

Enhancing Mental Health Awareness in Indian Maritime Education: An Empirical Assessment of Cadet Perspectives and Training Gaps

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Abstract

This research investigates the critical yet often overlooked issue of seafarer mental health within the Indian maritime education system. The study addresses the significant challenges faced by seafarers, including isolation, long working hours, demanding work environments, and the stigma surrounding mental health. By integrating mental health awareness into maritime education curricula, the research aims to equip future maritime professionals with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to promote their own well-being and that of their colleagues. The ultimate goal is to cultivate a more resilient and psychologically healthy maritime workforce, enhancing both individual well-being and overall operational safety and efficiency. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a comprehensive literature review with a structured survey of 50 maritime students in Indian institutions. Data analysis evaluates the current status of training, student knowledge, stressors, and perceived well-being gaps. The findings inform actionable recommendations for embedding mental health literacy into the core curriculum, reducing stigma, and fostering a culture of support among seafarers to align Indian maritime academies with international best practices.

Keywords: Seafarer Mental Health, Maritime Education, India, Well-being, Resilience, Stigma, Curriculum Integration.

1. Introduction

The maritime industry plays a vital role in global trade and economic development, with seafarers serving as the backbone of international shipping operations. Despite the technical advancement and professional opportunities associated with this field, the psychological well-being of seafarers remains a growing concern. Seafarers are exposed to a unique combination of stressors that distinguish their profession from most land-based occupations. Extended contracts, irregular sleep patterns, limited recreational opportunities, and unpredictable environmental conditions contribute significantly to stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Over time, these factors can lead to burnout, reduced job performance, and in severe cases, self-harm or suicidal ideation.

The lack of comprehensive mental health awareness and support systems within Indian maritime education contributes to the high prevalence of mental health issues among seafarers. Current

frameworks prioritize mechanical and operational readiness over emotional stability. This research aims to address this problem by investigating the current state of mental health awareness in Indian maritime education, identifying training deficiencies, and assessing cadet perspectives to establish baseline metrics for curriculum reform.

Students in maritime institutions, including those under Indian Maritime University, undergo strict discipline, intensive training schedules, and long periods away from family during sea phases. These conditions often lead to stress, anxiety, homesickness, and emotional fatigue. Integrating mental health awareness into maritime education can significantly contribute to developing a more resilient and adaptive workforce, helping students recognize signs of stress, develop coping strategies, and build emotional intelligence.

2. Literature Review

Occupational and educational psychology increasingly recognizes the unique structural stressors of seafaring. Sharma (2024) assessed 109 Indian seafarers using standardized psychological tools and revealed a high prevalence of anxiety and occupational burnout, finding that prolonged exposure to demanding work conditions directly correlates with chronic psychological distress. Similarly, Anand and Joy (2023) utilized the DASS-21 scale to highlight heightened psychological distress among Indian seafarers during contract over-runs, concluding that systemic crises intensify existing institutional gaps rather than creating entirely new ones.

A defining element of maritime training is its heavy emphasis on independence and mental endurance. Joshi and Sarkar (2023) surveyed 315 Indian Merchant Navy personnel and observed that while a culture of high self-reliance supports situational composure, it frequently crosses into emotional suppression. Participants overwhelmingly preferred to manage psychological strain independently rather than reporting concerns to peers or supervisors, driven by fears of negative evaluation, loss of career progression, or perceived weakness. The authors argue that genuine resilience must encompass emotional awareness and help-seeking behaviors, which must be cultivated during pre-sea education before rigid cultural styles harden.

The Indian maritime education system, regulated by the Directorate General of Shipping (DG Shipping) under STCW guidelines, heavily favors operational competencies (e.g., navigation, marine engineering, ship stability). As Kapoor (2023) points out, cadets receive exhaustive technical instructions but virtually no training on stress management or cognitive self-care. Most institutions lack full-time counseling psychologists, dedicated wellness structures, or faculty trained to recognize early indicators of psychological strain in students.

3. Research Methodology

This study utilizes a descriptive, quantitative research design to evaluate mental health literacy, stressors, and institutional support gaps among maritime cadets. A structured questionnaire was deployed to capture numerical trends and descriptive evaluations without manipulating active institutional variables. Using a simple random sampling technique, a sample size of $N = 50$ maritime students was selected from multiple core specializations, including Nautical Science, Marine Engineering, and General Purpose (GP) Rating courses within training centers associated with the Indian Maritime University network.

The primary research tool consisted of a standardized, multi-section questionnaire comprising closed-ended multiple-choice questions, Likert scales, and selective open-ended queries focusing on past formal mental health training, personal mental health literacy, active training stressors, and awareness of support frameworks.

4. Results and Discussion

Data indicates a severe deficit in formal psychological education within active maritime programs. Table 1 outlines the prevalence of formal training received by cadets.

Had Formal Mental Health Training?	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	12	24%
No	38	76%

An overwhelming 76% of cadets have never received structured education concerning mental health during their training programs. Cadets were also asked to self-rate their understanding of psychological health conditions, as shown in Table 2.

Rated Understanding Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Very Poor	8	16%
Poor	14	28%
Average	18	36%
Good	8	16%
Very Good	2	4%

Cumulatively, 44% of respondents possess poor or very poor literacy regarding mental health. Furthermore, 80% of surveyed cadets report experiencing active stress during training, with 44% stating they experience stress 'often' or 'always'. Academic pressure (30%) and examinations (24%) emerge as the primary institutional stressors. Additionally, 84% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that family separation acts as a crucial modifier of mental health deterioration.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates a significant gap within Indian maritime education: while cadets experience high frequencies of training stress (80%) and distinctly recognize that psychological well-being directly impacts operational maritime safety (84%), the active training curriculum remains heavily skewed toward technical competence, leaving 76% of students completely devoid of formal mental health training.

Recommendations include: (1) Mandatory STCW Curriculum Integration: introduce standardized modules covering stress management and emotional regulation; (2) De-stigmatization Campaigns: establish confidential peer-support frameworks; (3) Faculty Gatekeeper Training: train instructors to identify early warning signs of cadet burnout and anxiety.

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