

Understanding the Awareness of Mental Health Care Among the Marine Engineers in Mumbai

Ms. Harshana Uchil Kuveskar

Guru Nanak College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Mumbai.

Abstract

The current research paper focused on understanding the awareness of mental health care among the marine engineers in Mumbai. The study examined male marine engineers (N=6) in the age group of 29 to 31 years old, through a Qualitative study using focused group case study method and discussed about the mental health awareness and need for being mentally healthy among the marine engineers. The analysis found that the motivating factor for the marine engineers is the pay they receive at the end of the month. It was also seen that the shipping companies do not pay a lot of attention to Employees' Mental Health. However, out of the 6 individuals interviewed, one individual belonged to a shipping company that would provide psychometric assessments to its employees before they would go on ship. Here, if they did not meet the criteria of the psychometric assessments, they weren't allowed on the ship, instead they would be provided with counseling. While on board if the employee would feel emotionally disturbed and if that's affecting their work, they would be asked to sign off. On their arrival the company would provide them with some counseling session by a trained counselor. Further analysis also pointed out that providing mental health training to the seniors on the ship would really help maintain a good healthy working environment on board. As a further research, industrial organizational intervention study is needed in the field to understand the impact of mental health intervention on marine engineers.

Keywords: Mental Health, Mariners.

Introduction

Life at sea is not less than a roller coaster ride. Being away from the loved ones and devote one's life to the sea for next 6 to 7 months with complete strangers is not easy. As an outsider life at sea seems very exciting, since this profession pays its employees very generously. It indeed comes across as a very glamorous profession, since the employees not only get paid well but also get to travel the world on shipping company's cost. They also get to experience various cultures, since they work with people from different countries. They get to witness the beauty of the marine flora and fauna.

This profession like any other profession, comes with its share of ups and downs. Staying away from family and friends is not easy. They miss upon important events and celebrations. They may not be aware of some emergency that has taken place back home. Even when they are told about the emergency, there will be a sense of helplessness that they shall experience. Family too may hesitate to share their concerns and worries with their mariner sons or husbands.

In other professions, where people have a corporate job, or work in any other private or government sector at the end of the day they get to be home and spend quality time with their family and friends. However, for those working on ship, this privilege is missed. Mariners must face the same people, do the same work,

experience stress with respect to work and stress in interpersonal relations and continue being there till they complete their tenure. Since, they do not get to spend time with their family or friends, chances are they will not feel emotionally relieved and will be under stress for most of the time.

Mental health is often neglected in this profession. Repercussion of the same are inability to manage one's emotions while on the ship. People tend to get irritated and frustrated way too often. They tend to displace their anger on their juniors or co-workers. Work on ship involves a considerable level of risk, due to stress one can get distracted and mistakes while working could cost them a lot.

According to a paper titled Human factor competencies for the future mariner by Captain Pradeep Chawla (2015), which clearly states that as future mariners they need to be able to cope with increased stress, able to communicate effectively and able to be a leader. All these competencies need to be developed within these mariners by Industrial Organizational Psychologists.

In a study focused on the negative impact of working in isolated conditions, it was seen that the constraints of the restricted environment lead to the occupational stress among the submariners (Brasher et al., 2010). In another study it was seen that the prevalence of tobacco and alcohol consumption amongst seafarers was higher than that in the general population (Pougnet, et al, 2014). Another study also showed that the rate of suicide by seafarers is much higher than general populations and that the causes of depression leading to suicide include loneliness, separation from families, stress, lack of shore leave, short ship turn around times and cultural problems (Iversen, 2011).

A recent research focused on the marital status of the mariner. In this study, it was seen that the marital satisfaction correlated with the level of stress and anxiety among mariners, constituting as a stress inhibitor (Peplińska, 2013). A study on mariners revealed that the long working hours, heat in the workplace, separation from the family, time pressure, hectic activities and job burnout factors contribute to job dissatisfaction (M. Patchiappane & Dr. J. Rengamani,2017).

According to another study on Seafarers it was observed that they have higher hospitalization and mortality rates than age matched peers, due to exposure to unique health risk factors (J. Audruskiene, et al., 2016)

The current research paper understands the awareness among the marine engineers about the necessity for mental health care.

Rationale

- The comparatively different work life.
- The possible negative impact of this profession on employees' mental health.

Aim

- To understand the awareness and need of mental health care among the marine engineers.
- To explore the role of a mental health practitioner for the mental wellbeing of mariners.

Method

Focused group case study

Participants- 6 male, marine engineers

Age group- 29 to 31 years old

Designation- Watchkeeping/ Operational Engineers

Experience- 2 to 3 years

Case Analysis and Discussion

The Focus group analysis was categorized into four parts:

1. The work environment
2. The Family
3. The Marine engineering profession
4. Mental Health Awareness and Promotion

The work environment

The work environment was considered stressful, there is lack of sleep, the stress level also depends to an extent on the kind of co-workers, seniors' attitude and the length of the voyage. Short voyages involve a lot more work and compromises on rest hours, so it's not preferred much as compared to the long voyage. The risk level working on the ship also depends on how old the ship is. Older the ship, more maintenance would be required, the engineers would be expected to be more vigilant. At times the parts of these ships will not be easily available for replacement. Hence considering all these problems the risk level on ships increases. This was also seen in one of the researches by J. Andruskiene, et al in 2016.

These marine engineers work in the temperature of 40 to 50 degrees, which makes the working conditions even more stressful. They then feel fatigued. According to the marine regulations, the engineers are not supposed to work more than 72 hours in a week (6 days) i.e. not more than 12 hours a day. But at times during emergencies or when the ship is in port, working hours do go beyond 12 hours.

The ships are of two types- manned ships and unmanned ships(automatic). The working conditions are comparatively less stressful in an unmanned ship. The problem with unmanned ships is that the emergency alarm can run at any time of the night, when everyone's fast asleep, so at that time then the designated engineer will have to compromise on his sleep and attend to the emergency alarm. The free time on ship involves- rest, food and sleep. If time permits and if the co-workers are friendly enough, they also engage in some board games, video games and watching movies.

The work environment points out to the fact that the working conditions are very stressful, due to the long working hours, unfriendly co-workers and unsupportive leaders. Here, Mental health practitioner's role would be to provide training to the marine engineers to manage their stress, to be able to work in a team and support each other and to impart leadership skills to the leaders.

Family

For the family members the initial days of being away from their son, brother, husband is a little difficult. This was also seen in a research done by M. Patchiappane & Dr. J. Rengamani (2017). As time passes the family gets used to their schedule and separation. Connectivity at times becomes a problem, especially when there is an emergency. Many a times, family do not inform their mariner son/ husband about the emergency, because they don't want their mariner son/husband to be stressed. Since, the family is aware that their son is going to feel helpless anyway, hence there is no point telling them about the emergency. Likewise, mariners too do not share their problems that they face on the sea with their families for the exact same reasons. Ideally, when we share our problems with our loved ones, we feel a little better since we get the words of encouragement and support, which does not happen in this field, hence the frustration builds up and stress level increases.

Every mariner is insured by the company. So, if in case there is some accident that takes place while on board, the company takes care of all the medical expenses. There is an official body named maritime union

that takes care of the mariners and his immediate family. In case of emergencies families can contact the company or call directly on the ship to the satellite phones on board or send emails on the common email id. However, as per the maritime regulation internet/Wi-Fi is provided on the ships these days and it is made compulsory. Signal strength could be a problem at times, and data usage too is limited. The job demands that these mariners stay away from their family for months together

Special counselling needs to be provided for those mariners who are new to this field. Counselling shall help them deal with the loneliness of being away from families better. Group counselling sessions could be arranged for the family members, to make them aware about the life on ship. At times family could put undue pressure on their sons or husbands, ones they become aware about the hardships on the sea, they shall try to deal with their problems on their own and not pressurize their sons or spouses regarding the problems in the house. Group counselling could also help family members to become mentally strong and make them mentally efficient to take care of the house, bills, kids and family

Profession

The marine engineering profession was considered as a passion only during the college days, ones they started working all the passion and adventure towards the field became secondary, because of all the hardship involved. This was a new observation and not found in the earlier research.

While on board the mariners need to follow safety protocol to avoid any unforeseen circumstances. The best government scheme that has been provided to the mariners is that if they are on board for 180 or more days during one financial year, their income tax is exempted.

They need to compulsorily undergo safety and technical training.

Financial planning becomes a problem for marine engineers, since they do not earn round the year. They need to spend on courses and exams along with other basic and luxury goods too. There is unpredictability in this profession, since they do not know when they will join when will they sign off. Unpredictability brings its share of stress. Every employee aims for job satisfaction in his or her profession, which is seen less here. Ones an employee is satisfied with his job, the amount of work or the stress or the salary wouldn't matter.

As industrial psychologists, we need to find out ways and means to make life at sea more satisfying to our mariners. There is a lot of unpredictability and uncertainty in this field, may be that could be reduced, if the shipping companies realise the consequences of such uncertainties on the mariners' mental health and the chain effect of the same on the shipping industry.

Mental health related

Medical examination is done, to see to it that the employee is medically fit to go on the ship. First aid kit is available on board for small problems or injuries.

However, with respect to mental health awareness not all companies consider it as important. Out of the 6 interviewed marine engineers from different shipping company, in only one interviewee's shipping company the employees need to undergo psychometric assessment and if the employees scores fall under the assessment criteria, only then he is sent for the sailing. Here even when the person is on board and if he is emotionally disturbed, he is provided either telephonic counselling or asked to sign off. On his arrival the company arranges for counselling session for the employee with a trained counsellor.

Currently the interpersonal issues on board are dealt by trying not to isolate oneself or talking to someone else but not directly to the person. There are harassments that do happen on the ship, but the interviewees

haven't experienced anything. Now the regulations are very strict. It's important to be tough on the ship or else people on the ship can push you down. Senior people higher in age and designation do tend to displace their stress and pressure on junior employees. According to the interviewees there is not much to like in the sea world.

According to the interviewees, for some mariners after a certain age they like being more on board than at home, reason being they are seniors on ship, and they get a lot of respect on board. Apparently, the family is used to living away from them, and the mariners are also used to living away from the family. It takes a few days to adjust to work after a long gap, also to adjust to home life after working for so long. Promotional exams are mentally exhausting, since the syllabus is not fixed, answering pattern is not fixed. There is no proper structure that they are aware of in the format of the exam being conducted in India. Population is high and surveyors (examiners) are less. Surveyors too are permitted to only clear a specific percentage of students.

The interviewees said that they are used to the sea life now; they need not prepare themselves mentally in any special way. However, they warn the young generation from entering this field, due to the unpredictability of this profession.

According to the interviewees, better planning is needed in the shipping industry. The salary structure needs to be improved, since it's not revised from a long time. Also, the number of colleges providing marine engineering degree needs to be reduced, there needs to be an improvement in the standard of technical trainings and more structure in the format of the exams conducted, also they wish to see routine and certainty across all ships. Lastly Mental Health training shall benefit them in times of loneliness, stress and managing their emotions they experience while on board

Following steps needs to be taken in order to improve the efficiency of the marine engineers: Regular counselling to the mariners is needed, juniors mariners to be trained on mental health care, providing mental health training to seniors on the ship would help maintain healthy working environment on board. Along with technical certifications mental health workshops and certification should also be made mandatory.

The research shall further concentrate on the interventions needed to create more awareness and promotion of mental health care among the marine engineers.

Limitations and Recommendations:

The current research could focus only on the marine engineers from Mumbai belonging to the grade of operations engineer.

Future research could take into consideration seniors working in this profession with 10-15 years of work experience.

Future research could also focus on the interventions for helping the mental wellbeing of marine engineers.

Conclusion

The current research understood that the awareness of mental health care isn't much among the marine engineers.

The current research also understood the hardships involved in marine engineering profession.

The current research also tried to explore the role of mental health practitioner/Industrial Organizational Psychologist in making the mariners' life on board more comfortable.

The current research could create a base for future interventions in this field in order to develop a better mental health care facility or program for the marine engineers.

Also as rightly stated by Captain Pradeep Chawla in the paper titled Human factor competencies for the future mariners, they need to be able to cope with increased stress, able to communicate effectively and able to be a leader. All these competencies need to be developed within these mariners by Industrial Organizational Psychologists.

References

1. K. Brasher, A. Dew, S. Kliminister & R. Bridger, 2010 *Occupational Stress in Submariners: the impact of isolated and confined work on psychological well-being*, Ergonomics, Taylor & Francis Vol: 53, 305-313.
2. R. Pougnet, L. Pougnet, B. Loddé, L. Canals, S. Bell, D. Lucas, J.Dewitte, 2014 *Consumption of addictive substances in mariners*, International Maritime Health, Vol 65, No. 4, 199-204.
3. R. Iversen, 2011 *The mental health of seafarers: a brief review, 2011* Актуальні проблеми транспортної медицини, 3 (25) 38-48.
4. A. Peplińska, M. Jeżewska, I. Leszczyńska, P. Połomski, *Stress and the level of perceived anxiety among mariners: the mediating role of marital satisfaction*, 2013 International Maritime Health; 64 (4): 221-225.
5. M. Patchiappane & Dr. J. Rengamani, *A Study on the Job Satisfaction and Job Burnout of Indian Marine Engineers*, 2017 International Journal of Civil Engineering and Technology; 8 (11): 427-436.
6. J. Andruskiene, S. Barseviciene & G. Varoneckas, *Poor Sleep, Anxiety, Depression and Other Occupational Health Risks in Seafaring Population*, 2016 The International Journal on Marine Navigation and Safety of Sea Transportation; 10 (1): 19-26.
7. Web source:
8. https://www.he-alert.org/filemanager/root/site_assets/standalone_article_pdfs_1220-/he01345.pdf
Capt. Pradeep Chawla, Human Factor Competencies for the Future Mariners.