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## CREW HEALTH ADVICE

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# What are the effects of homesickness and how can we best cope with it?

Homesickness is the emotional distress that we experience when adjusting to new circumstances or surroundings when away from home and feeling cut off from our regular support system.

Homesickness may manifest suddenly and unexpectedly, even while travelling, and cause intense feelings of nostalgia, loneliness and a “longing for the familiar”, “for the known”, “the place we call home”. It has often been described as “a grief reaction to the loss of the familiar place”.

When feeling homesick, we may feel insecure or uncomfortable in the new surroundings as we are longing for home, the place that brings safety, stability and comfort to our daily life. Even though homesickness is normal and quite common, we need to keep in

mind that it is associated with very difficult emotions and experiences including feelings of nostalgia, anxiety, grief, and sadness which can be overwhelming as we adjust to the new surroundings.

Homesickness has very little to do with the specifics of the past situation or the new, current circumstances. This means that even if “the familiar place” was far from ideal, perhaps struggling with poverty, dealing with violence, or any other difficult circumstances, a person can still feel homesick even if the new surroundings are a much better place

where most problems are solved. Feeling homesick has more to do with the transition between the two worlds.

Due to the nature of their job, seafarers are often away from home for long periods of time and regardless of their position on board, nationality, age or experience at sea, homesickness may manifest at any time during a seafarer’s life at sea. It can affect anyone, but it is also more likely to affect those experiencing absence from home for prolonged periods. It is important to be kind to ourselves, remind ourselves, that we are all unique creatures with our own



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experiences and feelings, and therefore, we deal with situations in different ways.

## What are some of the symptoms of homesickness?

### Physical symptoms may include:

- Fatigue or low energy
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite
- Muscle tension or pain
- Bodily aches and pains
- Gastric and intestinal complaints / nausea
- Sleep disturbances or insomnia / nightmares

### Cognitive symptoms may include:

- Thoughts of missing home
- Idealizing home environment
- Lack of concentration
- Lack of optimism
- Negative thinking about the ship environment
- Inability to complete even simple tasks
- Absentmindedness

### Behavioural symptoms may include:

- Social withdrawal
- Unwillingness to participate in social events or socialize with others onboard
- Lack of motivation or initiative on the job
- Wanting to leave
- Lack of drive to work or cooperate with other team members
- Isolating yourself

### Emotional symptoms may include:

- Feeling sad, lonely or helpless
- Depressed thoughts or mood
- Anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Mood swings
- Crying
- Loss of confidence
- Inability to enjoy life onboard
- Sense of insecurity
- A feeling that you don't belong
- Nervousness or irritability

Dealing effectively with homesickness requires that we recognize homesickness as a transition part of the adjustment process, when we miss home, while not feeling comfortable in the new environment. The way to deal with homesickness is to normalize it by

reminding ourselves that it is OK to feel this way and that these negative feelings are temporary because you will not feel like this forever. We must always remember to take it easy and be kind to ourselves. It is also important to recognize that homesick feelings will come and go in waves.

Once you accept homesickness as a temporary part of the transition process, the best thing you can do is make connections with your new environment and start creating a new reality. There are small things you can do to feel more connected to where you are.

## Tips for combatting homesickness

### Make an effort to get to know your crewmates

You might already know and get along with other seafarers onboard. But perhaps as a new joiner you may not know anyone and you may feel that it is difficult to make connections. Make new friends with whom you can talk about things that you worry about or simply share stories and happy memories from life back home.

It's important to build friendships when you're working away from home. Although your work friends will not replace your loved ones back home, you will share many hours both at work and off-duty, and over time your bond will become stronger.

### Keep in touch with your family

If you can stay in touch with your loved ones and family at home, it makes the transition period a lot smoother. Sometimes just a quick phone call or video chat with your family will make you feel better, knowing that you are still connected and close to each other. Make some time on a regular basis to contact friends or family and catch up with each others' news.

### Take advantage of port visits to explore new surroundings

Where they exist, use the port facilities for seafarers. Seafarer centres offer recreational activities and sometimes can even provide transport into town or local

areas of interest. Grasp the opportunity to explore the new surroundings and do something different.

### Keep your brain occupied

Working at sea and living in your work environment, makes it difficult to "get away" from work. You may feel tempted to simply disconnect after your shift is over. But it's important to try to keep active in the non-sleeping hours off duty.

Exercising is a great way to spend some time after work. For example, running a few laps around the deck or using any onboard exercise equipment. Exercising will not only help you physically but exercising is also important for your mental health.

### Create a new routine onboard

Having a routine is something that makes life feel "normal". Try to create your own routine, doing things you enjoy and socializing with your coworkers. Part of that may also be creating a more social environment onboard. Any activities that bring you joy are worth exploring and introducing to your coworkers!

### Remember why you enjoy your job!

Take some time to realize how important and valuable your job is! You keep the wheels of world trade and commerce running smoothly.

You might find acting as a mentor for a colleague helpful in gaining enjoyment from your own role onboard. Learning is a positive experience, and helping others can remind you of your own achievements.

### Reach out for help

If your feelings of homesickness continue over a prolonged period – reach out and ask for help!

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This advice was compiled with the help of our psychological and psychometric screening partners I.M.E.Q. You can watch their mental health video library at: [www.imeq-magazine.com](http://www.imeq-magazine.com)

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## CREW HEALTH PROGRAMME

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The Club was the first to launch a crew health scheme in 1996 due to increasing crew illness claims and a lack of accountability of clinics. Since 1996, the Crew Health programme has become one of the Club's leading loss prevention initiatives. The aim of the programme is to reduce the volume and value of crew illness claims which are caused by a pre-existing illnesses or disease. These underlying conditions often impact on the crew member's fitness for service and can endanger not only the health of the seafarer but also the onboard safety of other crew.

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**Sophia Bullard**

Crew Health Programme Director

Direct: +44 20 7204 2417

Email: [sophia.bullard@thomasmiller.com](mailto:sophia.bullard@thomasmiller.com)



Sophia joined Thomas Miller in 1992 and from 1994 worked as a claims handler dealing mainly with French and Spanish Members. In 2004, Sophia became the Crew Health Programme Director. Sophia has undertaken a large number of clinic audits, implemented the standard medical form and clinic guidelines. She has also lead the scheme through the largest period of growth and development with a doubling of approved clinic facilities and a four fold member increase. Sophia is a Director of Thomas Miller & Co. Ltd.

**Saidul Alom**

Crew Health Fees Administrator

Direct: +44 20 7204 2968

Email: [saidul.alom@thomasmiller.com](mailto:saidul.alom@thomasmiller.com)



Saidul Alom joined Crew Health from the European Region Service Team in 2004. Saidul provides administrative support to the Crew Health programme and is responsible for liaison with the approved clinics on financial billing matters and ensuring prompt payment of all clinic fees

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**Stuart Last**

Crew Health Member Administrator

Direct: +44 20 7204 2413

Email: [stuart.last@thomasmiller.com](mailto:stuart.last@thomasmiller.com)



Stuart joined Thomas Miller in 1998 as a claims trainee for UK P&I Club's Greek Members. In April 2005 Stuart joined Crew Health as the Team Administrator. Stuart is responsible for co-ordination of Member entries and administration for the clinic approval process.