



# *Steps to Positive Mental Health*

Good Mental Health Guide for Seafarers





There are several factors that can impact seafarers' mental health; such as job stress, family pressures, limited shore leave and more. Being away at sea can also make it difficult to access support.

However, help is out there! This self-help guide details some skills, exercises and coping strategies to help you deal with your emotions when life becomes stressful or your mood is low.



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ISWAN is an international charity which is dedicated to the relief of hardship or distress amongst seafarers of all nationalities, races, colour and creeds irrespective of gender.

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



**SeafarerHelp**  
*The lifeline for seafarers*

We run the free 24 hour multilingual helpline – SeafarerHelp – which aims to assist seafarers and their families whatever the problem, wherever they are in the world.

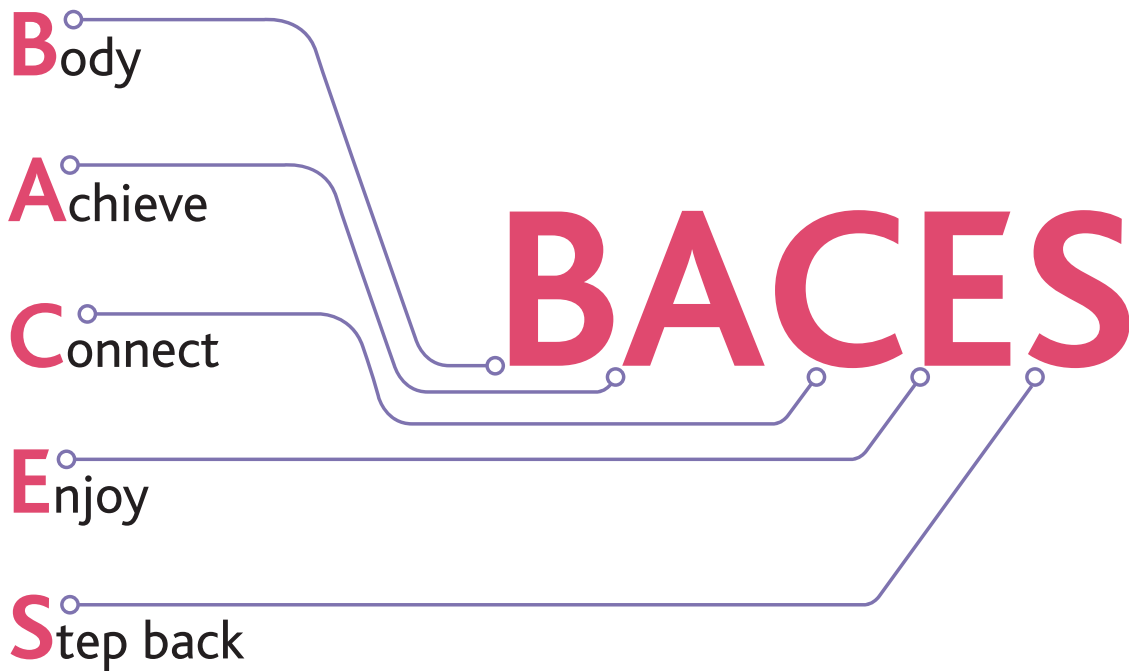
[www.seafarerhelp.org](http://www.seafarerhelp.org)

This guide has been developed from materials accessible from [www.getselfhelp.co.uk](http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk) under the supervision of Consultant Clinical Psychologist Dr. Pennie Blackburn.



# STEPS TO POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH

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## BODY: SELF CARE

Taking good care of our physical body means we will be better able to cope with emotional problems.



Take steps to ensure you get as much sleep as you need



Eat healthily and regularly



Exercise regularly, preferably in an outside/natural space



Plan how to make best use of rest times



Beware of how things like drink, drugs, smoking and caffeine affect you

## ACHIEVE

Our brain gets a boost when we achieve things during the day. Achievement increases the neurotransmitter dopamine and purposeful activity increases serotonin.

It is helpful to plan realistic and achievable goals every day, such as those concerning work, chores and study, but we can also set goals and achieve activities relating to connecting to others, enjoyment and exercise.



## CONNECT

As our mood drops, we feel more tired and we tend to do less. We start to stay alone more, withdrawing and isolating ourselves. The unique conditions on board a ship can make isolation more likely.

You may have limited opportunities to communicate with friends and family back home but it's important to keep connected to loved ones when you can.

Different shift patterns and other reasons may make it difficult to connect with other crew on board, but making an effort to socialise could help.

Are there opportunities on board to get involved in a film or games night? If not, why not plan a range of regular activities to enjoy with crew mates such as: deck BBQs, game evenings, team sports, movie nights and karaoke contests.



## ENJOY

When our mood is pretty good, we tend to do a large variety of enjoyable activities, in addition to the things we have to do. As our mood and energy levels drop, we do less and less, until eventually we struggle to even do the necessary daily chores.

Aim to do more enjoyable activities. Try to find activities you can enjoy now and plan ahead for your next voyage/contract – what can you take with you that you can enjoy doing on board?

Try to get a balance between time on your own and time with others. Individual hobbies can help when social activities aren't possible:

- Exercise can really help lift your mood. Try [www.trainingonboard.org](http://www.trainingonboard.org) for inspiration.
- *Want a challenge?* Learn new skills at your own pace. There are many free online courses which may introduce you to new interests and activities. For example, try [www.lynda.com](http://www.lynda.com)
- *Feeling creative?* Keep a written or photographic journal of your time on board.

## STEP BACK

When we have a problem we can get caught up in the emotion (anger, frustration, sadness) – it is difficult to think clearly and see the bigger picture at those times and we can react by doing things that are unhelpful. At stressful times, we tend to be driven by our emotions and opinions, which create a vicious cycle by fuelling each other. Our emotions strengthen our opinions, which in turn, intensify our emotions. This leads to impulsive acts and unhelpful longer term consequences, which helps to maintain the overall problem. It might seem like doing those things helps at the time, but by reacting impulsively or the same way all the time, we just keep the problem going.

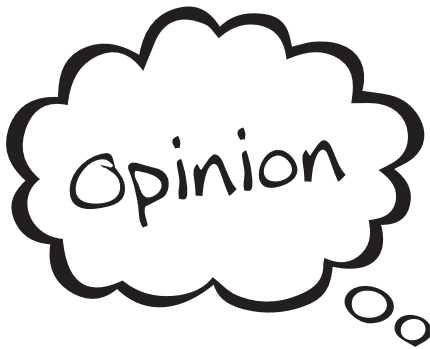
**We can learn to react and think differently.** The skills and exercises on the following pages might be helpful, try practising them so you're ready to use them when your mood drops.



# IS THIS THOUGHT A FACT OR OPINION?



- Evidence to support its truth
- Undisputed
- Driven by rational thought
- Head



- Personal view
- Arguable
- Driven and reinforced by emotion
- Heart

Facts are what we need to focus on in order to make helpful changes. Reacting to our opinions is pointless and upsetting. Asking "is this fact or opinion?" helps us to pull back from our distress and defuse from the unhelpful thinking.

It is often the meaning or opinions that we attach to facts that cause us distress, rather than the fact itself.

Imagine reading a newspaper that is different to your usual one. You might look at the headlines and wonder whether they might be biased in some way. It may be the journalist's opinion rather than just the facts. So we might ask ourselves whether this headline is "fact or opinion". We can do the same with our thoughts.

If we identify our thought as an opinion, then we can look at the facts – what we KNOW about the situation. Then we can make choices about what we can or cannot do.

## SO ASK YOURSELF:

Is this thought a fact or opinion?

What is a more reasonable explanation?

How important is this? How important will it be in 6 months time?

## REMINDE YOURSELF THAT THE THOUGHT WILL PASS

# THE HELICOPTER VIEW

In any stressful situation, it's easy to get caught up in the emotion, which skews our view of things. Completing this worksheet will help you see a different perspective:

**Self** What am I reacting to? What does this situation mean to, or say about, me? What's the worst thing about thinking this? Or about the situation?

**Others** What would this look like to others involved? What meaning might they give this situation?

What might their thoughts and feelings be?

**Stop!**  
**Take a breath.**  
**What's the bigger picture?**

**Outsider** How would this seem to someone outside the situation, who's not emotionally involved?

What would someone else say? What would I say to others?

**Wise mind** Practise what works! What would be the best thing to do – for me, for others, for this situation?

What will help most?



# S T O P

## **S**top!

Just pause for a moment

## **T**ake a breath

Notice your breathing as you breathe in and out.

## **O**bserve

What thoughts are going through your mind right now?

Where is your focus of attention?

What are you reacting to?

What sensations do you notice in your body?

## **P**ull back – put in some perspective

What's the bigger picture?

Take the helicopter view.

What is another way of looking at this situation?

What advice would I give a friend?

What would a trusted friend say to me right now?

# POSITIVE COPING STATEMENTS

Positive coping statements encourage us and help us cope through distressing times. You only have to watch a tennis match to see the power of positive self talk. The player who looks despondent is probably criticising themselves whilst making lots of mistakes. The other player may look very confident, using lots of positive self talk to encourage and push themselves, and they play like a master. This process might swap from player to player during the match – but the one who is using and believing positive self talk will be the better player at that time.

We can say these encouraging words to ourselves, and be our own personal coach. We have all survived some very distressing times, and we can use those experiences to encourage us through current difficulties.

## Examples of coping statements

I choose to see this challenge as an opportunity

I can feel bad and still choose to take a new and healthy direction

Stop, and breathe, I can do this

I can be anxious/angry/sad and still deal with this

I have done this before, and I can do it again

I have survived before, I will survive now

I will learn from this experience, even if it seems hard to understand right now

I can use my coping skills and get through this

I can learn from this and it will be easier next time

This is difficult and uncomfortable, but it is only temporary

Choose words that work for you. Write down a coping thought or positive statement for each difficult or distressing situation. Tell yourself something that will help you get through. Write them down on a piece of card and carry it in your pocket to help remind you.

# MINDFULNESS

## WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness is an ancient Buddhist practice which is very relevant for life today. It is a very simple concept. Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally. This increases awareness, clarity and acceptance of our present-moment reality.

Mindfulness does not conflict with any beliefs or tradition, religious, cultural or scientific. It is simply a practical way to notice thoughts, physical sensations, sights, sounds, smells - anything we might not normally notice. The actual skills might be simple, but because it is so different to how our minds normally behave, it takes a lot of practice.

Being mindful helps us to train our attention. Our minds wander about 50% of the time, but every time we practise being mindful, we are exercising our attention "muscle" and becoming mentally fitter. We can take more control over our focus of attention instead of passively allowing our attention to be dominated by distressing thoughts.

Mindfulness might simply be described as choosing and learning to control our focus of attention, and being open, curious and flexible.

## MINDFULNESS

MEANS PAYING  
ATTENTION IN A  
PARTICULAR WAY

ON PURPOSE

IN THE PRESENT  
MOMENT

NON-  
JUDGMENTALLY

*Jon Kabat-Zinn, Where Whenever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness meditation for everyday life*



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Free, confidential, multilingual and available 24/7, 365 days a year

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Try to respond to stressful situations mindfully:



## DISTRESS REACTION

- Judging
- Based on opinion
- Thoughts as real
- Believe and engage with thoughts
- Attention on past and future
- Avoid (situations, thoughts, emotions)
- Struggle
- Automatic pilot
- Distress and pain
- Fog of upsetting thoughts
- Reactive impulsive behaviours
- Overwhelming, catastrophic
- Lost in reaction



## MINDFUL RESPONSE

- Non-judging, accepting
- Based on fact
- Thoughts as mental events
- Distance/disengage from thoughts
- Awareness of this moment
- Approach
- Let go
- Interested, focused, attentive
- Reduced distress and pain
- Clear and alert
- Considered wise choices
- Calm, effective
- Clear awareness

Consider the most distress you have experienced or are ever likely to experience. Is that time in the past? Is it perhaps in the future?

Right now, at this very moment, are you the most distressed you have ever been or are likely to be?

If not, then perhaps that's a good reason to learn to be mindful – to put your attention to this very moment.

## MINDFUL BREATHING

We can focus our attention on our breathing when we feel distressed, which will help calm our mind and our body.

The primary goal of mindful breathing is simply a calm, non-judging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. Take 10 minutes each day to practise mindful breathing:

- Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed and your spine reasonably straight.
- Bring your attention to your breathing.
- Imagine that you have a balloon in your stomach. Every time you breathe in, the balloon inflates.
- Each time you breathe out, the balloon deflates. Notice the sensations in your abdomen as the balloon inflates and deflates. Your abdomen rising with the in-breath, and falling with the out-breath.
- Thoughts will come into your mind, and that's okay, because that's just what the human mind does. Simply notice those thoughts, then bring your attention back to your breathing. Likewise, you can notice sounds, physical feelings, and emotions, and again, just bring your attention back to your breathing.
- You don't have to follow those thoughts or feelings, don't judge yourself for having them, or analyse them in any way. It's okay for the thoughts to be there. Just notice those thoughts, and let them drift away, bringing your attention back to your breathing.
- Whenever you notice that your attention has drifted off and is becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note that the attention has drifted, and then gently bring the attention back to your breathing.
- It's okay and natural for thoughts to enter into your awareness, and for your attention to follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing.



**SeafarerHelp**  
*The lifeline for seafarers*

SeafarerHelp is a free, confidential helpline for seafarers and their families around the world.

Our multilingual team is available 24/7, 365 days a year.

If you're feeling depressed, lonely or unhappy and would like someone to talk to in your own language, the SeafarerHelp team is here to listen as long as you need.

Talking to someone about things that are worrying you can help you see your situation and options more clearly and make you feel a lot better.

## CONTACT US



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UK time only

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