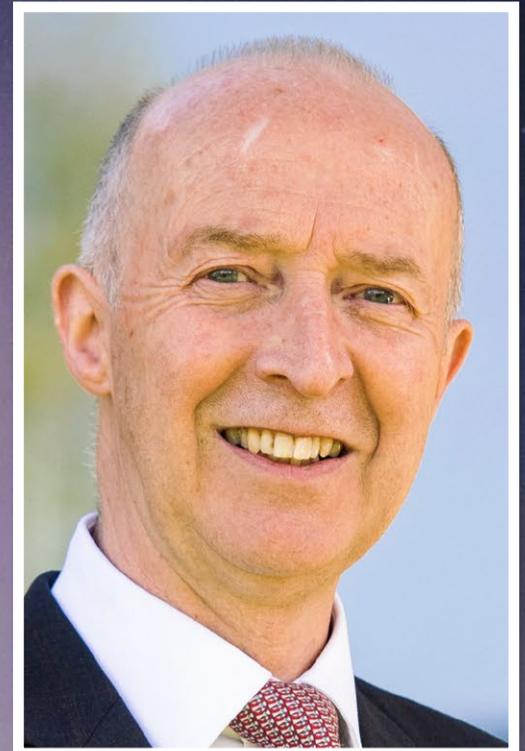


**HELPING HAND:** Chris Adams (inset, far right) of Steamship Mutual says the disappointment that seafarers 'must be going through is unimaginable'

Photos: Fleet Management and Steamship Mutual



# P&I gets serious about mental health as crew crisis drags on



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New schemes are being developed to help seafarers cope with feelings of anger, frustration, anxiety and depression

**Adam Corbett**  
London

Steamship Mutual has launched an initiative to give seafarers struggling with mental health problems immediate access to professional care while at sea.

The move is the latest attempt by protection and indemnity clubs to address these issues, which have become increasingly critical since the Covid-19 pandemic forced up to 300,000 seafarers to work well beyond their contracted period of employment.

Steamship Mutual has signed up with Mental Health Support Solutions (MHSS), a company set up by clinical psychologists Charles Watkins and Susann Rusch to assist shipping companies provide support to crew.

Crew working for Steamship Mutual members can have direct phone access to MHSS' team of mental health professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

North P&I Club has run a similar scheme — Mind Call — with seafarers' charity Iswan since 2018. The UK P&I Club works closely with the Sailors' Society on its Wellness at Sea programme to provide training and assistance on mental health care.

Steamship Mutual head of loss prevention Chris Adams, a former ship's master, said access to professionals is critical to help seafarers get through the crisis.

"I remember in my days at sea we would look forward to going home to friends and family after a long voyage and the disappointment we would feel even if there was just a short delay," he said. "The dis-



**PROACTIVE:** Charles Watkins  
Photo: Mental Health Support Solutions

appointment these guys must be going through is unimaginable."

The initiative should also help Steamship Mutual reduce crew-related claims, which consistently rank high among in its claims figures.

"The fact that seafarers are at sea for extended periods is something we view as a risk factor," Adams said. "If you have a crew that is demoralised and demotivated, then they won't perform at an optimal level.

"Accidents can happen because crew are distressed or fatigued."

The scheme is intended to continue long after the current crisis has ended. Steamship Mutual views the venture as just one part of its policy to look after the well-being of seafarers. It has previously initiated similar schemes such as "fit for life" — a physical health programme.

Watkins said one of the reasons he began MHSS was because he could see there was a lack of

adequate provision for seafarers' mental health needs.

"We wanted to address the mental health issues in the industry and offer a 24/7 confidential helpline which seafarers could call any time for their emotional needs and to provide crisis management," he said.

"We are also proactive and try to look at what can be done before things get too bad."

The care extended to crew does not end with the phone call. Watkins said that, especially with crew who have had suicidal thoughts, it is important to maintain contact and support until the situation has been resolved and the seafarer is safe.

A critical aspect is to win the trust of seafarers. They are often concerned that a call will not be confidential and that their difficulties could be shared with their employers.

"It's often hard for them to trust someone," Watkins said. "It can take us a long time to assure them that their conversations with us really are private."

Adams also knows that, even though seafarers spend months at sea away from their families and have no way of escaping the confines of a ship, there is no training for them on how to cope with these issues.

"As a ship's master, you get very little training that will help you deal with mental health situations," he said. "Masters are often not well equipped to deal with it.

"So, for seafarers to talk to qualified psychologists providing a high-quality service will give them the guidance they need."