

# The mental health of Seafarers

A joint project by  
Melbourne Port Welfare Association  
*beyondblue: the national depression initiative*  
The Rotary Club of Melbourne South  
Stella Maris Seafarers' Centre  
The Mission to Seafarers Victoria



Rotary Club of



Melbourne South



beyondblue  
the national depression initiative  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

The purpose of this booklet is to provide Masters and other ship's officers with basic information about the mental illness of depression so seafarers who are depressed may be identified and helped.

## HELPLINE TELEPHONE NUMBERS 24 HOURS A DAY IN AUSTRALIA

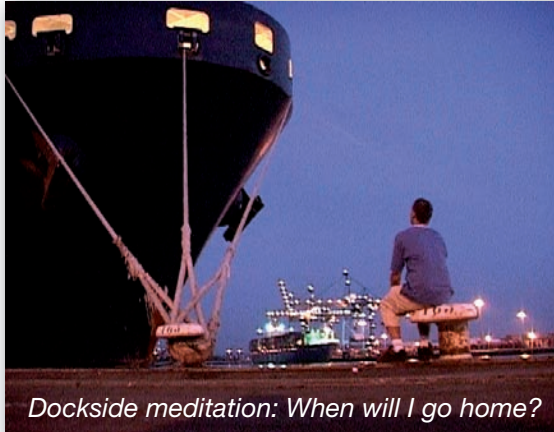
For assistance in English call Lifeline Australia – **13 11 14**

For assistance in other languages call Commonwealth Interpreter Service – **13 14 50**

For emergency assistance from police or ambulance on board ship or ashore – **000**

For general information about depression call the *beyondblue* info line on **1300 22 4636** or visit [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

# The Mental Health of Seafarers



*Dockside meditation: When will I go home?*

## NOTICE TO MASTERS AND SENIOR OFFICERS

This booklet on recognizing the issues of Seafarer's depression is provided as a guide to you and your officers.

You may also obtain some further knowledge and understanding of this Assistance Program from The Mission to Seafarers, Stella Maris Seafarers' Centre, and other seafarer welfare agencies' ship visitors and volunteers at the centers.

Your ship's agent should also be aware of this Assistance Program if you need further information.



# The mental health of Seafarers

Mental illness among seafarers is of growing concern and it's believed that mental health problems may contribute to many other physical health conditions that seafarers experience.

Due to the nature of their work, seafarers are often separated from their families and support networks for long periods of time and may feel very lonely. The fast turnaround times of modern ships often result in limited time for shore leave.

Recent research by international maritime organisations has shown that seafarers may be more likely than their shore counterparts to experience mental health problems.

Different cultures are often found aboard ships and differing cultural expressions and stigma associated with mental illness can make it difficult to recognise and to treat effectively.

Seafarers who are severely depressed, thinking of suicide or self harm may not tell their fellow crew members because mental illness is not discussed openly in their cultures.

It is hoped this booklet will give Masters information needed to identify crew members at risk and help depressed seafarers on their ships.

Robert Iversen  
Project Manager  
Rotary Club of Melbourne South

## Depression Checklist

To find out if you, or someone you know may have depression, complete the checklist below.

For more than **TWO WEEKS** have you:

Tick if  
Yes

1. Felt sad, down or miserable most of the time?
2. Lost interest or pleasure in most of your usual activities?

**If you answered 'YES' to either of these questions, complete the symptom checklist below. If you did not answer 'YES' to either of these questions, it is unlikely that you have a depressive illness.**

3. Lost or gained a lot of weight? OR  
Had a decrease or increase in appetite?
4. Sleep disturbance?
5. Felt slowed down, restless or excessively busy?
6. Felt tired or had no energy?
7. Felt worthless? OR  
Felt excessively guilty? OR  
Felt guilt about things you should not have been feeling guilty about?
8. Had poor concentration? OR  
Had difficulties thinking? OR  
Were very indecisive?
9. Had recurrent thoughts of death?

Add up the number of ticks for your total score: \_\_\_\_\_

### What does your score mean?

(assuming you answered 'YES' to question 1 and/or question 2)

- 4 or less: Unlikely to have a depressive illness  
5 or more: Likely to have a depressive illness

**For further assessment, or if you are concerned about any of these symptoms, please consult a doctor or another health professional.**

References: American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, 4th ed (DSM-IV), Washington, DC, APA, 1994; and, International classification of diseases and related health problems, 10th revision, Geneva, World Health Organisation, 1989-1994.

For more information about depression, visit the **beyondblue** website at: [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) or call 1300 22 4636



04/09

## Helpline Telephone Numbers in Australia

The following are **helpline** telephone numbers that Masters and ship's officers can call **24/7** for assistance.

**For assistance in English call: Lifeline Australia – 13 11 14**

**For assistance in other languages call: Commonwealth Interpreter Service – 13 14 50**

**For emergency assistance from police or ambulance on board ship or ashore – 000**

**For general information about depression call the *beyondblue* info line on 1300 22 4636**

# Understanding depression



## INFORMATION FOR ADULTS

Depression is more than just a low mood – it’s a serious illness. People with depression find it hard to function every day. Depression has serious effects on *physical* and *mental* health.

### HOW DO YOU KNOW IF A PERSON IS DEPRESSED AND NOT JUST SAD?

A person may be depressed, if **for more than two weeks** they have:

- felt sad, down or miserable most of the time

**OR**

- lost interest or pleasure in most of their usual activities.

**AND** experienced a number of these symptoms:

#### Behaviour

- Stopping going out
- Not getting things done at work
- Withdrawing from close family and friends
- Relying on alcohol and sedatives
- No longer doing things they enjoyed
- Unable to concentrate

#### Thoughts

- “I’m a failure.”
- “It’s my fault.”
- “Nothing good ever happens to me.”
- “I’m worthless.”
- “Life’s not worth living.”

#### Feelings

- Overwhelmed
- Guilty
- Irritable
- Frustrated
- No confidence
- Unhappy
- Indecisive
- Disappointed
- Miserable
- Sad

#### Physical

- Tired all the time
- Sick and run down
- Headaches and muscle pains
- Churning gut
- Sleep problems
- Loss or change of appetite
- Significant weight loss or gain

In most cases, depression will go on for weeks or months if left untreated. If it isn’t properly treated, depression is highly likely to recur.

### WHAT MAKES A PERSON MORE AT RISK OF DEPRESSION?

#### Some events or situations have been linked with depression:

- family conflict
- isolation or loneliness
- unemployment
- having a serious medical illness
- drug and alcohol use
- changes in the brain
- having a family member with depression.

It’s important to remember that each person is different and it is often a combination of factors that puts a person at risk of depression.

### HOW COMMON IS DEPRESSION?

Very common. Around one million Australian adults and 160,000 young people live with depression each year. On average, one in five females and one in eight males will experience depression in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT ARE THE TREATMENTS FOR DEPRESSION?

Depression is often not recognised or treated.

Different types of depression require different types of treatments. This may include physical exercise for preventing and treating mild depression, through to psychological and drug treatments for more severe levels of depression.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008). 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results (4326.0). Canberra: ABS.

# Understanding depression



## INFORMATION FOR ADULTS

### PSYCHOLOGICAL TREATMENTS

Psychological treatments deal with problems that particularly affect people with depression, such as changing negative thought patterns. CBT is a structured program which recognises that the way people think affects the way they feel.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) helps to correct negative thought patterns. CBT is a structured program which recognises that the way people think affects the way they feel.

Interpersonal Therapy (IPT) is a structured program with a specific focus on improving relationships.

Psychological treatments can help to:

- change negative thoughts and feelings
- encourage the person to get involved in activities
- speed the person's recovery
- prevent depression from recurring
- identify ways to manage the illness and stay well.

### MEDICATIONS

People who are depressed often feel physically unwell.

Antidepressant drug treatments can relieve the physical symptoms of depression as well as the mood symptoms.

Drug treatments for depression are not addictive.

Many people worry about the potential side-effects of antidepressant medication. It's important to know that when depression isn't treated effectively, physical health often gets worse.

### THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS TO FIND A TREATMENT THAT WORKS.

There is a range of treatments that are proven to work. Each person needs to find the treatment that's right for them. Often a combination of treatment approaches is most useful.

### WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP?

People with depression can often find it difficult to take the first step in seeking help. They may need to get help with the support of their family, friends and/or health professional e.g. a

doctor or psychologist. Visit [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) and click on [Get Help](#). With the right treatment, most people recover from depression. Delaying treatments may delay recovery.

### YOU CAN HELP SOMEONE BY:

- assisting them to get information from a website or library
- suggesting they go to a doctor or health professional
- assisting them to make an appointment
- accompanying them to their appointment with a doctor or health professional
- following them up after the appointment
- encouraging or getting them involved in social activities
- discouraging them from treating themselves with alcohol or other drugs.

### IT WOULD BE UNHELPFUL TO:

- put pressure on them by telling them to 'snap out of it' or 'get their act together'
- stay away or avoid them
- tell them they just need to stay busy or get out more
- pressure them to party more or wipe out how they're feeling with drugs and alcohol.

If you or someone you know needs help, talk to your family doctor or another health professional about getting appropriate treatment.

### RECOMMENDED DEPRESSION WEBSITES

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Information on depression, anxiety and related disorders, available treatments and where to get help

[www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com)

*beyondblue's* website for young people

[www.crufad.org](http://www.crufad.org)

Information and internet-based education and treatment programs for people with depression or anxiety

[www.blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au)

Information about depression and bipolar disorder

[www.mmha.org.au](http://www.mmha.org.au)

Mental health information for people from culturally diverse backgrounds

[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

Information, support and services for young people aged 12 to 25

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# How can you help someone with depression/anxiety?



## HOW DO YOU LET A PERSON KNOW THAT YOU THINK THEY MIGHT NEED HELP?

It's not always easy to know how to help someone who is experiencing depression/anxiety. It can be hard to know what to say or do. We all respond to situations and talk about things differently. The following approaches are designed with this in mind. They offer you a number of ways to help a friend or family member.



### Initiate talk

Taking that first step towards helping a person who appears to be in need, requires some thought and care. Choose a mutually convenient time and place.

### Listen more than talk

Sometimes, when a person you care about wants to talk, they're not necessarily seeking advice, but just need to talk about some of their concerns. Listening, rather than talking, is a way of understanding how someone feels. This is called *active* listening. You may like to save any suggestions, solutions or advice for a later discussion and instead, offer neutral comments such as 'I can see how that would bother you'.

### Use appropriate body language

Body language plays an important role in helping the person you care about to feel more comfortable. To show you are listening, try to maintain eye contact and sit in a relaxed position.

### Use open-ended questions

Open-ended questions are a good way to start a conversation. They require more information and can't be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. Some examples are 'So tell me about...?' or 'What's troubling you?'

### Difficult conversations

Sometimes, if people are experiencing the symptoms of depression/anxiety, they may find it awkward to discuss their thoughts and emotions openly. They may even get angry with you when you ask if they're OK.

The following tips may be helpful when approaching a difficult conversation:

- Stay calm
- Be firm, fair and consistent
- If you are wrong, admit it
- Don't lose control.

For more information see *beyondblue* **Fact sheet – Understanding depression** and **Fact sheet 21 – Anxiety disorders**.

### Spend time together

Often, just taking the time to talk to or be with the person lets them know you care and can help you understand what they're going through.

### Take care of yourself

As a family member or friend of someone who is experiencing depression/anxiety, it's important to look after yourself. Take time to relax and enjoy things you like doing.

There are organisations that can provide support, education and information – see *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 2 – Caring for a person with depression/anxiety**.

# How can you help someone with depression/anxiety?



## PRACTICAL WAYS TO HELP

People with depression/anxiety often don't see the point of doing anything and may feel that no one can really help them. The type and amount of help you're able to provide may depend upon your relationship with the person experiencing depression/anxiety.

Helping someone who isn't ready to recognise they need assistance may be very difficult.

Below are some do's and don'ts for helping a person with depression/anxiety.

### DO – You can help someone by:

- Spending time talking about their experiences
- Indicating that you've noticed a change in their behaviour
- Letting them know you're there to listen without being judgemental
- Suggesting they see a doctor or health professional
- Assisting them to make an appointment with a doctor or health professional
- Going with the person to the doctor or health professional
- Asking how their appointment went
- Assisting them to find information about depression/anxiety
- Talking openly about depression/anxiety
- Encouraging them to become involved in social activities
- Encouraging them to exercise and eat well
- Providing a change of scenery occasionally
- Maintaining contact
- Encouraging other close friends and family to adopt a similar, inclusive approach
- Encouraging them to practice stress management and relaxation techniques (see *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 6 – Reducing stress**).

### DON'T – It's unhelpful to:

- Pressure them to 'snap out of it', 'get their act together', 'cheer up' or 'calm down'
- Stay away or avoid them
- Tell them they just need to stay busy or get out more
- Pressure them to party more or wipe out how they're feeling with drugs or alcohol
- Assume the problem will just go away.

For more information on caring for someone with depression, anxiety and/or a related disorder, see the *beyondblue Guide for Carers and the Carers' Stories of Hope and Recovery* DVD – available to order at [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) or by calling the *beyondblue* info line 1300 22 4636.



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# Reducing stress



## STRESS AND DEPRESSION

It is important to note that stress is not depression. However, acute distress associated with tough times can occur and may be a risk factor for depression if it persists.

## STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress is a response to an event or situation. It can be positive or negative. Stress is common in daily life and may be associated with work, family or personal relationships. It usually means that something is happening that's causing worry and affecting how we are thinking and feeling.

Think about what you've been doing and how you've been feeling over the last two weeks. Have you:

1. Found it hard to relax most of the time?  YES  NO
2. Felt stressed and overwhelmed most of the time?  YES  NO
3. Felt panicky and anxious most of the time?  YES  NO

If you've answered YES to one or more of these questions, it might be helpful to use the information in this fact sheet to reduce your stress.

Stress management teaches you about:

- Managing stress and anxiety symptoms
- Breathing exercises to decrease your stress and anxiety
- Relaxing and the importance of physical activity.

## WAYS TO REDUCE STRESS

Stress is common in daily life and may be associated with work, family or personal relationships. Whatever the cause, there are some simple steps that can help you to reduce stress.

### Postpone major life changes

- Making major changes in your life can be stressful at any time. If you're feeling stressed or anxious, it's probably a good idea to try to avoid moving house or changing jobs. Leave them to a time when you're feeling better.

### Resolve personal conflicts

- Stress in personal relationships often contributes to depression and anxiety. Talk to a counsellor or psychologist who can help you find ways to address your problems.

### Do the things you enjoy

- You may find you are enjoying yourself less and spending

more time worrying. In order to relax effectively, you need to allocate time to do the things you enjoy, such as exercising, meditating, reading, gardening or listening to music.

### Control your work

- Take control of your work by avoiding long hours and additional responsibilities. This can be difficult, but small changes can make a difference.
- Learn to say 'No' more often. Create a balance between work and the things you enjoy doing. Don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed by new commitments.
- Make sure you have enough time to rest, relax and exercise.
- Part of learning to relax requires you to set aside some time in the day to do the things you enjoy.

### Exercise regularly

- Physical exercise such as walking, swimming, dancing, playing golf or going to the gym can help relieve the tension in your muscles and relax your mind.
- Try to do some physical exercise every day, even if it's just going for a walk.

### Seek help

- Talking to a friend, doctor, counsellor or someone else you trust, can help to relieve your stress. Asking for help and support at home, at work or in your other activities can also reduce stress.

## CONTROLLED BREATHING EXERCISE

Have you noticed that you're breathing too fast? Stress and anxiety can affect your heart rate and breathing patterns. A relaxed breathing rate is usually 10 to 12 breaths per minute.

Practise this exercise three to four times a day when you're feeling stressed or anxious so that you can use this as a short-term coping strategy.

1. Time the number of breaths you take in one minute. Breathing in, then out is counted as one breath.
2. Breathe in, hold your breath and count to five. Then breathe out and say the word 'relax' to yourself in a calm, soothing manner.
3. Start breathing in through your nose and out slowly through your mouth, in a six-second cycle. Breathe in for three seconds and out for three seconds. This will produce a breathing rate of 10 breaths per minute. In the beginning, it can be helpful to time your breathing using the second hand of a watch or clock.

*continues overleaf...*





4. Count to yourself.
5. Continue breathing in a six-second cycle for at least five minutes or until the symptoms of overbreathing have settled.

After practising this exercise, time the number of breaths you take in one minute. Practise the controlled breathing exercise each day before breakfast, lunch, dinner and bedtime. Use the technique whenever you feel anxious. Gradually, you'll be familiar enough with the exercise to stop timing yourself.

**Practise this exercise three to four times each day, so that it becomes easy to use as a short-term coping strategy when you feel anxious.**

## MUSCLE TENSION EXERCISE

When you are feeling stressed and anxious, your muscles become tense. When your muscles remain tense for long periods, you can start to develop aches and pains, fatigue, headaches and difficulty breathing.

Take a few minutes to do this exercise. It will help you understand how muscle tension can cause pain and fatigue.

1. Hold a piece of paper in your hand and stretch your arm out in front of you.
2. Keep holding the paper for a few minutes without moving your arm.

You will probably notice that your arm feels tired after only a few minutes and may even start to ache in some places. Imagine how your arm would feel if you continued to hold that piece of paper for a number of hours. Although the paper is not heavy, keeping your muscles tense for any length of time can cause pain.

## MUSCLE RELAXATION EXERCISE

This exercise helps to reduce physical and mental tension. Practise this exercise regularly and at the first signs of muscle tension.

1. Sit in a comfortable chair in a quiet room
2. Put your feet flat on the floor and rest your hands in your lap
3. Close your eyes
4. Do the controlled breathing exercise for three minutes

5. After three minutes of controlled breathing, start the muscle relaxation exercise below
6. Tense each of your muscle groups for 10 seconds, then relax for 10 seconds, in the following order:
  - **Hands:** clench your hands into fists, then relax
  - **Lower arms:** bend your hands up at the wrists, then relax
  - **Upper arms:** bend your arms up at the elbow, then relax
  - **Shoulders:** lift your shoulders up, then relax
  - **Neck:** stretch your neck gently to the left, then forward, then to the right, then backwards in a slow rolling motion, then relax
  - **Forehead and scalp:** raise your eyebrows, then relax
  - **Eyes:** close your eyes tightly, then relax
  - **Jaw:** clench your teeth, then relax
  - **Chest:** breathe in deeply, then breathe out and relax
  - **Stomach:** pull your tummy in, then relax
  - **Upper back:** pull your shoulders forward, then relax
  - **Lower back:** while sitting, roll your back into a smooth arc, then relax
  - **Buttocks:** tighten your buttocks, then relax
  - **Thighs:** push your feet firmly into the floor, then relax
  - **Calves:** lift your toes off the ground, then relax and
  - **Feet:** gently curl your toes down, then relax.
7. Continue controlled breathing for five more minutes, enjoying the feeling of relaxation
8. As you become better at relaxation, it can be more interesting to combine these exercises with memories of relaxing situations e.g. lying on a beach or doing a favourite activity.

A full session of relaxation takes about 15 to 20 minutes. Once you are good at relaxing your muscles, start relaxing tense parts of your body during the day while you are going about your daily activities.

## MORE INFORMATION

### **Coping strategies for depression and anxiety:**

*beyondblue* Fact sheet 7 – Sleeping well

*beyondblue* Fact sheet 8 – Keeping active

*beyondblue* Fact sheet 9 – Reducing alcohol and other drugs

### **Other treatments for depression and anxiety:**

*beyondblue* Fact sheet 10 – Changing your thinking

*beyondblue* Fact sheet 11 – Antidepressant medication

*beyondblue* A Guide to What Works for Depression booklet –

A comprehensive review of all known treatments for depression, including medical, psychological, complementary and lifestyle.

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