

Fatigue

Fatigue is a chronic problem for many around the world, and the stress effects put seafarers, their vessel, its cargo and the environment in possible jeopardy. The effects of sleep deprivation, well known in the maritime community is taking a toll. Lack of sleep leaves you impaired -- and has a negative impact on overall health, mood, mental perspective, anxiety, or depression.

Chronic sleep deficits may cause communication problems, or makes them worse. Despite regulations to ensure crew sleep hours, the problem still exists globally. Not only is sleep essential for safety and mental wellness, lack of sufficient sleep is made worse with poor nutrition, lack of exercise, and self-isolation to seek sleep intervals.



Is Sleep a Challenge for You?

Sleep is difficult for many, especially when multiple stressors exist. Vibration. Crew tension. Harassment or bullying. Homesickness. Time aboard a ship has been described as living in a factory; sleep may become difficult over time. And, lack of sleep may reduce immunity, making it more likely for colds, flu, and other illnesses.

Signs of Fatigue

How does fatigue show aboard ship? Mistakes occur, and result in falling asleep on watch, disturbed or faulty thinking, poor decision making, confused communication and shortcuts, and concerns over personal and vessel safety rise. Crew may be distracted, or fall into a cycle of caffeine and further sleep disturbances.

Fatigue increases the probability of anxiety and depression with chronic fatigue becoming a vicious cycle of concern. You know you need sleep, but the lack of sleep may cause uncertainty, and fear of making mistakes. This may lead to heightened anxiety, and unfortunately, it is impossible to store extra sleep. Chronic anxiety over job performance, personal communication, and possible mistakes can lead to uncertainty and depression. Sleep deprivation may become a serious health and safety issue.

There are also signs of fatigue that may be less obvious. Slow reaction times, decreased concentration and focus, poor decision-making, and even “decision overwhelm”, where you feel unable to make a decision – we require sufficient sleep for best performance.

Good News about Better Sleep Routines

Healthier personal habits may help. Creating and maintaining good sleep habits is key to personal and vessel safety and solid, regular sleep is a critical health priority. It’s far too easy to skip meals to sleep, to avoid social interaction, communication, and to fail to find the energy to exercise.

Studies show mental fitness is enhanced by social interaction, physical fitness, and good nutrition – and better sleep is helped with healthy habits and awareness. Use your cabin only to sleep and rest instead of isolating yourself. Contact or be around those bring out the best in you, not the stress. We are all greatly affected by what we read, watch, listen to, and talk with. Music, mantras, phone apps, exercise or yoga, breathing exercises, and calm visualizations may help you.

Each person has personal physical and mental limits, and onboard, fatigue affects all around you. To prevent short bouts of sleep deprivation from becoming chronic, know your regular sleep patterns and any significant or prolonged sleep changes. If you're failing to sleep well, limit caffeine and energy drinks, reduce or stop smoking, and watch how you're spending your time.

If you're failing to stay asleep, consider your stress level, and think what you might do to reduce the stress. Is this a problem you can solve while at sea? Is it best to wait till leave to resolve? It's easy to be drawn into excess social media, manufactured drama, withdrawal from others, and lack of sleep may increase negative mental spiraling. If possible, alert a fellow crew member if sleep begins to be a problem, which may help you prioritize quality sleep and keep safety first in mind.

Sleep is as essential as breathing, and prioritizing rest, and relaxation time, (even with heavy shift work) is vital. Let your supervisor know if sleep is affecting your work performance, and know that good sleep equals better health and wellbeing. Take the best steps for restorative sleep for you, your shipmates, and your family!