



— CULTURE & PEOPLE

Seafarer wellbeing: the pandemic behind the pandemic

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Image: iStock.

A few years ago, I shared a post on social media about one of the most heartbreaking conversations I've had in my maritime career.

A master I'd met told me about a close friend, also a ship's master, who'd returned to sea to earn money for his wife's cancer treatment. Then Covid-19 struck. The world shut down. He became one of tens of thousands of seafarers trapped aboard their ships, unable to disembark due to blanket restrictions and closed borders.

Despite being arguably in one of the safest, most isolated environments on Earth, he wasn't permitted ashore. Tragically, his wife died while he was away at sea. He wasn't there to say goodbye, and he couldn't be with his children during their grief.

I remember standing quietly with the master who told me the story, and both of us were overcome. It was more than just personal sorrow; it was the realisation that this wasn't an isolated case. It was a system-wide failure to recognise seafarers' humanity.

In that original post, I wrote that if we weren't careful, the entrapment of seafarers would become the world's next pandemic. Not viral, but psychological. Not visible, but no less real.

The message resonated. The post was shared hundreds of times, mostly by seafarers who recognised in it their own stories. Human beings who'd also missed funerals, births and goodbyes. People who'd silently borne the weight of uncertainty, loneliness and exhaustion, often without the recognition, support, or resources they needed.

It was that story, and the response it drew, that urged me towards seafarer mental health advocacy. Not because it was a one-off tragedy, but because it highlighted something endemic: a systemic undervaluing of the human element in global trade.

Since that time, awareness of mental health in maritime has grown, but much of the burden still falls on people. We often speak of resilience at sea - and make no mistake, seafarers are resilient - but even the strongest steel fails under constant strain. Fatigue, isolation, poor connectivity and stigma still shape the daily lives of those at sea. Despite initiatives like mental health first aid training, peer support networks and welfare services, many seafarers still struggle in silence.

This month, I'm participating in the Push-Up Challenge (3,214 push-ups in 23 days) to raise awareness for mental health. While my motivation is personal, it's also a reflection of the stories I've carried since the pandemic and a small way to keep the conversation going. Not just about mental health, but about the lives of those who spend months away from home, out of sight and often out of mind.

Because the truth is, seafarers didn't stop when the world locked down. They kept going, quietly, professionally and at great personal cost. They still do.

We owe them more than thanks. We owe them care, visibility and systems that treat their wellbeing as integral rather than incidental to safe operations.

If Covid taught us anything, it is that humanity cannot be an afterthought - not at home, and certainly not in maritime.

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