

Family Separation

Seafaring is a time-honored tradition for many nations and their people. Yet, the necessity of routine and often lengthy separation from family continues to be a primary challenge for most seafarers. There is a shortage of seafarers in the world, and many we've spoken say the time away from family eventually causes them to leave the changing maritime lifestyle.

Seafarers differ in how they manage family separations, and those that create a family separation routine start from a position of strength. Still, over time, the constant strain of distance, availability, Internet access, competing schedules, and time away from family can be increasingly challenging. With fewer crew on ships, longer articles, and less or no shore leave due to increased regulation and fast turnaround times, seafarers are seeing heavier workloads. This places additional stress and transitions on those at home.



Family members are important to bring into the discussion. Some partners find time away a matter of routine, but many spouses and families may have little idea of what goes on day to day – life at sea is increasingly busy and lonely. When one of you needs to be heard or needs verbal support, those at home may perceive that their seafarer is “away and worrying only about themselves”. If there is not a shared understanding of what life at sea consists of, families may communicate poorly out of that lack of understanding. This means both parties will need to communicate the circumstances and find shared understanding.

Seafarers must be constantly vigilant for themselves, their shipmates, the vessel, and the environment, especially with increased regulation. Living aboard ship even with a private cabin is still “living at work”, and the vibration, motion, and noise continues. Weather is uncertain, and teamwork vital. Rest, mental fitness, emotional health, and good exercise and nutrition helps. A solid job and career gives purpose each day, but sometimes conditions are poor, or even dangerous. In recent studies, an increasing number of seafarers report violent or bullying behavior that threatens them. Safety for the seafarer is paramount – and so is caring for your family.

At home, family members may feel alone, carrying the burden of the household and family by themselves, and if good communication and understanding is missing -- distraction, stress, and confusion may increase. It is often a time of focus: what to share with your partner while away, and what to wait on... Internet and phone accessibility plays an important role, and connectivity is often cited as the most important factor to recruiting and retaining seafarers.

For the seafarer, there is a greatly reduced social life aboard a ship, with loneliness, homesickness, and even self-isolation if withdrawal is preferred to spending time with shipmates. Staying healthy aboard ship may be challenging, with vigilance, skilled labor, communication, and mental and emotional fitness. Meals may be unappealing, exercise may be difficult, sleep may be lacking, and isolation is difficult for many. For the spouse at home, the same is true: managing the household, children, caregiving other family members, and working may create emotional distance. Put together -- we see how better understanding of each other’s daily lives make for less strain and better emotional support – whether newly married, or longtime partners.

Sharing is not always easily done when the norm has been keeping home and work complete separate. Creating a family culture of empathy and understanding for the perspective of the other, means communicating family problems may be less disruptive to safety at sea, and reduction of the frustration on both sides. Understand that each person connects differently, and patience may be needed as you navigate a new way of sharing, or compartmentalizing; there is no one perfect way.



Families can improve their time apart with good communication routines, supporting the health and wellness of the entire family, and fulfilling the strong family ties that enhance daily life. Seafaring life is a career choice with ramifications for all. Working together, enhancing your relationships, career, health, safety, and communication is possible. Do it for yourself, your family, your friends, and your livelihood!