

Crew guide

Managing stress in high-risk areas



Introduction

Operating in high-risk areas, particularly during periods of uncertainty or disruption, can place sustained pressure on seafarers. When a vessel is delayed, restricted, or operating under heightened security conditions, it is common for crew members to remain mentally “on alert” for extended periods of time. You may notice that it becomes harder to fully relax, even during rest hours. Thoughts about safety, operational changes, or concerns from home may stay on your mind longer than usual. The longer this situation continues, the more it can affect sleep, concentration, mood, and overall energy. This guide provides practical ways to help you understand these reactions and manage them effectively while continuing to work safely and professionally onboard.

Understanding your reactions

In situations like this, the mind and body naturally adjust to stay prepared. This is a normal response to uncertainty and potential risk.

You might notice:

- difficulty switching off or relaxing
- disrupted or poor-quality sleep
- increased alertness or jumpiness
- repeated thoughts about “what might happen”
- irritability or reduced patience
- difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- physical tension, headaches, or fatigue

Please don’t consider these reactions a sign of weakness. They are a very normal reactions to a demanding environment.

However, when the situation continues for many days or even weeks, these reactions can begin to affect performance, wellbeing, and interactions onboard. Recognising them early helps you manage them more effectively.



What happens during prolonged stress

This section explains what can happen when there is not enough rest or recovery from stress.

When the situation does not settle, the body does not fully return to normal. A constant low level of tension can stay in the background and slowly affect how you think, feel, and work.

At first, the changes are small. It may be harder to concentrate, sleep may feel lighter, and you may react more strongly to everyday situations. Over time, especially with fatigue, this becomes more noticeable.

Impact on thinking and performance may include:

- reduced concentration and shorter attention span
- slower decision making
- difficulty processing more complex situations
- increased likelihood of small mistakes, especially when tired

Emotional and psychological effects may include:

- ongoing tension or underlying anxiety
- feeling mentally drained or worn out
- irritability or frustration over small issues
- increased sensitivity to uncertainty or perceived risks

Sleep and fatigue related effects may include:

- difficulty falling asleep even when tired or waking up often
- not feeling properly rested after sleep
- fatigue building up over several days

Physical effects may include:

- headaches or muscle tension
- stomach discomfort
- low energy or ongoing tiredness

Changes in behaviour and social interaction may include:

- withdrawing from others more than usual
- reduced motivation
- focusing more on negative or risk related information
- less communication within the team



Managing stress onboard

In this kind of situation, stress cannot be avoided completely. The aim is not to remove it, but to keep it at a level where it does not start significantly affecting your focus, your mood, or your work.

Small, practical actions during the day make the biggest difference.

Stay connected with colleagues

It is easy for people to keep things to themselves when the situation is ongoing. Over time, this can increase tension. Simple contact helps more than most people expect. Sitting together during meals, having normal conversations, or just checking in with someone briefly during the day can reduce pressure.

You do not need to talk about the situation all the time. In fact, it often helps more to talk about ordinary things. It gives the mind a break and helps create a more stable atmosphere onboard.

Manage information intake

When there is uncertainty, most people feel the need to stay updated. This is normal. The problem is that constant checking and exposure to distressing news does not improve the situation, but it does keep the mind focused on it.

Try to limit checking news or social media to once or twice a day and switch off your news related notifications otherwise. This helps for two reasons. First, much of the information does not change in short periods, so repeated checking only repeats the same input. Second, frequent exposure keeps the body in a more alert state and makes it harder to switch off later.

Rely on official onboard briefings as your main source of information. Avoid getting drawn into speculation or repeated discussions about worst case scenarios.

Release physical tension

Stress often builds up in the body, even if you are not fully aware of it. Simple movement helps:

- stretching your shoulders, neck, and back
- short walks when possible
- light exercise if space and time allow

Even a few minutes can make a difference. It helps the body come out of a constant alert state and improves overall recovery.



Use breathing to settle the body

When the body stays tense for several days, breathing becomes shallower and faster.

Slow breathing can help the body settle when feeling tense or overwhelmed.

One simple technique is the 4-7-8 breathing exercise:

- inhale slowly through your nose for **4 seconds**
- hold your breath for **7 seconds**
- exhale slowly through your mouth for **8 seconds**

Repeat this several times and you will realize it helps reduce the heart rate. This exercise signals the nervous system that it is safe to relax.



If the stress does not settle

In most cases, the reactions described earlier will gradually reduce once the situation becomes clearer or once the level of uncertainty decreases.

Sometimes, however, certain experiences can stay with people longer. This can be the case after events that felt close, unexpected, or difficult to process at the time. Even if no one was physically harmed, the situation itself can still have an impact. It is not always immediate. Some people notice it only after a few days, when things become quieter and there is more space to think.

You might notice:

- thoughts about the event coming back unexpectedly (it can feel like sudden and uncontrollable flashbacks)
- difficulty switching off, especially during rest
- feeling more alert or easily startled
- disturbed sleep or more vivid dreams
- feeling tense, on edge, or unsettled without a clear reason
- avoiding certain thoughts, conversations, or reminders

If you feel that:

- the reactions are not easing after days or even weeks
- sleep is not improving
- it is becoming harder to focus on your tasks
- you feel constantly on edge or overwhelmed
- you are withdrawing more from others,

then it is important not to deal with it alone.

Speaking to someone early can make a significant difference. There is no expectation to “just deal with it” on your own.

Reactions like these are **not** a sign of weakness. They are a sign that the experience has had an impact, which is understandable in situations involving uncertainty or perceived danger.

In most cases, with the right support and enough time, these reactions reduce and settle. Reaching out early helps that process.

Check Your Pulse |

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This guide is part of Check Your Pulse, The Swedish Club's Seafarer Wellbeing initiative created to strengthen safety, awareness, and support for seafarers across our membership.

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