



THE IMPACT OF THE PHENOMENON COVID-19 ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF SEAFARERS

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Abstract: This paper aims to highlight the devastating impact of the imposed restrictions during the COVID-19 Pandemic towards the mental health of the sailing crew.

It is well known that the employees in the navy domain were already accustomed to distinct working conditions, depriving themselves of factors that are vital for a balanced, functional state of mental health. The seamen are subjected to solitude, uncertain and unpredictable weather, a constant fear of danger and the anxiety of being prepared to ensure their own safety at any time needed. This paper aims to highlight the devastating impact of the imposed restrictions during the COVID-19 Pandemic towards the mental health of the sailing crew.

Isolation, research shows, has an impact on both mental and physical health, from reducing the ability to manage stressful situations, to difficulties in making decisions, memorizing and processing information to the onset of depression, anxiety, attacks of panic and increasing the risk of illness, because the immune system of a person responds differently in the fight against viruses.

In this paper were presented the procedures that the crew members of the ships that made voyages in the areas where the imposed restrictions were among the toughest to follow. Also, the mental state of the crew during the voyage and after arrival were analyzed, from in terms of the staff's statements but also individually.

Key words: crew, isolation, mental health, navy, pandemic, restrictions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sailing is not an occupation suited for everyone, that is a known fact; the conditions in which the navy crew works are also not new. However, what seems to be torturous for the untrained man was balanced with off-shore free time – visiting port cities, testing local cuisine, socializing with the crew – and other people in a more relaxed, less work-oriented manner. Travelling, visiting places – even just for a few hours - not many have access to, and this off-shore time are one of the main motivations that many individuals choose this domain for.

And the pandemic stole this away from them. This, and many others.

2. CHANGES AFTER THE PANDEMIC

After uncertainty and isolation were already more or less a requirement for sailing, COVID-19 deepened the wound with harsh restrictions. At the peak of the pandemic, the restrictions had an incredible impact in Asia, known as the pole of most commercial routes. The installment of rigorous preventive measures inevitably became a great source of stress.

2.1. Experience of a vessel's crew on an Europe-Asia route:

For example, from the experience of a vessel's crew that were away on voyage on an Europe-Asia route during 2020-2021 and that were subjected to the unpredictable changes, it is now possible to analyze the package of safe management measures and the emotional impact it had on the personnel.

According to the "Arrangement for Prevention & Control of NCP in Tianjin Port", due to the gravity of the situation, there were several requirements, such as:

- Declaring the presence of new crew members from or passing through severe epidemic areas;
- Performing daily temperature measurement and health check of all crews two weeks before arrival;
- If any crew have a cough, fever and other physical abnormalities, it should be reported immediately and the vessel is not allowed to enter Tianjin Port until gets the approval;

- No crew shall leave the vessel without permission unless in special circumstances.
- Both the attendances and the ship side should wear protective equipment;
- The business communication between the ship and the port is all online. If there is a special need for document transfer, sealed bags must be used, and shall happen via non-contact transfer outdoors with disinfection.

The requirements from PSA Singapore terminals are similar:

- Any shore-based personnel who is going on board a vessel must produce proof that he/she has a valid negative test result from a COVID-19 Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test taken as part of the rostered routine testing (RRT);
- Shore-based personnel who are not on a RRT program will be required to show a valid negative test result from a COVID-19 PCR test or Antigen Rapid Test (ART) within 72 hours prior to boarding the vessel;
- All vessels berthing at PSA Singapore Terminals must conduct contactless (segregated) cargo operations. This means that during cargo operations, the vessel crew are to stay within the accommodation area of the vessel and to avoid contact with the stevedores working on the vessels.

A general preventive measure during the pandemic was the requirement of isolation that the company imposed on the personnel before boarding, after the flight, was between 1 and 3 weeks, depending on the restrictions of the country, the company and the proximity of the next port.

On top of every previously mentioned restriction, the personnel had to face devastating news about the situation in China on the regular, as well: another city was doomed to a harsh quarantine, another Chinese citizen committed suicide because of the despair the quarantine restrictions ignited in them.

疫情防控期间船舶作业告知书
Requirements for Ship Operations during COVID-19 Epidemic Prevention and Control

各船公司、船长：
To: shipping companies and ship masters

当前新冠肺炎疫情依旧严峻，港口疫情防控、重要港区及外高桥等，密切配合，根据各港口管理部门防控工作的要求与部署，在港外莫忘防疫，船舶在港期间做好如下配合：

Currently, COVID-19 situation is still dangerous. Port epidemic prevention and control need the joint efforts of both sides. According to the port authorities' requirements, Ningbo port/terminals require ships to cooperate as follows during port stay:



MARITIME AND PORT AUTHORITY OF SINGAPORE

PORT MARINE CIRCULAR
PMO 04 OF 2021

14 Jan 2021

REQUIREMENTS FOR SHORE-BASED PERSONNEL BOARDING VESSELS AT ANCHORAGES, SHIPYARDS, TERMINALS AND MARINAS, IN THE PORT OF SINGAPORE

1. This circular supersedes Port Marine Circular No. 35 of 2020 with effect from 15 Jan 2021.

Proof of requisite test results (Rostered Routine Test results or PCR/ART test results) before allowed to go on board a vessel in port

2. Any shore-based personnel¹ who is going on board a vessel² must produce proof that he/she has a valid negative test result from a COVID-19 Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test taken as part of the rostered routine testing (RRT) programme, within the last 7 days before boarding the vessel. Details of the RRT programme are in Annex A.

3. Shore-based personnel who are not on a RRT programme will be required to show a valid negative test result from a COVID-19 PCR test or Antigen Rapid Test (ART) within 72 hours prior to boarding the vessel. The COVID-19 PCR test (ART) may be done at any of the MCH approved COVID-19 test providers (https://www.mch.gov.sg/health-services/health-services/health-services/covid-19-test-providers). After disembarking, these shore-based personnel must take a PCR test between the 5th and 7th day, and a final PCR test on the 11th day. The costs of these tests for shore-based personnel who are not on a RRT programme would be at the shore-based personnel's own or the vessel's expense.

¹ "Shore-based personnel" in relation to a relevant vessel, means an individual who is not a passenger or member of the crew of the vessel and is in a relevant group or performing service on the crew of the vessel on board the vessel, or is in effecting the arrival or retention of a vessel, or service of any other legal process, whether or not a contractor or an employee or agent of the vessel or agent of the relevant vessel.

² "Vessel" includes harbour craft and pleasure craft.

Figure 1 Various documents with restrictive requirements in Asian ports

It is difficult to be constantly informed of such news, the negativity of the situation deepening the seamen's own unhappiness on deck.

3. THE EFFECTS OF ISOLATION

Isolation during the pandemic is definitely an unpleasant experience. Separation from loved ones, loss of freedom, uncertainty about the stage of the disease and boredom can lead to dramatic effects. In the context of the preventive restrictions, some experts appreciate that the pandemic became the greatest psychological experiment of all time.

Isolation, research shows, has an impact on both mental and physical health, from reducing the ability to manage stressful situations, to difficulties in making decisions, memorizing and processing information to the onset of depression, anxiety, attacks of panic and increasing the risk of illness, because the immune system of a person responds differently in the fight against viruses.

In a survey conducted by the Ipsos company on nearly 14,000 participants from 15 of the largest countries on the globe, it shows that more than two out of five (43%) of respondents claimed they were impatient to return to a normal life. Another third (34%) were concerned about their health, while 15% felt lonely and 12% were dissatisfied with restrictions on personal freedom.

Concurrently, more than half (55%) were worried about the family members who are vulnerable or weak, while just under a third (31%) claimed they were happy



to spend time with their family. Another fifth of those surveyed (22%) were inspired by people who adapt. The mixed responses in terms of the emotions felt may actually reflect how isolated people really are, according to experts, who say that the more severe the isolation, the greater the psychological impact. [4]

It goes unsaid that the navy crew members who were unfortunate to be on deck during the peak of the pandemic have experienced multiple negative emotions: fright, despair, hopelessness, anger. And worst of all, loneliness, because it was just them and the overwhelming body of water, with not much but on-board routine to keep them sane.

Needless to say that everything they were experiencing at the time was not only physically stressful, their bodies growing more exhausted every day, but also mentally stressful. When such situations happen, people are prone to developing mental health imbalances, such as depression, anxiety, chronic fatigue, burnout. These conditions, although they are different, are closely related, have common characteristics and affect the nervous system.

4. THE AFTERMATH OF EXPOSURE TO LIFE-THREATENING SITUATIONS

Broadly, stress is a psychosocial phenomenon characterized by states of tension and mental discomfort determined by external factors that are perceived as aggressive, difficult or painful. Short-term stress can be beneficial to the body as it can act as a catalyst to help mobilize challenging situations, however chronic stress can seriously damage one's health.

With the constant uncertainty the seamen had to bear in long, seemingly endless voyages, stress was no longer physical; the crippling depression and anxiety the pandemic caused were extremely demanding for the brain, leading to what is called mental stress.

Mental stress is defined as a syndrome constituted by the exacerbation of psychic reactions and their somatic correlates (affecting almost all body compartments) in connection with external excitation or internal exerted by stressor agents that act intensely, unexpected, sudden and/or persistent and sometimes having a symbolic "threatening" character, other times an extremely favourable role for the subject (perceived or anticipated as such by the subject).

Distress is the term that designates stresses that have harmful potential for organism. What needs to be emphasized is related to the main hormones released in the course of distress:

- catecholamines (especially noradrenaline and adrenaline) - which can favour cardiovascular diseases;
- and cortisol, which lowers the body's resistance to infections and cancer.

In medical literature, distress generally covers the scope of the notion of stress appearing in a series of situations with extremely unfavourable meaning for most

individuals and for this reason the word "stress" is commonly used with negative connotation. [3]

After the preventive measures were at last less restrictive and the personnel had the chance to return to their families, the distress would not end there.

Due to the hectic, repetitive lifestyle the members adopted in the midst of the pandemic, their bodies got accustomed to having an occupation at all times – they are left restless, unable to relax even when there is no sign of threat or urgency.

After only communicating with people from the vessel at, most likely, a superficial level, communication with the loved ones was difficult, more formal, perhaps insincere, because it is emotionally demanding to open up about traumatic experiences. Moreover, it was also unnatural to talk freely at home, when for several months (or even years) the main subjects of conversation were work and adapting to the everchanging rules. They may think the past is in the past, but their bodies remained in a state of defence.

Even though on a safer terrain, each crew member felt the effects of isolation in the long run, feeling various negative emotions: inexplicable irritability, a sense of danger, lack of motivation, paranoia, apathy. It is impossible to sweep such stressful years under the rug.

5. SOLUTIONS

The next step would be returning to the normal state in which life used to be, before the pandemic. However, that is an impossible request; therefore adapting to the current situation seems to be the only choice.

There are definitely helpful solutions to ameliorate and the reconstruct the shaken mental health of the crew members. Indubitably, rest is absolutely essential for an efficient recovery, as well as developing relaxing hobbies such as gardening, yoga, practicing a sport etc. Meditation and breathing techniques have proven to be very useful in situations of great stress.

Quality time with the loved ones and engaging in favourite activities definitely help ameliorate the tension, too.

Worst case scenario, all crew members should be granted access to professional help – psychotherapy - if necessary.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly very impactful for millions, billions of people. Several lives were affected, physically, psychologically, financially and in many more other areas, by an unpredictable virus that to this day has not stopped to spread.

This paper's aim was to cover, broadly, how truly impactful the pandemic was for the marine domain, by focusing, in the first chapter, on how an already demanding field of work was aggravated by harsh restrictions. In the second chapter real documents and



examples of restrictions on various vessels were shown, to enhance how the situation was both rigid and erratic with incredibly strict rules that were changed day by day. These restrictions imposed even more isolation for the crew members, effects of which were presented in the third chapter. In the 4th chapter, the consequences – physical and mental - of living in a constant state of danger were described, even after the danger was no longer there. The employees in the marine field, the residents of vessels, were subjected to difficult conditions, that leading to depression, anxiety, stress and even medical issues. Fortunately, there are always solutions for a better quality of life, which were presented in the 5th chapter.

All in all, the efficiency and productivity of a crewing company depends on the well-being of all its members. Therefore, it is extremely important to enhance the focus on the mental health of all employees – everyone benefits when companies support and promote mental health for those who are suffering.

psychological evaluation within each compulsory medical visit before a voyage. According to the results, the crew members should be given a compensatory recovery time directly proportional to the amount of time spent in moments of crisis.

It is of utmost importance to maintain and focus on the mental health of the employees – the more affected, the more the entire crew suffers. One less efficient

member makes the work load more demanding for the others, having an impact on everyone's health.

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