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Columbia – supporting seafarer mental health

Columbia Shipmanagement is providing seafarers and office staff with access to a remote counselling service – and also recognising the importance that good technical management, and good social life onboard, can have to how seafarers feel in these difficult times

Columbia Shipmanagement, one of the world’s largest ship management companies, based in Cyprus, is providing its seafarers and office staff with a free 24 hour remote counselling service, where they can talk through any worries they have, and also mental health concerns.

More broadly, the company recognises there are many factors which can support good seafarer mental wellbeing, including a strong company culture, good organisation, communications with senior managers, as well as good nutrition and focus for socialising onboard.

Counselling service

The counselling service is provided by a Hamburg based company called Mental Health Support and Solutions (MHSS), which specialises in maritime mental health. Seafarers can use the service 24 hours a day, talking to a counsellor via phone, e-mail or WhatsApp.

The service is offered free of charge to all shipboard and offshore personnel. Support is also available in common seafarer languages, via a network of psychologists.

Posters have been placed on ships encouraging people to use the hotline, with messages such as “you are not alone, we are here for you.”

Videos have been created for the crew explaining what the service is for and how they

can take advantage of it.

Providing access to a counsellor is something fairly new for seafarers, says Captain Faouzi Fradi, group Director of Training at Columbia. People have had access to remote medical advice for many years, but that is not the same thing.

In many cases, having someone to talk to about an issue is the most useful part of the service, says Charles Watkins, clinical psychologist with MHSS.

People do not need to give their name or the name of the vessel. They can be provided with mental health tips, or a counsellor can talk through their feelings and explain that they are normal.

Seafarers can be asked what would make them feel better. They can be encouraged to speak to family and friends, and also consider if there is someone who has helped them in the past, in a relationship which can be reactivated. “Encouraging them to talk to someone is the best advice,” Mr Watkins says.

Seafarers might be encouraged to connect more with people onboard. Sometimes the availability of internet communication can discourage people onboard from talking to each other. The counselling can re-emphasise the value of face to face communication, he says.

One of the toughest aspects of the Covid period was difficulties changing seafarers on a

vessel, which meant that many seafarers were staying onboard longer than they had anticipated. “You were looking forward to going home on a certain date and now it is pushed back. Having a stay prolonged is one of the hardest issues for seafarers to handle,” Captain Fradi says.

While the company may not be able to do much when crew are unable to leave a vessel, the counselling service can help. “It is about having the possibility to talk about these things – the anger, sadness, depression, having the ability to get it all out,” Mr Watkins says.

“It is about understanding where these things may come from, helping them get a grasp of what is going on. It is helping them to normalise, bring helpful tips that they may not have thought of.”

Suicide

One of the toughest issues to deal with onboard is when someone is thought to be a suicide risk.

In this case, whoever has the concerns is able to contact the counselling service to talk it through.

It is easy to handle the situation in the wrong way at both extremes, Mr Watkins says. Sometimes such behaviour is thought of as a short-lived emotional outburst which does not warrant further concern. At the other extreme, masters may take drastic action to prevent



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someone from having any capability to harm themselves.

If the issue is discussed with a counsellor, “it is a type of crisis management. There’s a lot of different scenarios,” Mr Watkins says.

“You need to assess if there is a current danger of someone harming themselves, or maybe you just need to take a tactical step, removing sharp objects from the person’s reach.”

“Once the captain realises there’s a threat, we work closely together to make sure the person is getting every help they can.”

Socialising onboard

As a former captain, Captain Fradi says he still misses the environment and ambience onboard. Apart of the heavy workload it can be very relaxing as well, with people having plenty of time to themselves, he says.

On large tankers particularly, “the accommodation space is comfortable and cabins are good. The standards in the whole industry have improved significantly.”

But alcohol, which in former times would have been a good social lubricant, is typically banned or highly restricted on vessels today.

As a replacement for providing a social focus, shipping companies often provide gym or sport equipment. Providing better food, and running

cooking competitions, also gives crew a focus for socialising.

Columbia works with Christian Ioannou, Managing Director of an international maritime catering management and training consultancy called MCTC, which both supplies food and provides training for cooks onboard.

“Things like cooking contests, or newsletters that seafarers write, [support] open communication where ideas are shared,” Mr Watkins says.

“The culture is lived through how you communicate, the ability to know what everyone is doing. Everyone is on the same page. Everyone feels appreciated and valued.”

A better social atmosphere onboard also means that seafarers are more likely to spot if someone else is having mental health difficulties. “It is hard to see psychological problems if people don’t talk to each other,” Captain Fradi says.

Four pillars

More broadly, Captain Fradi sees four “pillars” for maintaining a healthy atmosphere onboard - good technical management, supporting wellbeing onboard, support for mental health (described above), and training.

In terms of good technical management, seafarers are happier in general if there are robust

management systems and procedures, all the necessary spare parts are available, and there is a well-regulated onboard routine, which people can get used to. Seafarers can get familiar with the company policies, and understand how they fit the company culture.

The training provided to seafarers includes advising people on how to help their own mental health. “We have sent a lot of training materials, in the form of videos and computer based training, to all our seafarers to prepare them for this [Covid] crisis,” he says.

Communication with the company is very useful. The company president personally makes short videos every week, separately for seafarers and office staff, giving them an update on the global situation and what Columbia is doing to help make crew changes. One video had over 30,000 views, Captain Fradi says. “This was extremely helpful for the whole staff to get through this pandemic.”

All company top management and directors regularly call ships for a chat with the master, and other staff are also encouraged to talk to the crew.

“Communication will be the key word in this crisis.”

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