



**INTERTANKO**



**Crew Welfare  
Management and  
Mental Wellness  
2nd Edition**

**TWENTY  
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**INTERTANKO**

# **Crew Welfare Management and Mental Wellness**

## **2nd Edition**

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to widespread concerns over its effects on people's lives and employment, while seafarers are also anxious about their families and loved ones back home.

Anxieties about how worrying events may evolve can affect the wellbeing of seafarers. Unpleasant thoughts and feelings can escalate quickly, making it difficult for those on board to find the energy to follow their daily routine and to concentrate on their work tasks. Although seafarers access news and hear stories from home, they may feel disconnected and unable to engage. The resulting impact on their mental wellness and welfare should not be ignored.

If left undetected, or if seafarers do not have the opportunity to process these thoughts and feelings, or have not had the opportunity to develop coping strategies, it is feasible that they can become overwhelmed and potentially suffer from depression or psychosis.

This pandemic has highlighted a need for more guidance on how to manage crew welfare and mental wellness management and, with this in mind, INTERTANKO's Human Element in Shipping Committee (HEiSC) prepared these recommendations, which are written especially, but not exclusively, for crewing managers and shore-side staff.

The guidance includes advice on helping seafarers to deal with emotional stress and overcome negative feelings. While this guidance has been written during the Covid-19 global pandemic, the key principles are applicable at any time.

We would like to extend particular thanks to Eaglestar for allowing HEiSC to use its internal guidance in the development of this document.

### This Document

The advice and recommendations that follow have been developed for the consideration of shore-side staff when providing practical guidance to leadership teams on how to manage crew that may be experiencing stress as a result of prolonged service onboard.

While this guidance is aimed at non-healthcare professionals, if in any doubt, guidance from health professionals should always be sought.

This guidance considers three key areas:

- Understanding Seafarers' Needs
- Advice on Addressing Seafarers' Needs
- Special Focus on Cyber Wellness

In addition to this advice, HEiSC members have provided examples of practices that they have adopted to help ease the hardship associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. This advice can be found in the last section on additional best practices.

## Understanding Seafarers' Needs

In order to prevent emotional and psychological distress in our seafarers, it is useful to understand what their needs might be. Seafarers, like all human beings, need three things: recognition, stimulation and certainty. The graphics in Figures 1 and 2 explain briefly what these needs are and the consequences if such needs are under- or over-fulfilled.

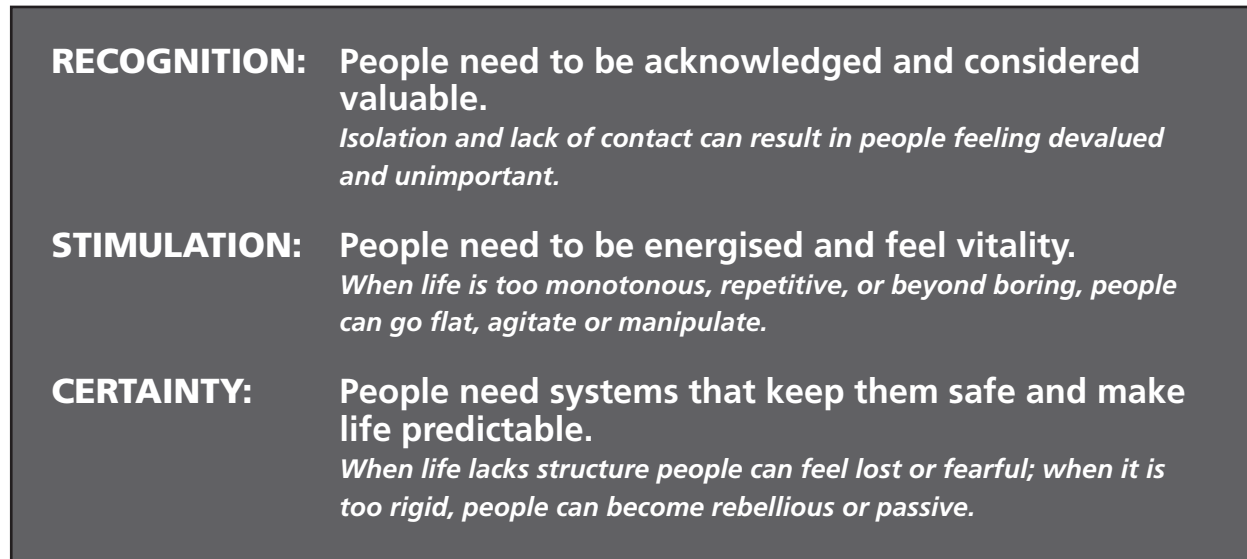


Figure 1. Human Needs (Source: Illsley-Clarke and Dawson, 1998)

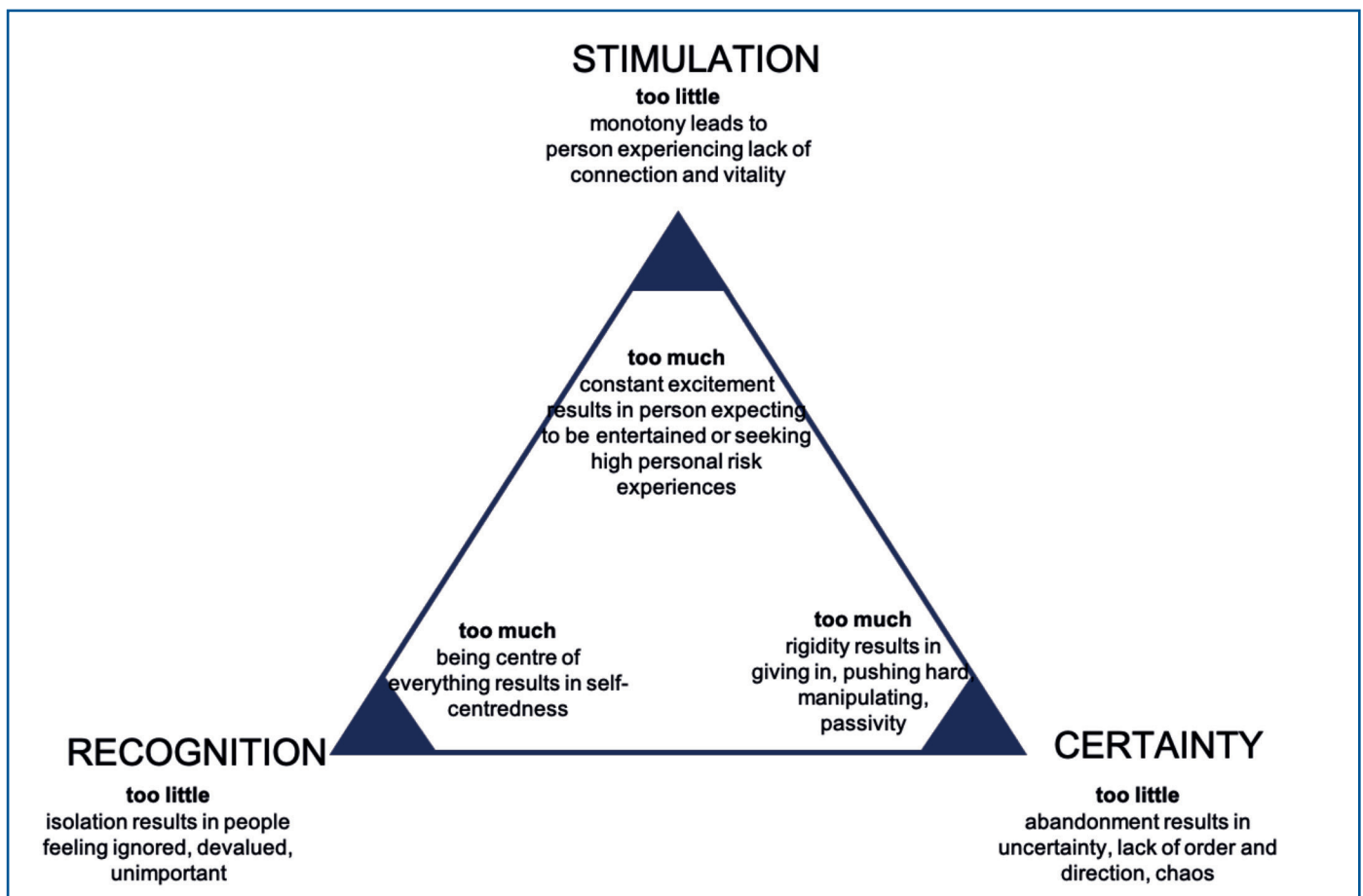


Figure 2. Consequences of over and under-fulfilment of human needs (Source: Illsley-Clarke and Dawson, 1998; p. 18)

### Risks associated with seafaring

Seafaring is an occupation which, by its very nature, is associated with risks to the welfare and mental wellness of the job incumbents. Using the framework of human needs as depicted and considering the situation under normal circumstances and with the added pressure of the global Covid-19 threat, the following identifies the hazards to individuals' welfare and mental wellness associated with seafaring.

#### *Too little recognition*

As a consequence of their working patterns and being at sea, seafarers will have reduced contact with society, their communities, their employer, shore-side management, their loved ones and even their colleagues on-board. Being *out of sight* in this way can also lead to seafarers being *out of mind*.

With a lack of contact, there is a danger that people important to seafarers' wellness will fail to recognise their special circumstances, fail to take into account the difficulties they face, will find it difficult to empathise or understand their wants, and as a result, will fail to make meeting seafarers' needs a priority; for example, granting timely relief to enable a seafarer to be present at the birth of their child.

Too little recognition of seafarers' needs will lead to seafarers feeling a sense that they are unimportant, not valued or even ignored. In the current crisis, their remoteness is heightened, their need for recognition increased and without appropriate attempts to meet their needs, these feelings are likely to be exacerbated.

#### *Too little stimulation*

On-board ship, it is very difficult to recreate the kind of social life that people working ashore enjoy; for example, going to a concert, taking part in a sports team, or meeting with friends for dinner in a restaurant. It is also difficult to pursue many hobbies, although reading, painting and playing music are all possible. A social life is an important source of stimulation and provides variety as well as recuperation from work activities, and having a range of activities to pursue other than work is important for seafarers' welfare.

Nowadays, many ships are 'dry' ships with no or very limited alcohol on-board. In addition, many ships are multi-culturally crewed and so people from vastly different backgrounds are put together. Both factors have reduced the amount of social interaction that takes place on ship, making contact with family through social media increasingly precious and runs ashore an important pressure-release valve.

Without social interaction being encouraged and poor internet communication on-board, the addition of a lack of shore-leave due to the coronavirus means seafarers will be denied access to crucial sources of stimulation. This lack of stimulation may lead to feelings of boredom and a sense that life is becoming increasingly monotonous, which ultimately can lead to a lack of energy and a loss of interest in things, activities and people.

#### *Too much and too little certainty*

Ordinarily, life at sea might be viewed as containing too much certainty, with the working environment being highly proceduralised with many rules and regulations governing what seafarers can and cannot do. However, with *too much* certainty, a lack of personal control and discretion can result – this is not necessarily a good thing. A lack of control can lead to learned helplessness on the one hand and intense frustration or anger on the other.

In contrast to their working environment, seafarers' personal lives, particularly in the current situation, are likely to be associated with *too little* certainty. The coronavirus has had a huge impact on the ability of companies to repatriate their seafarers at the end of their contracts and to give work to those on shore. Consequently, it is very hard to plan and enact crew exchanges, leading to seafarers experiencing a lack of predictability and control over when they will be home, or, when they will be earning.



In addition, the insidious nature of the virus makes it very difficult to know who has been infected and who has not and thus to know the risk posed by visitors to the ship such as pilots and port officials. Undoubtedly, this will increase seafarers' sense that life is becoming increasingly chaotic, leading to fear and anxiety about what the future holds.

### Advice on Addressing Seafarers' Needs

This section considers four key actions that shore management can take that address seafarers' needs. These key actions focus on the interactions between shore management and shipboard personnel and are as follows:

- Effective communication
- Look out
- Reach out
- Lead by example.

#### Effective communication

It is especially important at this time to convey to seafarers that they are not alone and reassure them that they have not been abandoned. This can be achieved through increased, effective communication.

Make communication part of the regular routine to check on the wellbeing of the crew onboard; do not mix these checks with work/operations issues.

Effective communication begins with the way that messages are delivered and how care is conveyed towards the people you engage with.

Frequent communication will harness familiarity, trust, commitment and an appreciation of being on the same team. Do not assume.

#### *Prepare messages in advance*

Keep to known facts, for example, if seafarers were to ask about their status about signing off:

*"We are sorry that this has happened. We are extremely concerned about what you are going through. I wish we had more definitive answers for you. Rest assured, management is highlighting the issues with the relevant authorities for seafarers at national and international level so that we can develop amicable and practical solutions."*

#### *Tips for effective communication*

*Be compassionate, empathetic, courteous and considerate.* It's not easy to do this under pressure when many questions are asked or repeated, but shore-side staff need to adopt a patient approach.

*Do not over-assure.* The objective is not to soothe, but to convey accurate information and calm concern. In fact, it is better to over-estimate the problem and then be able to say that the situation is better than first thought.

*Acknowledge uncertainty.* Say only what is known, show concern and acknowledge the concern of your crew.

*Emphasise that a process is in place to resolve the issue.*

*Be regretful, not defensive.* Say, "We are sorry..." , or "We feel terrible that..." when acknowledging the issue.

*Acknowledge people's fears and concerns.* Don't tell the crew they should not be afraid. They are afraid and have a right to share their fears/concerns.

*Express wishes.* Say, "I wish we knew more," or "I wish we had more definitive answers from the government/authorities".

As far as possible, the Ship Management team can share with the seafarers the details of the outcomes of the company's attempts to address the plight of the crew, e.g. repatriation attempts, for seafarers to be as informed as they can be. The timely flow of information to seafarers helps to prevent seafarers from forming the perception that the company is doing little or nothing to address their plight.

When prevalent, the spread of such perceptions amongst the shipboard crew and the families of the seafarers, it becomes more challenging for the company to manage. For example, at each port call, seafarers naturally assume this as a window of opportunity for repatriation. However, often companies fail to share the details on why it is not possible to do so; for example, when flights are cancelled due to contradictory information provided by airlines on flight availability; situations that are outside the company's control.

Be willing to address the 'what if' questions. These are the questions that everyone is thinking about and they want your answers. "What will happen to us if the Covid-19 issue doesn't resolve in the next one or two months?" **Empathetic Listening** – One basic principle is to "seek to understand, before being understood."

People will only feel comfortable to share their true feelings and thoughts when they are convinced that they will be heard appropriately, without judgment from the listener.

### **In summary**

#### *Do*

- Be non-judgmental – allow people to express their worries or stress.
- Give the person your undivided attention.
- Listen carefully (to feelings and facts).
- Show concern by asking about their families and their wellbeing.
- Follow up, especially with those who show signs of weak coping ability.

Most importantly, firmly assure that worrying events will pass and everyone will be safe at home with their families again.

#### *Avoid*

- Belittling people's worries or concerns.
- Offering solutions or advice.
- Sounding repetitive and giving out the same information.



## Why is effective communication important?

Effective communication can help to foster a good working relationship between you and your crew onboard, which can in turn improve the team's morale, productivity, commitment and efficiency.

How people are treated and managed on a day-to-day basis is central to their mental well-being and motivation, as well as the level of trust they put in the Ship Management team.

The behaviours of the Ship Management team will largely determine to what extent the crew onboard stay resilient under pressure during periods of prolonged shipboard service and remain loyal to the company during tough times.

### Potential questions that you may face

*Q: How can people, who are confined to vessels under quarantine, stay safe and well at this difficult time?*

*"You have developed a skill that the general population needs to learn in order to better manage Covid-19. You have developed a skill to work for long periods onboard, where you can circulate freely and manage boredom by making sure that you stay connected with your loved ones. You also know how to manage boredom by staying connected with people around you. So, please stay connected remotely and enjoy the activities onboard i.e. exercise, recreation activities etc. Please draw on these strengths and share them with others so that we can all manage the pressure and boredom of the coming weeks." [Source ISWAN helpline](#)*

*Q: My family needs me, therefore please find ways to sign me off immediately*

*"These are difficult situations that seafarers are facing globally, with port closures and travel bans imposed by many countries. We know that you are feeling anxious, especially with regard to those countries with high cases of Covid-19. Rushing back home may put your family at risk, so it would be wiser to stay onboard and stay connected to them remotely." [Source ISWAN helpline](#)*

## Look out

It can be very easy to focus on our own immediate concerns in times of high stress and consequently we can unintentionally overlook the pressures on sea staff. Taking time to look out for your crew's welfare and signs of distress means that you can intervene early to help them manage their worries at this time.

Worrying situations may not go away overnight and your crew will be facing similar pressures to you.

Sea staff could experience what is known as "anxious distress" in addition to low mood. People with anxious distress often feel tense, restless, and have trouble concentrating because they worry so much. Therefore, it is important that the Ship Management team takes a more caring and compassionate approach in dealing with their team onboard.

### Early intervention: spotting the signs of stress and poor mental health

Like physical health, everyone can have mental health issues and it can fluctuate along a spectrum of good to poor. Good ship management support is crucial in assisting wellbeing, spotting early signs of distress and initiating early interventions. Stress can take a toll on people physiologically and in the long run, it can affect the immune system of a person. Look out for the following signs during your engagement with the team:

Impact	Psychological	Behavioral
Fatigue	Anxiety or distress	Increased smoking and drinking
	Tearfulness	Using recreational drugs
Headache	Feeling low and/or lonely	Withdrawal syndrome
Appetite and weight changes	Mood changes	Resigned attitude
Joint and back pain	Indecision	Irritability, anger or aggression
Changes in sleep pattern	Loss of motivation	Overexcitement or euphoria
Visible tension or trembling	Loss of humour	Restlessness
Nervous trembling speech	Increased sensitivity	
Chest or throat pain	Distraction or confusion	
Sweating	Difficulty relaxing	Intense or obsessive activity
Constantly feeling cold	Lapses in memory	Repetitive speech or activity
Psychological	Illogical or irrational thought	
Psychological	Difficulty in concentration	Uncharacteristic errors
Psychological	Suicidal thoughts	Uncharacteristic problems with colleagues
Psychological	Slowing down of thought process	Apparent over-reaction to problems
Psychological	Feelings of guilt and/or worthlessness	Disruptive or anti-social behavior

## Reach out

Reaching out early can signal to your onboard teams that you are concerned for their welfare. Following the advice regarding effective communication will also help to ensure that you come across as sincere and caring rather than simply concerned about performance.

Always keep in mind that the current situation may not go away overnight and you should focus on longer-term working capacity rather than repeated short-term crisis responses.

Empathy is an essential leadership skill. It helps to build bonds and without it you will not be able to reach your people. When you show empathy and care about the crew onboard, you can create a stronger bond with them; you can connect and understand their interests and perspectives. Once you have developed this trust and bond, you will be able to play an effective part in reducing the stress levels within your team.

Demonstrating empathy is hard; it takes time and effort to show awareness and understanding. When it comes to building teams and earning trust, you must take an interest in your people to show that you care. You must show curiosity by asking questions about their challenges and their families.

It's not always easy to understand why someone feels or thinks the way that they do. People often react in ways that are surprising, and it may leave you clueless about how to respond. But with empathy in your

leadership toolkit, you don't have to worry about how to respond, because the goal is not to respond but to listen, not to reply but to understand. Empathy allows you to understand others without passing judgment or making assumptions.

Here are some tips to guide your conversation:

Questions to ask	Questions to avoid
How are you doing at the moment? How is your family doing?	You're clearly struggling. What's up?
You seem to be a bit down/ upset/ under pressure/ frustrated/ angry. Is everything okay?	Why can't you just get your act together? What do you expect me to do about it?
Is there anything I can do to help?	Your performance is unacceptable right now – what's going on?
What support do you think might help?	Everyone else is in the same boat and they're okay, why aren't you?

Tips to facilitate your conversation:

Choose an appropriate place

It's important to make people feel comfortable. Choose somewhere private and quiet to have the conversation. This applies specifically to shipboard conversations.

Avoid making assumptions

It can be difficult for people to disclose information relating to their problems, so make it easier by keeping an open mind and giving them space to talk it out.

Embed confidentially

People can understandably be anxious about disclosing information, so be prepared to assume responsibility for confidential and sensitive details. Reassure the individual that any private information they disclose will not be leaked to their colleagues.

Encourage people to talk

It's important to have an open dialogue when discussing personal problems.

Be understanding and honest

It's important to recognise that a person's performance or behaviour can be affected if they are experiencing any personal problems/ mental health issues.

Reassure people

People may not always be ready to talk straight away, so it's important that you outline the support that is available. Reassure the individual that there are always people available and they can speak to you at any time. Let them know that you'll ensure they will get the possible support that they need.

Encourage people to seek support

Provide details of your organisation's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) if you have one, and inform the crew onboard of any arrangements for online counselling.

Companies can reassure seafarers and refresh seafarers on the avenues of sharing their concerns apart from their shipboard superiors. Many seafarers (especially non-officers) are not aware of their rights under the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), and tend to feel trapped in that they have no one beyond their shipboard superiors to turn to.

Under Standard A5.1.5-4 of the MLC, all seafarers shall be provided with a copy of the on-board complaint procedures applicable on the ship. This shall include contact information for the competent authority in the flag State and, where different, in the seafarers' country of residence, and the name of a person or persons on board the ship who can, on a confidential basis, provide seafarers with impartial advice on their complaint and otherwise assist them in following the complaint procedures available to them on board the ship.

You can direct them to **[www.seafarerhelp.org](http://www.seafarerhelp.org)**, which provides a free, confidential, 24/7 helpline service for seafarers and their families around the world. The SeafarerHelp team speaks a wide range of languages including Filipino, Russian, Hindi, Chinese, Spanish and Arabic and can be contacted via several different methods including telephone (with a callback option), email, live chat and WhatsApp.

### **Lead by example**

The Ship Management team plays an important role in creating and ensuring the right culture for the company. Hence, treat your crew with respect, praise good work, offer support if there are any skill gaps, and try to use a positive coaching style of management.

Ask for feedback about the support that you have provided and what support they need to help them achieve their goals.

Encourage seafarers to overcome this storm by exploring the following interventions, which may help to lower anxiety and stress levels:

#### *Reach out*

Encourage staying connected remotely with loved ones to check on their wellbeing. This is extremely effective and creates a positive impact on both the seafarer onboard as well as the family at home.

#### *Events onboard*

Organise regular events and engagement activities for the crew onboard to help them bond and ease stress levels. Example activities that you can organise with your crew include:

- Movie nights
- Karaoke nights
- Dance parties
- Thematic parties
- Indoor team-building games

#### *Workout*

Exercise is the all-natural treatment to fight stress and depression. Practicing yoga can also be an effective way of alleviating stress and boosting positivity.

#### *Healthy lifestyle*

Adopt a healthier working style by managing the work/ rest hours well and by taking proper healthy meals and breaks.

### *Breathing exercises*

Manage stress by using a breathing exercise such as the following:

Exhale deeply for eight seconds and then inhale through the nose for four seconds. Hold the breath for seven seconds, then repeat the steps.

### *Good sleep*

Sleep deprivation can affect the psychological and mental state of people onboard. Keep an eye out for signs of stress, depression and anxiety among crew members.

### *Look out*

Ensure that seafarers are working together to look out for each other.

## **A Special Focus on Cyber Wellness**

'Cyber wellness' refers to the positive wellbeing of internet users. It requires a clear understanding of positive and constructive behaviour and awareness to protect oneself online.

Cyber wellness also ties into the general concept of wellness for all seafarers and involves an understanding of healthy online behaviour and awareness of how to use the internet and mobile devices responsibly whilst onboard a vessel. Accordingly, this section provides advice and recommendations on promoting seafarers' cyber wellness. A more detailed discussion of the topic can be found in INTERTANKO's guidance document *Cyber Wellness at Sea*.

Three primary principles of cyber wellness, when adhered to, will help get the most benefit from the internet while at sea:

1. 'Respect for self and others';
2. 'Safe and responsible use'; and
3. 'Manage non-work screen time'.

### **(1) Respect for self and others**

- Seafarers should respect themselves by only sharing appropriate content and participating only in legal online activities;
- respect other people online (e.g. putting themselves in others' shoes, accepting diverse views and opinions, giving credit when using other people's work, seeking permission where necessary, avoiding sharing hurtful materials);
- be a positive role model online (e.g. sharing healthy and positive content); and
- advocate positive online behaviour (e.g. standing up for peers online, reporting cases of cyber bullying to a trusted adult/authority, posting encouraging remarks on social media).

### **(2) Safe and Responsible Use**

Seafarers should:

- Understand that the safe and efficient completion of the important work they do onboard requires full concentration and awareness. This means that they should get sufficient rest every day (as per the company's work/rest policy) and ensure that they are free from unnecessary distractions whilst at work;
- Understand that internet-connected mobile devices increase one's social connectedness but can also be a constant source of distraction; and
- Understand and apply basic best practices for internet security.

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### (3) Manage Off Work Screen Time

“Screen time” is the time spent each day using devices with screens. These devices include televisions (TVs), video consoles, smartphones and tablets. Screen time can be:

- *interactive* – for example, playing video games, communicating;
- *not interactive* – for example, sitting still and watching movies, TV programmes or YouTube videos;
- *educational* – for example, doing personal or professional development online; or
- *recreational* – for example, playing games or watching videos for fun.

There are both benefits and risks to using these devices. A healthy cyber usage lifestyle includes limits on daily screen time. Limits mean making sure that usage doesn't get in the way of sleep and activities that are also good for seafarer's overall wellbeing.

Seafarers should take personal responsibility to self-manage how and when they access their devices as well as make wise and healthy choices (e.g. maintain a healthy balance of online and offline activities).

This can be achieved by limiting non-work screen time, making mealtimes free of TVs, smart phones and other screens, using the time during TV ads to be physically active, engaging fellow crew mates in conversation or activities whilst onboard and limiting socialising on social media or messaging.

#### Summary

As shipboard technology evolves, so will the human factors and related challenges in managing their associated risks. As most companies recognise, the benefits can outweigh the risks if seafarers are guided on how to assure cyber wellness by following the three steps outlined previously.



## Additional Best Practices

The principal advice for assisting seafarers in difficult circumstances is described in the following. The table below provides some concrete examples of practices adopted by INTERTANKO Members to ameliorate the stresses and strains associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and they are organised according to whether they help with the human needs of Recognition, Stimulation or Certainty.

Human Needs	Best Practice
<p><b>Recognition:</b> Practices that communicate value, understanding and empathy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consideration of the payment of bonuses from the day the seafarer completed the contract.</li> <li>• Contracts end when seafarers get home after quarantine finishes.</li> <li>• Sending flowers and presents to families of seafarers over their time.</li> <li>• Senior staff have produced videos thanking seafarers.</li> <li>• Provided prescribed medications to all crew on-board whose medicines are getting over.</li> <li>• Weekly call with the Senior Leadership Team ashore with ship staff.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Stimulation:</b> Practices that facilitate social contact and introduce variety into seafarers' lives on-board</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supply of additional board games to ships and set up tournaments.</li> <li>• Increased data and download time for the internet.</li> <li>• Increasing the amenities on board, this includes providing extra recreational equipment, organising special events, arranging extra half-day off on board etc.</li> <li>• Reducing of the workload and relaxation on non-critical PMS items.</li> <li>• Adopting of extra dietary measures with our catering partner aimed at keeping crew healthy and fit by increasing their immunology and mental well-being.</li> <li>• Ensuring onshore senior teams are in regular contact with the vessels crew and with their families back home to keep morale up.</li> <li>• Refurbishing of crew smoke room of all ships, with live TV and streaming apps and organise film screenings as a group to promote bonding through "shared experience". Also, the increasing of data usage for crew by 50%.</li> </ul>

**Certainty:**

**Practices that help give a sense of control and reduce uncertainty**

- Virtual town hall meetings to improve the flow of information.
- Continuation of financial support to cadets when their studies have been interrupted.
- Setting up of a dedicated Special Crew Operations team to find solutions to issues faced due to Covid-19.
- Creation of a solidarity fund to provide cash advances to crew ashore who were delayed in joining back.
- Providing of remote access to wellbeing support, mental health line and medical support. An in-house psychologist in constant contact with the fleets.
- Deviated vessels to perform crew changes where possible.
- Ran mental health/wellbeing questionnaire campaign in cooperation with external psychological consulting contractor for all crew on board ships that had tendered their resignation and could not disembark. This was followed up with feedback on mental health state and one-to-one sessions with psychologist where necessary.
- Communication on a weekly basis to all the fleet of all crew change initiatives that have taken place in order to keep informed/aware of actions from the office side, as well as hope that things will improving over time.
- Sharing of details regarding the outcomes of the company's attempts to address the plight of the crew, e.g. why the repatriation attempt at a port call was unsuccessful, in order for seafarers to be as informed as they can be.
- Persons on-leave to be provided with 50% wages every month until they join back.
- Medical coverage and pension to continue for persons who have exceeded the leave and cannot join back.
- Holding of the ship in anchorages / ports to complete the crew changes.

## Summary

This document provides guidance and recommendations for non-mental health professionals. In writing this guide, the authors have focused on providing a better understanding of seafarers' emotional and psychological needs along with practical tips on how to address those needs.

This guidance is not intended to be exhaustive or to provide specialist or detailed education and advice for all mental wellness issues that might arise. Readers are advised to consult appropriately qualified professionals should they be concerned about meeting the needs of their seafarers or feel that they are out of their depth in any way.

The most important point to remember is that it is better to take definitive action rather than to hope a problem might resolve itself. We hope this guidance will give the reader confidence to take the first steps in protecting seafarer mental well-being whether during the Covid-19 pandemic or when a more normal situation has returned.

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**INTERTANKO London**  
St Clare House  
30-33 Minories  
London EC3N 1DD  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 20 7977 7010  
Fax: +44 20 7977 7011  
london@intertanko.com

**INTERTANKO Oslo**  
Nedre Vollgate 4  
5th floor  
PO Box 761 Sentrum  
N-0106 Oslo  
Norway  
Tel: +47 22 12 26 40  
oslo@intertanko.com

**INTERTANKO Asia**  
70 Shenton Way  
#20-04 Eon Shenton  
079118  
Singapore  
Tel: +65 6333 4007  
Fax: +65 6333 5004  
singapore@intertanko.com

**INTERTANKO North America**  
801 North Quincy Street - Suite 500  
Arlington, VA 22203  
USA  
Tel: +1 703 373 2269  
Fax: +1 703 841 0389  
washington@intertanko.com

**INTERTANKO Athens**  
Karagiorgi Servias 2  
Syntagma  
Athens 10 562  
Greece  
Tel: +30 210 373 1772/1775  
athens@intertanko.com

