



Sailing Towards Well-being: Investigating Seafarers' Mental Health Challenges, Coping Strategies, and Best Practices to Shape an Enhancement Plan

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ABSTRACT

Mental health is a critical concern in the maritime industry due to the unique stressors seafarers face while at sea. Thus, this descriptive investigation aimed to explore the mental health challenges faced by seafarers, identify their coping strategies, and assess the best practices implemented by shipowners and shipping companies. Utilizing a quantitative approach, the study involved 46 randomly selected active seafarers from various shipping companies who answered a researcher-made survey questionnaire. Statistical tools such as descriptive statistics, t-test, ANOVA, and Pearson correlation were used to analyze the data. Findings revealed that the most prevalent challenges were physical risks, work-life balance, and limited access to mental health support. Seafarers reported using coping strategies like staying positive, communicating with family, and unwinding, which were consistent across demographics. No significant differences were found based on demographic variables, but a significant correlation existed between mental health challenges and coping strategies. An enhancement plan was proposed to improve seafarers' mental health through targeted industry support.

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1. Introduction.

The rapid growth of the maritime industry, ship technical equipment, and consistent strengthening of criteria for shipowners in the environmental protection and cybersecurity fields are some of the explicit demands of the maritime industry that maritime higher education institutions (MHEIs) have to address in order for Filipino seafarers to keep afloat.

Seafaring is considered one of the most stressful professions, leading to symptoms of stress and potential health issues such as metabolic syndrome and changes in anthropometric parameters (Russo et al., 2023).

This high stress environment is further compounded by the fact that seafarers are often exposed to a variety of stressors,

such as physical, psychological and social demands, environmental factors, and occupational risks, often resulting in a higher vulnerability to mental health problems (Szafran-Dobrowolska et al., 2023a).

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) identifies the mental health and well-being of seafarers as among the key areas of concern for the safety and security of maritime operations (IMO, 2022). This concern is justified, as studies have identified a number of factors associated with seafarers' mental health and well-being, such as the long duration of contracts, irregular working hours, physical and psychological workloads, limited leisure time, and cultural differences (Brown, 2022; Szafran - Dobrowolska et al., 2023b).

Despite the numerous studies conducted on seafarers' mental health and well-being, there are still gaps in the existing research. Most of the studies, however, are limited to descriptive studies, and there is a need for more research focusing on the development and evaluation of interventions aimed at promoting mental health and well-being among seafarers. Addition-

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ally, more research was needed to identify the risk factors associated with mental health problems among seafarers and to develop effective strategies to address them.

The rationale for conducting this study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the mental health and well-being of seafarers on board various vessels. To achieve this, by identifying the prevalent mental health challenges among seafarers and their impact on performance, the study aimed at providing insights into the challenges faced by seafarers and the need for effective support systems. Additionally, by exploring the coping strategies employed by seafarers and identifying best practices implemented by shipowners and shipping companies, the study aimed at contributing to the development of strategies and interventions that promote the mental health and well-being of seafarers in the maritime industry.

This study was anchored on the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986). This model emphasized the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environment. As a result, seafarers are likely to encounter stressors such as long periods away from home, isolation, and demanding work conditions. In such situations, coping strategies, both adaptive and maladaptive, play a crucial role in determining mental health outcomes. Therefore, interventions should focus on promoting effective coping mechanisms and stress management techniques.

The schematic diagram illustrates the interconnected relationships between the independent variables which includes the department, length of sea service, civil status, and income, and the dependent variables such as prevalent mental health challenges, coping strategies employed by seafarers, and best practices implemented by shipowners and shipping companies. These connections ultimately inform the development of an enhancement program aimed at improving seafarers' mental health and well-being.

2. Methodology.

2.1. Purpose of the Study and Research Design.

This study aimed at determining the mental health challenges, coping strategies and perceived best practices that shipowners and shipping companies implement to provide better support for the mental health and wellness of seafarers. The findings would serve as basis to shape an enhancement plan. This study used a descriptive research design utilizing a quantitative approach. The researcher believes that this is the most appropriate design for determining the status of mental health and well-being of seafarers onboard various vessels, specifically the prevalent mental health challenges among seafarers, the coping strategies to be employed in promoting and ensuring their mental health and well-being, and best practices implemented by the shipowners and shipping companies to provide better support for the mental health and wellness of seafarers. This design is suited for studies which aim to find out what prevails in the opinions and beliefs, processes and effects, and developing trends (Hassan, 2023). Descriptive research involves the description, recording analysis and interpretation of the conditions that exist. It also involves some type of comparison or

contrast and attempts to discover relationships between existing non-manipulative variables.

2.2. Participants.

The respondents of this study were the active seafarers, both deck and engine, who have been onboard the vessels owned by various shipping companies. They were selected using random sampling, a sampling method in which each sample of a given size has an equal chance of being selected from the population (ASA Dictionary of Statistics and Methodology, 2016). The sample size of 46 was obtained by using GPower 3.9.1.7 with the following parameters such as effect size of 0.5, alpha error of 5%, Power of 0.80, and 3 as the number of groups, and categorized according to department, length of sea service, civil status, and income. The GPower is a free statistical software that allows the user to determine statistical power based on a wide variety of tests. The user can specify the type of test being run, their desired level of power, and alpha level to determine the sample size needed (Wormuth, 2022).

2.3. Procedure.

The permission was requested from the school administrator through the department dean to allow this researcher to gather data for this study. Upon their approval, the researcher collected essential information for the conduct of the research. The assessment was personally conducted.

2.4. Statistical Treatment of Data.

After gathering all the data, the researcher collected, tallied, and processed the data using appropriate statistical treatments. The inferential statistical tools used in this research were the *t*-test for Independent Samples set, One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) at .05 alpha and Pearson Product Moment Correlation.

t-test. This was used to determine the significant difference in the mental health challenges among seafarers when categorized according to department (deck and engine).

One-way Analysis of Variance. This was used to determine the significant difference in the prevalent mental health challenges, the coping strategies employed, and the best practices implemented by shipowners and shipping companies when classified as to three or more categories.

Pearson r. This was used to determine the significant relationship between the mental health challenges and coping strategies employed by seafarers in promoting and ensuring their mental health and well-being.

3. Results.

3.1. Summary SD of Mental Health Challenges for the Independent Variable.

The findings in Table 2 reveal the prevalent mental health challenges among seafarers across different categories. Overall, seafarers perceive these challenges at a moderate level (Category A), indicating a balanced understanding of their significance.

Deck department seafarers (Category B) show slightly higher levels of perceived mental health challenges than Engine department seafarers, likely due to their direct exposure to physical risks and strenuous tasks onboard ships.

Mid-career seafarers (12-22 years of experience at sea, Category C) convey the highest agreement with mental health challenges, reflecting their prolonged exposure to the demands of maritime life.

Both single and married seafarers (Category D) report moderate levels of concern regarding mental health challenges, indicating that marital status alone does not significantly influence their perceptions in this regard.

Seafarers earning 66K and above per annum (Category E) demonstrate higher agreement with mental health challenges compared to those in lower income brackets, thus suggesting that higher income levels may afford greater understanding or access to resources related to mental health support.

These insights highlight the diverse perspectives on mental health challenges among seafarers, as influenced by their departmental roles, experience at sea, civil status, and income levels. Tailoring interventions and support systems to address these varied perceptions is crucial in promoting the mental well-being of seafarers across different categories.

Table 1: Summary Table of Means and SD of Coping Strategies for the Independent Variable.

Category	Mean	SD	Interpretation
A. Entire Group	3.29	.55	Moderate
B. Department			
Deck	3.36	.60	Moderate
Engine	3.12	.38	Moderate
C. Length of Sea Service			
Short (0-11 years)	3.28	.55	Moderate
Mid (12-22 years)	3.49	.54	Agree
Long (23 years and up)	3.43	.80	Agree
D. Civil Status			
Single	3.23	.49	Moderate
Married	3.38	.65	Moderate
E. Income			
Below 30K	3.21	.44	Moderate
31K to 65K	3.19	.30	Moderate
66K and above	3.44	.76	Agree

Source: Authors.

3.2. Prevalent Mental Health Challenges among Seafarers When Taken as a Whole Group.

The results in Table 2 present the prevalent mental health challenges among seafarers when considered as a whole group. The results indicate that the most prevalent mental health challenge among seafarers is “Physical risks and dangerous injuries,” with a mean of 3.61, interpreted as agree. This is followed by “Work-life balance” (mean = 3.48) and “Accessibility and effectiveness of mental health support” (mean = 3.50), both of which are also interpreted as agree.

On the other hand, challenges such as “Depression and anxiety” (mean = 2.82) and “Isolation and loneliness” (mean = 3.09) are perceived with moderate agreement, indicating that while these are recognized issues, they may not be as pronounced as others.

Overall, the combined mean score for all mental health challenges is 3.28, with a standard deviation of 0.555, interpreted as moderate. This suggests that seafarers acknowledge the presence of various mental health challenges but do not strongly agree on any particular challenge being overwhelmingly prevalent, except for the top-ranked ones.

Table 2: Prevalent Mental Health Challenges among the Seafarers When Taken as a Whole Group.

Mental Health Challenges	Mean	SD	Interpretation	Rank
Physical risks and dangerous injuries	3.61	.977	Agree	1
Accessibility and effectiveness of mental health support	3.50	.753	Agree	2
Work-life balance	3.48	.781	Agree	3
Stress and work pressure	3.41	.956	Agree	4.5
Mental health education and awareness programs	3.41	.858	Agree	4.5
Concerns about family and homesickness	3.35	1.016	Moderate	6
Cultural and language differences	3.33	1.055	Moderate	7.5
Port access and shore leave uncertainty	3.33	.990	Moderate	7.5
Job insecurity and economic concerns	3.26	.828	Moderate	9
Communication challenges with/among the crew	3.22	.917	Moderate	10
Limited recreation opportunities	3.17	.877	Moderate	11
Contract duration and mental fatigue	3.15	.942	Moderate	12.5
Stigma surrounding mental health	3.15	.816	Moderate	12.5
Isolation and loneliness	3.09	1.007	Moderate	14
Depression and anxiety	2.82	1.114	Moderate	15
Overall Mean	3.28	.555	Moderate	

Source: Authors.

3.3. Coping Strategies Employed by Seafarers in Promoting and Ensuring Their Mental Health and Well-being When Grouped According to Department, Length of Sea Service, Civil Status, Income and When Taken as a Whole Group.

Table 3 shows the summary of means and standard deviation of coping strategies for the independent variable. The result indicates general agreement with the coping strategies implemented across various categories. Both the Deck and Engine departments show similar levels of agreement. However, there is notable variation in agreement based on the length of sea service. Interestingly, mid-level experienced seafarers show the highest agreement, while those with long-term service exhibit only moderate agreement.

Both single and married seafarers agree with the coping strategies regarding civil status. Those earning below 30K agree the most when considering income levels, while those in the 31K to 65K income range show the lowest agreement within this category. Despite these variations, the overall trend reflects a consensus on the effectiveness of coping strategies among seafarers.

Table 3: Summary Table of Means and SD of Coping Strategies for the Independent Variable.

Category	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Entire Group	3.95	.86	Agree
Department			
Deck	3.94	.92	Agree
Engine	3.98	.73	Agree
Length of Sea Service			
Short (0-11 years)	3.95	.83	Agree
Mid (12-22 years)	4.46	.33	Agree
Long (23 years and up)	2.75	1.48	Moderate
Civil Status			
Single	3.96	.73	Agree
Married	3.95	1.06	Agree
Income			
Below 30K	4.10	.56	Agree
31K to 65K	3.61	.97	Agree
66K and above	3.96	1.09	Agree

Source: Authors.

3.4. Significant Relationship Between the Mental Health Challenges and Coping Strategies Employed by Seafarers.

The Pearson correlation analysis in Table 4 examines the relationship between mental health challenges and coping strategies employed by seafarers. The sample consists of 46 seafarers, suggesting that this group provides a fair representation of individuals experiencing and managing mental health challenges in the seafaring profession. The p-value of .003 indicates that there is a statistically significant relationship between the mental health challenges and coping strategies among the sample at the 0.01 level of significance. Since .003 is less than

.01, this result supports a strong association between these variables. Consequently, as seafarers encounter increased mental health challenges, the type and frequency of coping strategies they use may also change.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Result in the Significant Relationship Between the Mental Health Challenges and Coping Strategies Employed by Seafarers.

Variables	N	p-value	Sig.
Mental Health Challenges	46	.003	Significant @ 0.01 level of significance
Coping Strategies			

p>.05

Source: Authors.

4. Summary of the Problem and Findings.

The study aimed at determining the mental health challenges, coping strategies, and best practices implemented by shipowners and shipping companies to support the mental health and wellness of seafarers. The key objectives were:

1. To identify prevalent mental health challenges among seafarers, categorized by department, length of sea service, civil status, and income.
2. To explore coping strategies employed by seafarers to promote their mental health and well-being when taken as a whole and when categorized according to department, length of sea service, civil status, and income.
3. To assess best practices implemented by shipowners and shipping companies to support seafarers' mental health and wellness of seafarers when taken as a whole and when categorized according to department, length of sea service, civil status, and income.
4. To examine if there were significant differences in mental health challenges based on demographic variables.
5. To determine if there is a significant difference in the coping strategies employed by the seafarers in promoting and ensuring their mental health and well-being when the seafarers are categorized according to department, length of sea service, civil status, and income.
6. To determine if there is a significant difference in the best practices of shipowners and shipping companies implemented to provide better support for the mental health and wellness when the seafarers are categorized according to department, length of sea service, civil status, and income.
7. To determine if there is a significant relationship between the mental health challenges and coping strategies employed by seafarers in promoting and ensuring their mental health and well-being.

8. To design an enhancement program to improve seafarers' mental health and well-being.

The findings of the research are as follows:

1. The seafarers as a whole group agreed that the most prevalent mental health challenges among seafarers were "Physical risks and dangerous injuries," "Work-life balance," and "Accessibility and effectiveness of mental health support," with a moderate agreement on "Depression and anxiety" and "Isolation and loneliness," varying across department, length of sea service, civil status, and income.
2. The seafarers, regardless of department, length of sea service, civil status, and income, agreed that staying positive, communicating with family, and taking time to unwind were the coping strategies employed in promoting and ensuring their mental health and well-being.
3. The seafarers regardless of department, length of sea service, civil status, and income agreed that shipowners and shipping companies had implemented best practices in support for their mental health and wellness particularly on observing safe working practices, regular mental health and well-being consultation, and offering shore leaves.
4. There was no significant difference in the mental health challenges when the seafarers were categorized according department, civil status, length of sea service and income.
5. There was no significant difference in the coping strategies employed in promoting and ensuring their mental health and well-being when the seafarers were categorized according department, civil status, length of sea service and income.
6. There was no significant difference in the best practices of shipowners and shipping companies implement to provide better support for the mental health and wellness of seafarers when they were categorized according department, length of sea service, and civil status, but a significant difference existed when categorized according to income.
7. There was a significant relationship between the mental health challenges and coping strategies among the sample at the 0.01 level of significance.
8. An enhancement plan is proposed for the improvement of the mental health and well-being of seafarers considering the results of the study.

Conclusions.

Seafarers experience significant mental health challenges mainly due to physical risks, poor work-life balance, and limited access to support. Regardless of department, sea service, civil status, or income, they commonly cope by staying positive, communicating with family, and unwinding. Shipowners and shipping companies have implemented best practices such as safe working conditions, consultations, and shore leave, which seafarers recognize as supportive. Mental health issues do not

differ significantly across most demographics, but the length of time at sea and income level may impact the challenges faced and support received. Equitable and consistent mental health support remains essential in the maritime industry.

Implication and Recommendations.

Results seem to reveal that seafarers face common mental health challenges such as physical risks, poor work-life balance, and limited mental health support. Also, coping strategies like staying positive and keeping in touch with family should be emphasized through structured wellness programs and onboard initiatives. Most significantly, the lack of variation across demographics highlights the universal nature of these issues, a concern which is quite pressing and calls for inclusive mental health policies. Intervention programs and institutional support practices by shipping companies are deemed pertinent to address these concerns and should be standardized across the maritime industry for better well-being.

Recommendations.

In relation to the obtained findings and conclusions the following are strongly recommended:

1. An enhancement plan is proposed for the improvement of the mental health and well-being of seafarers considering the results of the study.
2. School administrators should implement mental health education programs in maritime curricula to raise awareness and equip future seafarers with coping strategies as well as collaborate with industry partners to provide practical training on stress management and work-life balance.
3. Maritime instructors should integrate mental health awareness into training modules to prepare seafarers for the challenges they may face at sea.
4. Students should proactively engage in mental health education and prioritize self-care practices and maintain open communication with peers and instructors.
5. Guidance counselors should provide tailored support for seafarers dealing with mental health challenges and advocate for the inclusion of mental health resources in career guidance programs.
6. Maritime Higher Education Institutions should enhance health support services for students pursuing maritime career and conduct research to further understand and address mental health issues in the maritime industry.
7. Seafarers should utilize mental health support services and resources onboard and advocate for improved mental health initiatives and prioritize self-care practices.
8. Shipowners should continue implementing best practices for mental health support and safety management and invest in comprehensive mental health programs and resources for seafaring staff.

9. Future researchers should explore innovative approaches to address mental health challenges in the maritime industry and conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of mental health interventions on seafarers' well-being.

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