vital to our understanding.
2. Agree on what is myth and what is fact - our ideas about mental health are often misplaced and this can be detrimental to our understanding and ability to have meaningful conversations about mental health.
3. Share a few tips for coping with anxiety and fear brought about by the pandemic we are currently facing.
4. Encourage you to join a Peer Support Group. We are not for a moment suggesting that there is something wrong! But mental health at its heart suggests a positive state of being and our Peer Support Groups are all about supporting one another so that we can stay healthy.

So let's kick off our discussion! We're looking forward to talking, discovering and learning with you.



Johan Smith
Sailors' Society's Wellness at Sea programme manager

MENTAL HEALTH VS MENTAL ILLNESS?

What is mental health?

Mental health encompasses our emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. It influences how we think, feel and act. It is a key factor in how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices.

What is mental illness?

It is when someone lacks the ability to manage day-to-day events and/or control their behaviour so that basic physical, social and emotional needs are threatened or unmet.

WHAT COMMON MYTHS ARE THERE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH?

1. Myth: "Mental health problems are very rare."

1 in 4 people will be affected by mental health illness at some point in their lifetime.

2. Myth: "I don't know anyone struggling with their mental health."

Someone you know, working with you or in your family, may well have experienced a mental health issue.

3. Myth: "Mental illness is the result of bad parenting."

Mental health is the result of a complex number of emotional, physical, environmental, biological and psychological factors.

4. "People do not recover from mental health problems."

People can and do recover from mental illness - and in many cases they come back much stronger.

5. "It won't happen to me."

Mental health does not discriminate on age, race, gender or background. It can happen to anyone.

MENTAL HEALTH IN A TIME OF COVID-19

HELPING YOU COPE WITH THE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT OF COVID-19

Here are our top ten tips:

1. Challenge your self-talk:

The way we think influences the way we feel and can result in anxious, depressed and out-of-control feelings. These worse-case feelings often exaggerate danger and underestimate your ability to handle it. Be conscious of your thoughts and steer them in a positive direction.

2. Plan worry time:

Not worrying is easier said than done! Schedule ten minutes of 'worry time', indulging in all your concerns. Write them down or give them a name, as verbalising your fears can help alleviate them. Once this is done, make a conscious effort to substitute worrying thoughts with positive memories. If this is hard, identify your fear, make a mental note of it and schedule some 'worry time' to handle it. Now shift your focus.

3. Facts minimise fear:

With headlines blaring at us and media outlets competing to break the news first, having the right facts is crucial. Misinformation catapults anxiety. Seek information from reliable sources and use it so that you can take steps to protect yourself and those around you. Look for information updates at specific times to avoid feeling overwhelmed or confused and consider muting some of your social media channels.

4. Take a social media holiday:

While social media is a great for keeping connected to our families, it can be detrimental when everyone is in panic mode and intensify our feelings of missing out on family events. Take a break for a few hours or even a day and try to see some beauty in the situation that you are in.

5. Strike up a conversation:

With the global nature of the coronavirus, chances are that people around you are experiencing the same thing. Talk to them and express your anxieties and fears. Knowing that you are not alone can do a great deal! Be a 'change agent' by shifting the narrative on your vessel from the number of deaths toward the number of recoveries.

6. Slow breathing:

Anxiousness causes faster and shallower breathing. Try to take a short break from what you are doing and intentionally slow your breathing. Count to five while inhaling slowly – and then do a countdown as you blow out your breath.

7. Muscle relaxation exercises:

Find a quiet and peaceful place. With closed eyes, start from your toes and slowly tense and relax each of your muscle groups from your toes to your head. Hold the tension for a count of five seconds and then slowly release it, by again counting to five. Muscle tension is often a sign of anxiety and dealing with this helps release your fears. You may also find meditation or prayer helpful. Meditation apps such as Calm and Headspace have both released free digital sessions or you could participate in an online worship service.

8. Keep in mind that you are more than your emotions:

Your social, emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual wellness play a role in your mental health. If you have free time between shifts, consider each of these aspects and think how they can assist you with a positive outlook.

9. Body and mind work together:

Try to eat healthily and make time to exercise. Take a run or a walk on the deck. Exercise releases endorphins in your bloodstream and can elevate your mood.

10. Be kind to yourself:

You are WAY more than your emotions. You are not your fears and anxiety. Give yourself a break. You are of great value!

Remember, you are not alone. Sailors' Society is here to help.

Need help?

Email crisis@sailors-society.org visit www.facebook.com/SailorsSocietyCRN, or go to www.sailors-society.org/helpline

JOIN A WELLNESS AT SEA PEER SUPPORT GROUP

Peer Support Groups are safe spaces where members can swap stories, ask for assistance or advice, and chat about their day-to-day lives and experiences. Through regular contact we hope to build relationships, provide a social support network and promote access to welfare services.

What is the aim of the Wellness at Sea Peer Support Groups?

- To provide a platform where seafarers can support one another
- To build caring seafarer communities through social support networks
- To establish trust relationships between seafarers and group moderators who can assist them on a day-to-day basis
- To enhance access to welfare services by putting seafarers in touch with role players
- To flag possible signs and symptoms of mental health issues and refer any these to our crisis response team
- To give seafarers the peace of mind that expert assistance is just a WhatsApp or Telegram message away

How do these groups work?

- Groups are WhatsApp or Telegram based
- Each group consists of no more than 20 seafarers and a moderator
- Members are asked to comply with a set of group rules, including confidentiality

The moderator will:

- Check the groups daily
- Post wellness-related subject matter twice per week
- Ask prompting questions
- Partake in general conversation
- Provide support and be available for individual chats outside the group
- Refer red flags to our Crisis Response Network or chaplains

HOW DO I JOIN A GROUP?

- Open WhatsApp or Telegram
- Add the Peer Support Group contact: **+27 61 890 5062**
- Send a message saying either '**SEAFARER**', '**FAMILY**' or '**SHORE STAFF**' and your name and surname
- Wait for the moderator to add you to a group