

The Psychological Impact of Stress and Confinement on Workers Separated from their Families



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Psychological Conditions

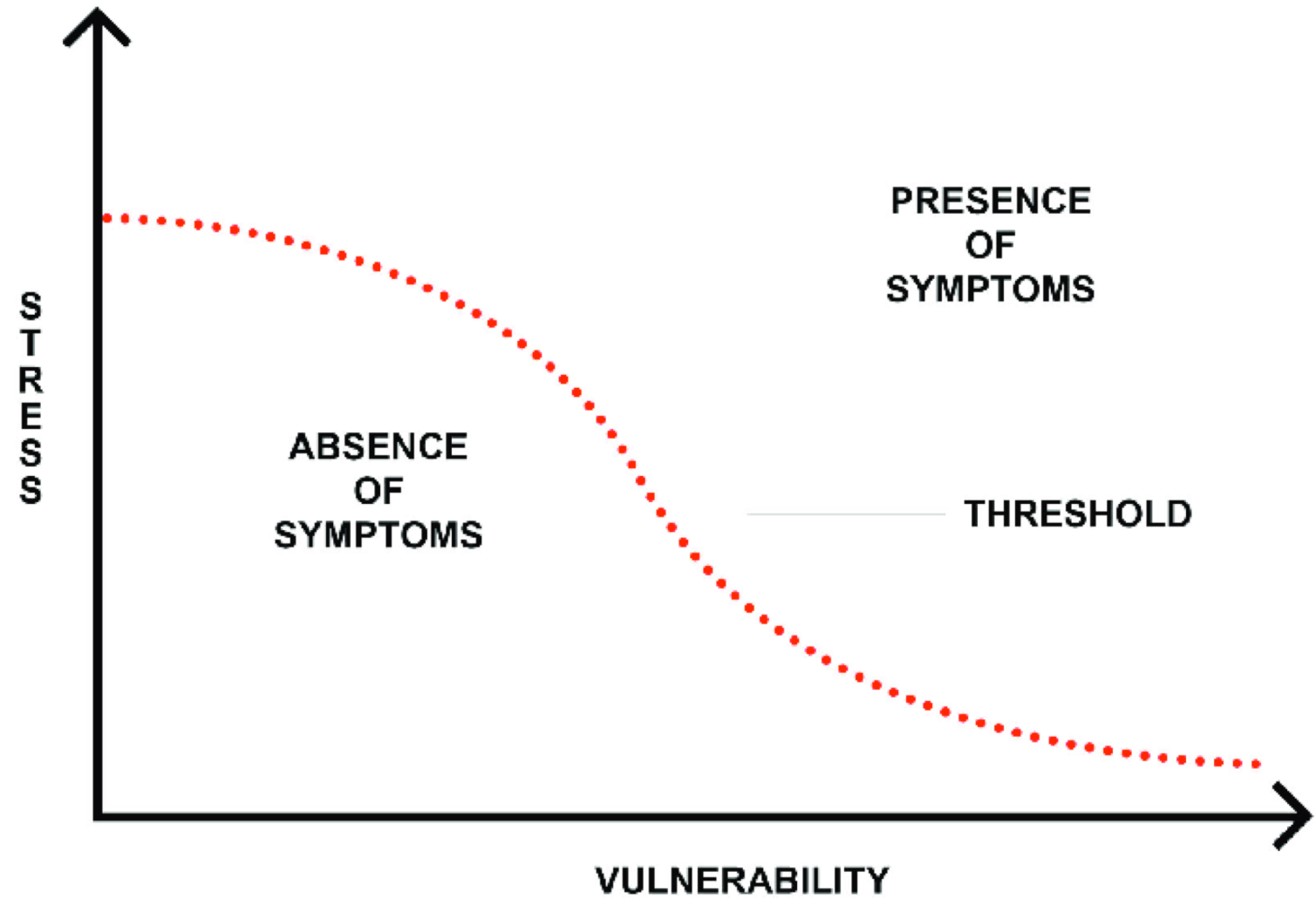


According to the World Health Organization, **1 in 4 people** will experience a mental illness in their lifetime.

Mental-health conditions are grouped in major categories:

- Depressive Disorders
- Anxiety Disorders
- Stress- and Trauma-Related Disorders
- Personality Disorders
- Psychotic Disorders
- Learning Disabilities
- Problems with Adjustment, Attachment, and Substance Use

Stress-Diathesis Model of Mental Health/Illness





Daily Hassles, Stressors, and Catastrophic Events

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Stress and Strain

- Stress is experienced uniquely by seafarers
 - Sea passage is often rated as the least stressful
 - River passage is considered moderately stressful
 - Port stay produced the highest overall strain (including physical strain)
- Common physiological reactions include fatigue and fast heartbeat, triggered in over 1/5th of the crew indicating high levels of stress
- The main stressors of the job were reported as noise, the ship's movements, and vibration. Multicultural crews pose barriers.
- Stays of up to 6-9 months are considered too lengthy. This along with the other stressors, "represent additional burdens on seafarers that are not found in land-based working environments"



Confinement

- Lack of interaction, sunlight, and exercise as well as lack of visual stimulation and human touch can change the brain dramatically
- Living in isolation with minimal work activity can lead to a syndrome of (poor) adjustment due to severe and extreme conditions of isolation and confinement
- There are a variety of myths around confined-space safety that put workers at greater risk:
 - confined spaces are dangerous spaces
 - safety equipment makes the job more risky
 - a “confined space” is any place where exiting is difficult



Prisoners

- When the hippocampus shrinks it can lead to disorientation
- Solitary confinement can reduce social problems like violence and outbursts, but its use in jails is increasingly controversial
- Growing evidence points to the fact that isolation can lead to negative physiological, psychological and neurological effects (for example, ulcers, depression, and vision loss)
- Passengers from cruise ships have been transferred to military bases – some described the transport received as like “being on a prison bus” – sailors may have to prepare for more confinement



Long-Haul Truck Drivers

- Truck drivers deal with both high job stress and poor sleep quality
- Compared to other occupations, they engage in more excessively unhealthy behaviours and tend to have disproportionately poorer health outcomes
- Factors such as adverse work organization characteristics, poor sleep, job stress, and negative health behaviours lead to increased physical and psychological health outcomes in long-haul truck drivers
- These factors lead to increased odds of receiving a mental health diagnosis, and low sleep (7 hours or less) in particular is associated with poor physical health outcomes



Astronauts





Seafarers

- There is often a high degree of time pressure during port stay and mental and physical strain of the crew members is at its highest at that time
- Good planning, coordination, and timely communication between the captain and port authorities is desirable although not always practical
- Energy expenditure is lower during sea and river passage and sailors heart rates tend to be lower – good time for psychoeducational programming and activities
- Different ports may give rise to different stress levels
- Tailor-made, onboard health measures (sport, nutrition) are necessary to promote and improve individual and group health status of seafarers
- Separation from home and family can be a major stressor



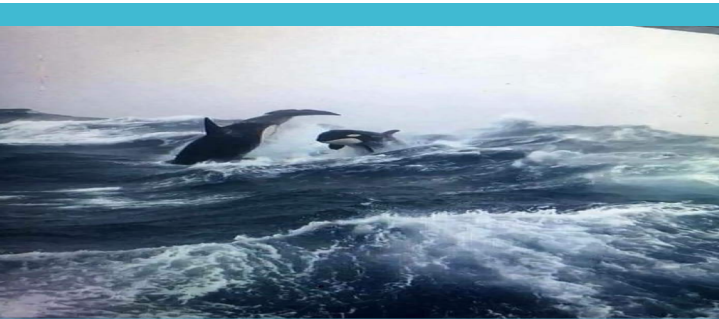
COVID – 19

Lockdown

- Half of the people on lockdown felt anxious and/or stressed during the first three weeks of sheltering at home
- Most of them spent a lot of time thinking about how to protect themselves and their families – which tended to lead to psychological, moral, and physical fatigue
- Anxiety increases upon seeing a rise in the local number of cases and deaths

Mental Health

- The COVID-19 crisis has led to a variety of psychological problems, such as:
 - Mood fluctuation/low mood
 - Boredom and excess stress
 - Extreme anxiety, worry, and preoccupation with the news
 - Unstable emotional states
 - Sedentary lifestyle: Leisure time is generally spent watching TV, using the Internet, or reading



Seafaring in the time of COVID

- WHO international health regulations are not enforceable and many countries do not have the resources to comply
- “A ship on international waters can slip between the cracks of disease surveillance”
- Need for adequate testing
 - follow each country’s protocols and procedures
 - test two weeks apart when necessary
- Are there isolation areas on board where people can quarantine effectively?
- Brainstorm ways to meet host countries’ on-land requirements for isolation or quarantine and how they can be accomplished either on board or ashore



Separation from Home and Family

- Long voyages are stressful for all crew members and they pose a particular strain for the family members at home
- When unexpected delays occur, more overall stress is experienced by families
- In the 1990s, recommendations were made to the members of the U.S. Navy and their families to help them cope with separation, isolation, mobility, and possibly death – and to help “immunize families against stress”
- A series of psychosocial programs about the service itself, how to deal with loneliness, and parenting issues was developed
- Topics covered include: normalizing the the lifestyle: “seafaring families are healthy families,” managing expectations and responses to change, increasing families’ resources, and anticipating possible problems.
- For example, the *anxiety* felt during the transit home is normalized and *worry* is reframed as productive if it motivates partners to make their relationship stronger.



Possible Solutions

- Combat boredom and burnout through the creation of recreational programs, social gatherings, games, exercise equipment, books, and worksheets.
- Provide ample opportunities for sleep and leisure during sea passage and other less-demanding periods.
- Make adequate, low-cost ICT (Information and Communication Technology) widely available, i.e., in private cabins and not just in mess rooms and other common areas. Create incentives for completing online learning.

Further Recommendations

- Offer tailor-made health programs and psychosocial interventions when the ships are at sea. Facilitate “welcome-aboard” and “family-reunion” workshops.
- Create health-promotion programs that focus on healthy sleep, exercise, and nutrition, and provide training in health issues – such as relaxation techniques – that can improve sailors’ resilience.
- Connect with psychiatrists who can provide virtual assessment and diagnosis virtually or by phone to facilitate treatment and medication needs, early intervention, and community support.

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