



# *Managing Stress and Sleeping Well at Sea*

Good Mental Health Guide for Seafarers



STEAMSHIP MUTUAL





Photo: Robin Hermansson

'Managing Stress and Sleeping Well at Sea' is part of ISWAN's series of Good Mental Health Guides for Seafarers. Seafarers face a number of challenges, some of which may be shared by other professions, like long working hours and shift work, and some that are unique, like long periods away from home, living and working in the same place, lack of shore leave, adverse weather, noise and vibration and even the risk of piracy. This guide provides some useful information to understand stress and its effects, and offers practical strategies to recognise stress and cope effectively. The guide also provides some advice on how to manage fatigue which may affect you when you're away at sea and how to get the most from your sleep.

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ISWAN is an international charity which is dedicated to the relief of hardship or distress amongst seafarers of all nationalities, races, colour and creeds irrespective of gender.

[www.seafarerswelfare.org](http://www.seafarerswelfare.org)



**SeafarerHelp**  
*The lifeline for seafarers*

We run the free 24 hour multilingual helpline – SeafarerHelp – which aims to assist seafarers and their families whatever the problem, wherever they are in the world.

[www.seafarerhelp.org](http://www.seafarerhelp.org)



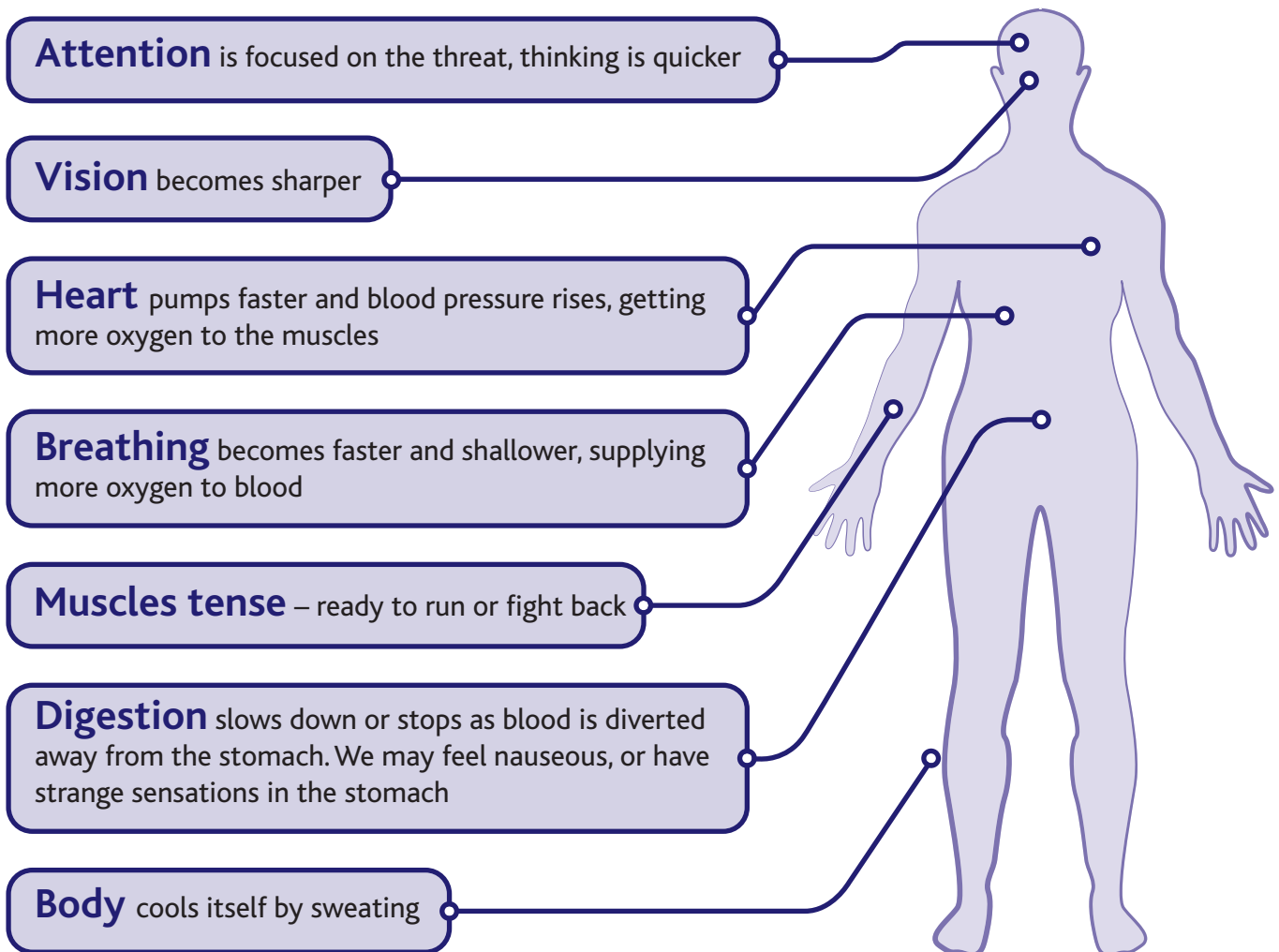
## WHAT IS STRESS?

We talk about feeling stressed when the pressures or demands of life get on top of us. We all feel stressed at times. Stress is a normal and natural part of what it means to be human and can be beneficial to us. Stress is actually our body's automatic reaction to threat and is essential for survival.

Take a moment and think about what happens in your body when faced with an immediate danger – if a tiger or a bear suddenly appeared in front of you. Your heart beats faster, your breathing becomes quicker, your muscles tense up, your senses become sharper, your attention is entirely focused on the tiger... In short, your body prepares itself to take the best action in that moment: to run away, to freeze or to fight back. Psychologists call this the **fight, flight or freeze response**.

Originally an acute sense of potential threat kept our caveman ancestors safe from danger and away from predators. The threat triggers the release of the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol which sets off a sequence of instantaneous bodily reactions essential for survival and slows down or stops body functions which aren't needed in an emergency. Today, the threat can be a serious emergency or it may be more minor and less life threatening dangers, like the pressures at work or tension between colleagues; but the physiological reactions in the body are the same. Much of this everyday stress can be useful; noticing a problem or the pressures that we face triggers us to act, it drives our performance and it helps us to perform at our best. You may have noticed that at times of acute stress, perhaps an alarm goes off and you have to act quickly; you are stronger, you can jump higher, run faster and think quicker. These are all the positive effects of stress on the body that prepare you for survival in an emergency.

### BODY'S REACTION TO STRESS (FIGHT, FLIGHT OR FREEZE)

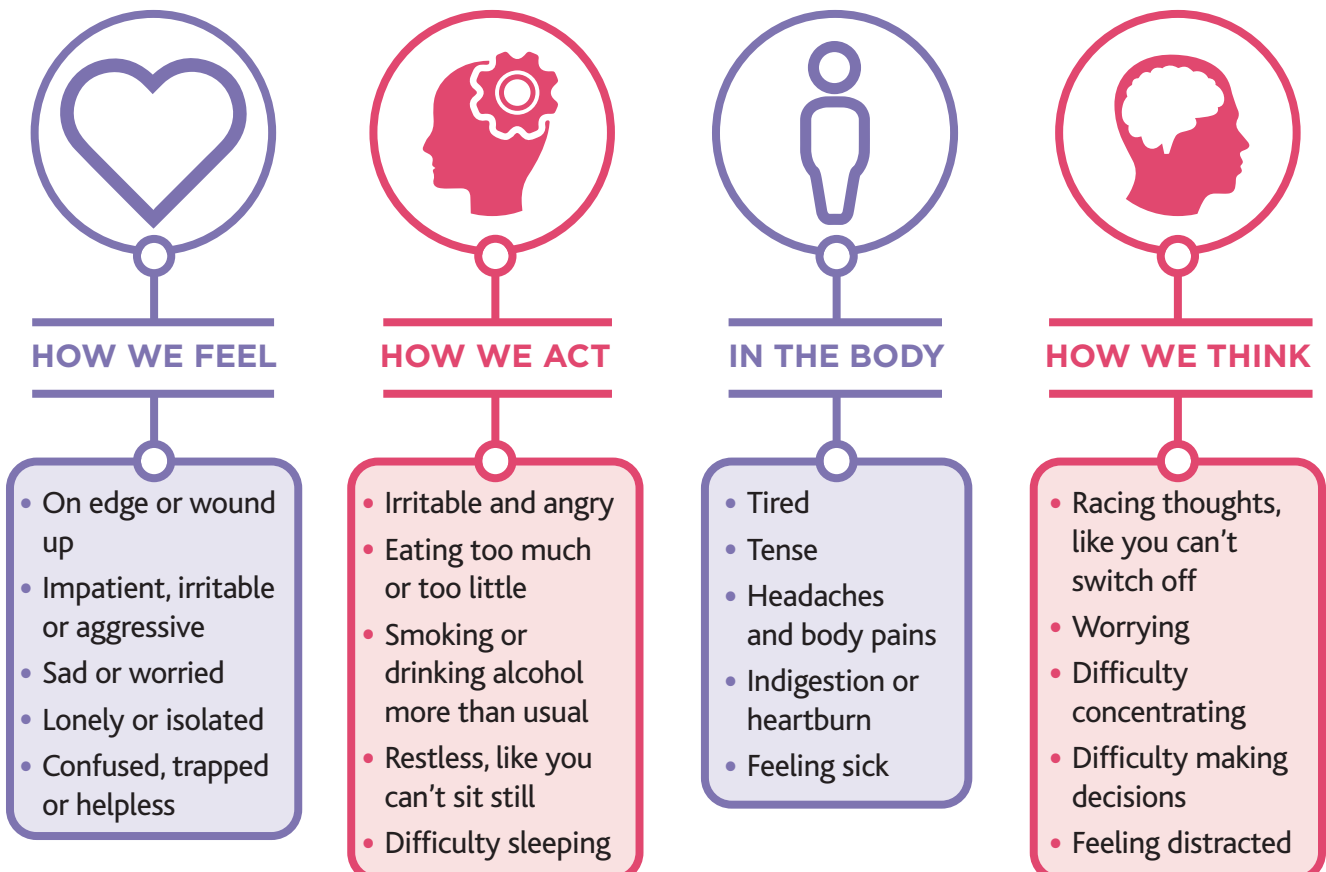


# THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF STRESS

After brief stressful events the body returns to normal very quickly. You might feel a sense of relief as the stress hormones leave your system. The energy that the body has used can leave us feeling tired and there can also be a rebound sense of low mood as the body and mind get back to normal. For example, when you have had to work hard quickly unloading and loading in port on a tight time schedule, your body will react which makes it easier to perform well. Afterwards you may be tired but have a good feeling when you've managed to complete the work, but you can also feel a bit deflated before you get back to life at sea as normal.

Repeated short term stress or stress that goes on for a long time can be exhausting. The physical and psychological changes during periods of stress use up a lot of our body's resources and energy. If the stress is prolonged or repeated, many of the changes in our body can have longer term effects: headaches, aches and pains in the body or chest, stomach and digestion problems, high blood pressure, poor concentration, difficulty sleeping, and so on. Chronic and long term stress have also been implicated in some serious health conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes and strokes as well as a lowered immune system and increased susceptibility to illness. The readiness to fight or run away also has psychological effects: we can be short-tempered, restless or anxious, start to feel trapped, hopeless, helpless, withdrawn and depressed. For all these reasons, it is important to recognise stress and take measures to manage it.

## STRESS AFFECTS US IN DIFFERENT WAYS: THESE ARE JUST A FEW



These negative effects of stress only come when stress is experienced often and over a prolonged period of time. The short-term effects of acute stress do not damage the body or the mind.

# MANAGING STRESS

We can manage stress in two major ways.

1. ADDRESS THE EFFECTS OF STRESS
2. ADDRESS THE CAUSES OF STRESS

## 1. ADDRESS THE EFFECTS OF STRESS:



### RELAXATION, MINDFULNESS AND CONTROLLED BREATHING

Relaxation, Mindfulness and Controlled Breathing are all ways to relax your body. They work by calming your body and your mind and reversing the physiological changes which happen in our bodies at times of stress. It is physically impossible to be stressed and relaxed at the same time. Practising these techniques helps us to build up some resilience to stress and makes it easier to use the techniques when we need them.

**(Progressive Muscular) Relaxation** – This is the easiest method for learning how to relax your body. The idea is to learn the difference between how your muscles feel when they are tense and how they feel when they are relaxed.




## AUDIO RELAXATION EXERCISE

Our new audio relaxation exercise combines muscle relaxation with the controlled breathing technique.

Practising them together helps your mind to associate relaxation with controlled breathing. This means that when you need to relax quickly and easily you can take a slow deep breath in, from the bottom of your lungs, remind yourself to relax and release the tension from your muscles.

You can listen to the relaxation exercise at:

 [www.seafarerhelp.org/health-well-being/relaxation-at-sea-exercise](http://www.seafarerhelp.org/health-well-being/relaxation-at-sea-exercise)



This exercise lasts 15 minutes.

Like any new skill, relaxation does take time to learn. Practise every day at least once a day for 10 days to 2 weeks to get the most from the technique.

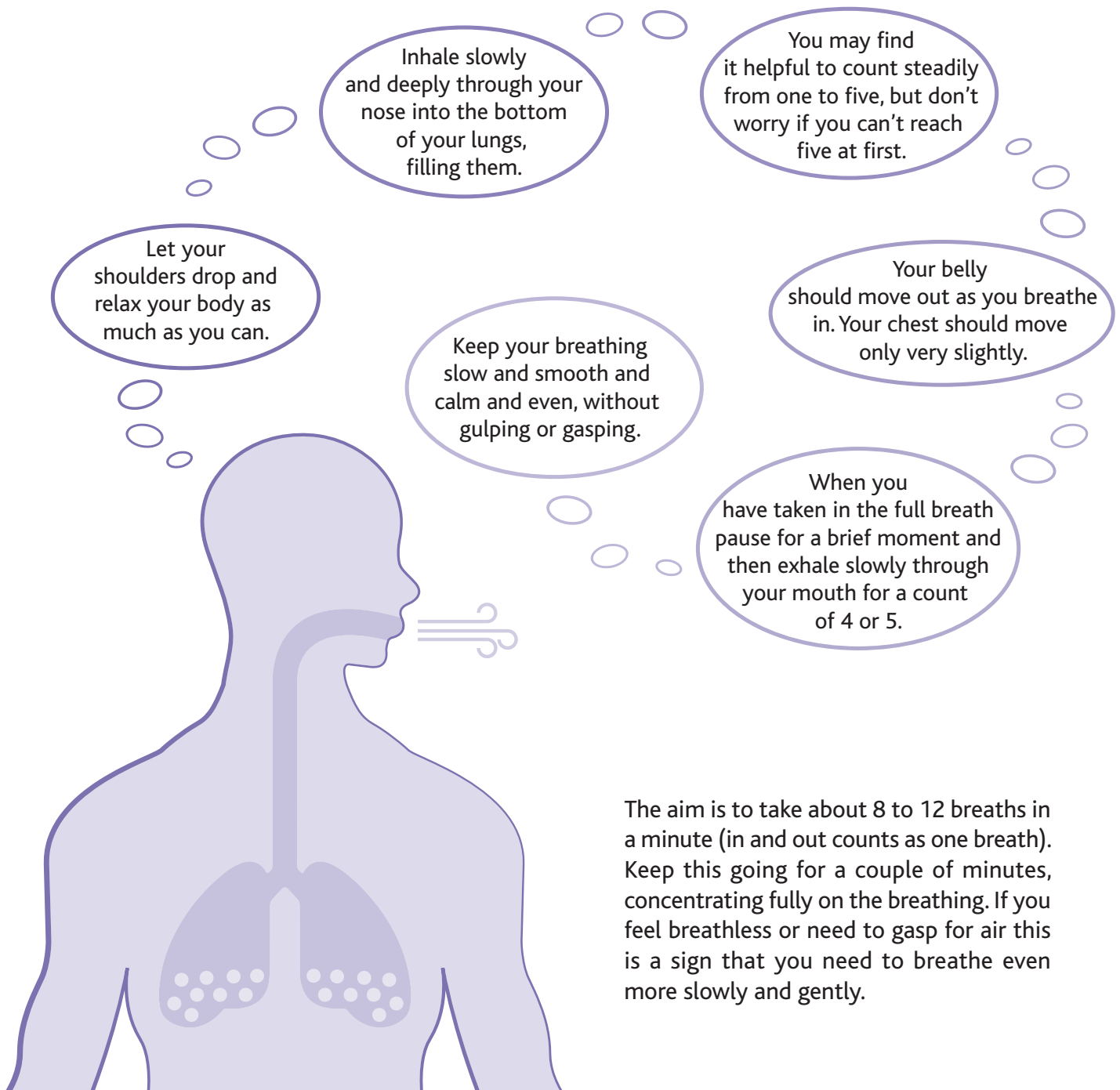
**Breathing Techniques** – Remember that all the physical effects of stress begin with the breath. Fast and shallow breathing gets the oxygen we need to our muscles to be able to fight or run away.

If we control our breathing (that is we breathe slowly and deeply from the bottom of our lungs) the heart slows down and the body returns to its resting state. You can use controlled breathing any time you notice your breathing is a little shallow or fast or whenever you notice sensations of stress, anxiety, fear or even anger. **Controlled breathing** can help you just take a moment out before reacting and is excellent to use quickly just before you enter into a difficult situation.

In the controlled breathing technique, we deliberately alter our breathing. In **mindful breathing**, we just notice our breath. More information about mindful breathing can be found in our guide **Steps to Positive Mental Health**. You can download the guide for free at:

 [www.seafarerhelp.org/assets/downloads/Steps-to-Positive-Mental-Health-English.pdf](http://www.seafarerhelp.org/assets/downloads/Steps-to-Positive-Mental-Health-English.pdf)

## CONTROLLED BREATHING:



Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into the bottom of your lungs, filling them.

You may find it helpful to count steadily from one to five, but don't worry if you can't reach five at first.

Let your shoulders drop and relax your body as much as you can.

Your belly should move out as you breathe in. Your chest should move only very slightly.

Keep your breathing slow and smooth and calm and even, without gulping or gasping.

When you have taken in the full breath pause for a brief moment and then exhale slowly through your mouth for a count of 4 or 5.

The aim is to take about 8 to 12 breaths in a minute (in and out counts as one breath). Keep this going for a couple of minutes, concentrating fully on the breathing. If you feel breathless or need to gasp for air this is a sign that you need to breathe even more slowly and gently.

## ADDRESS THE EFFECTS OF STRESS CONTINUED

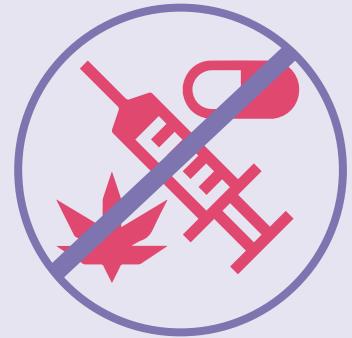


### GET ACTIVE

Exercise can help your body release tension, it can take away some of the emotional intensity that you're feeling and help clear your thoughts to help you to get into a better frame of mind to deal with your problems. Exercise may be the single most effective stress-busting technique there is.

### CONSIDER THE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL, DRUGS AND CIGARETTES

Many people find that when they feel stressed they rely on cigarettes, alcohol, drugs or caffeine to get them through. Although they may feel like they help in the short term, they won't take away the causes of stress; some will actually increase the physical effects of stress and they can create their own problems.



### TAKE TIME OUT

Use your rest breaks well. Take time for yourself or to exercise, relax or connect with others on board. Many people stop taking their work breaks when they are stressed but this only adds to the sense of pressure and fatigue.

### BUILD UP YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK AT HOME AND ON BOARD

Spending time with others can give you a sense of time out from your problems, give you some pleasure and be a good distraction.





## 2. ADDRESS THE CAUSES OF STRESS:



### IDENTIFY WHAT IS CONTRIBUTING TO THE STRESS

Different things can trigger a sense of stress: worries about home, relationship problems, tension between colleagues, isolation, bullying & harassment, feeling like you don't have the right skills for the job, having too much work to do, long hours, not enough rest... Make a list of the things that are worrying you or talk it over with someone you trust to identify the main causes of stress.



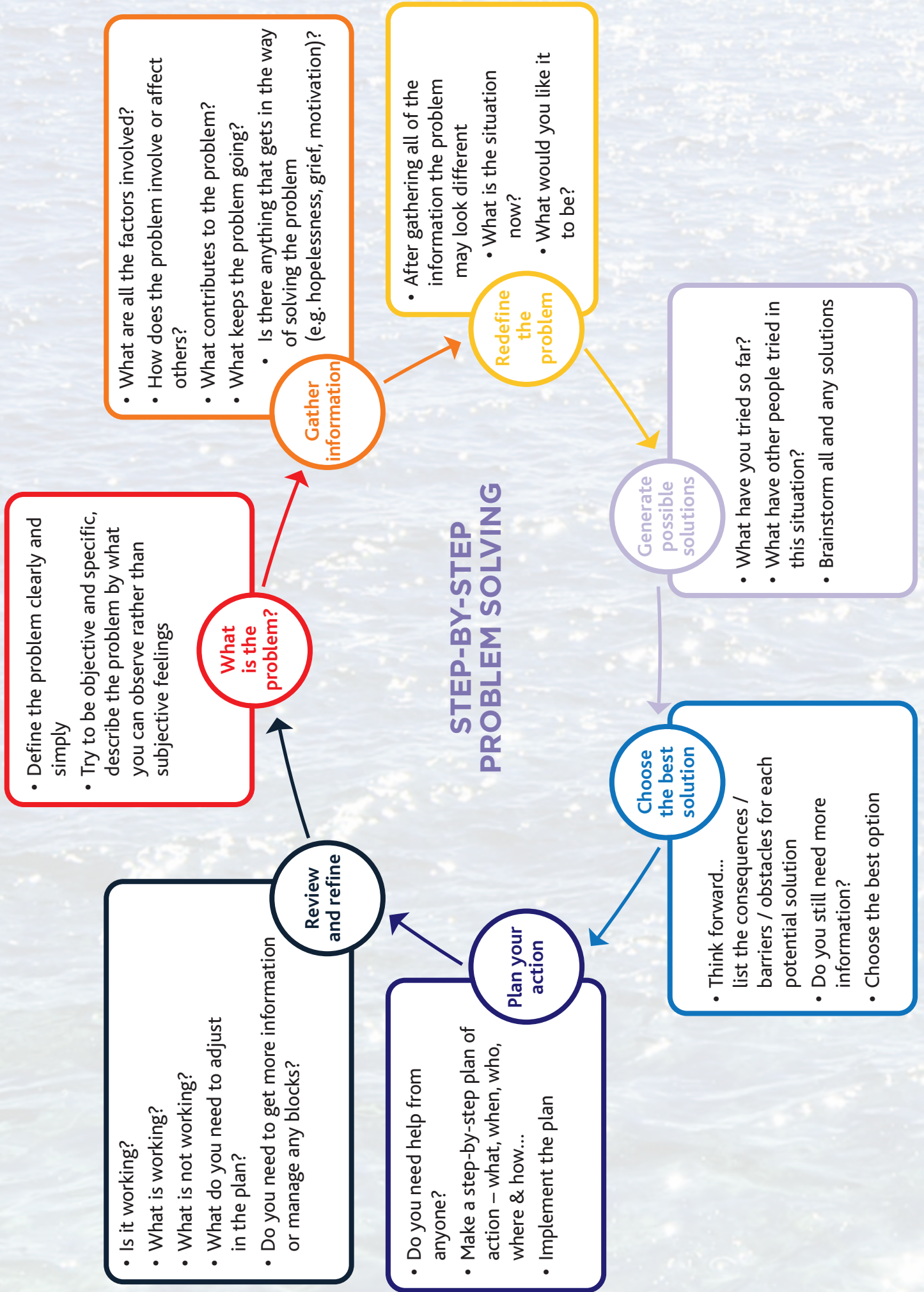
### MANAGE YOUR TIME AS WELL AS YOU CAN

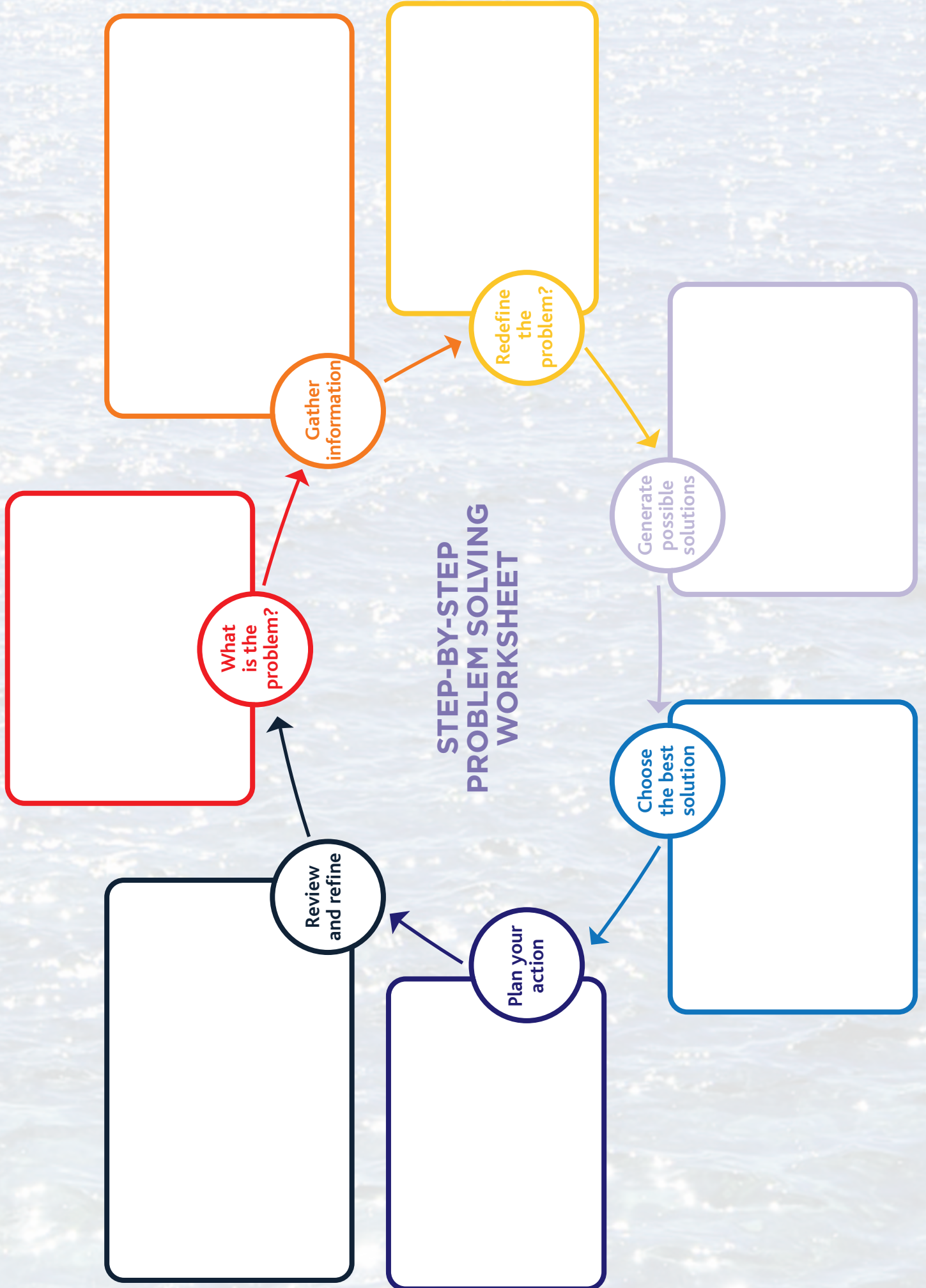
List the things that you need to do, prioritise the important and urgent things and the things that can make a real difference and do these things first. Don't skip your breaks; taking your work breaks will help you to be more focused and productive in your work time. Try not to agree to take on more than you can manage, share your workload where possible or ask for help if you need it.



### ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

Look at the problem solving cycle on the next page. First identify the problem itself and then work through each step.





## COPING WITH PROBLEMS AND EMERGENCIES AT HOME

Sometimes there may be problems at home and because you can't be there it can feel very difficult. There may be ways you can organise help for your loved ones even if you aren't there: through your network of friends or community at home or through support services such as SeafarerHelp.

Also remember that although you may not be able to physically help, sometimes the most useful thing for any of us is to have someone to listen and understand. It can be really helpful for your loved ones to talk it over with you and this may be much more helpful than you imagine.

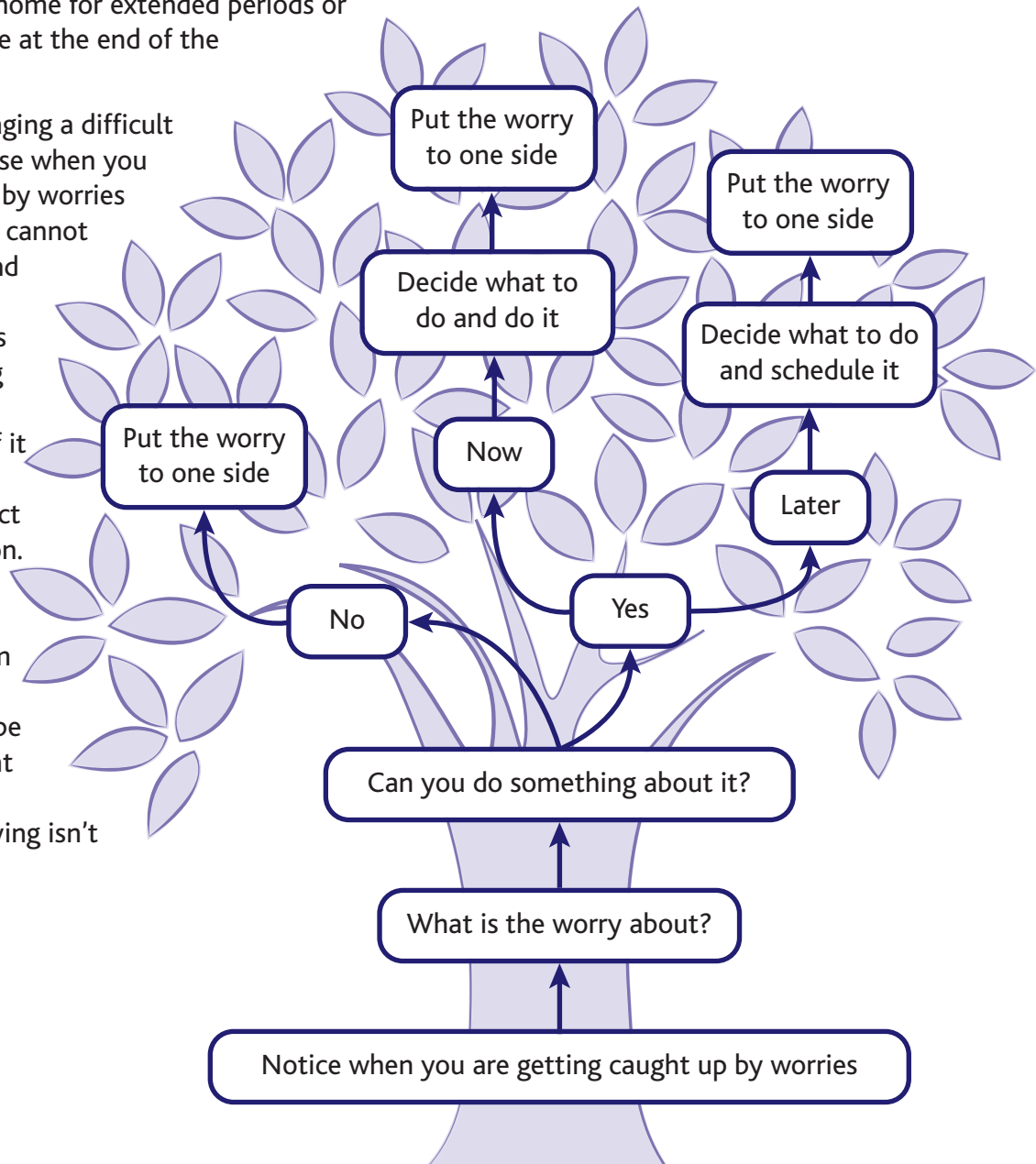
Get support for yourself – talk to other seafarers on board who know and understand what it is like.

If you have an emergency at home, such as the death of a loved one, talk to your senior officer. You know best whether your situation is affecting your ability to work. It is better to seek help than risk accidents or injury to yourself or others.

## COPING WITH PROBLEMS WE CAN'T CHANGE

Many of the things that cause stress for seafarers aren't things that can be changed, like being away from home for extended periods or not being able to leave at the end of the working day.

The first step to managing a difficult situation is to recognise when you are getting caught up by worries about things that you cannot change. It's easy to find ourselves going over problems in our minds without even realising that we are doing it. Worry can be useful if it alerts us to a problem and motivates us to act to change the situation. But worry does not serve any useful purpose if the problem is in the past or it is a problem that cannot be solved at all or straight away, but just telling yourself to stop worrying isn't likely to help...



## IDEAS FOR MANAGING WORRIES:



### WRITING WORRIES DOWN

This can help you to stop the worry going round and round in your head. Writing helps to get some perspective on the worry and work out what it is that is bothering you. Sometimes new ideas come to you or a different perspective emerges. Giving yourself this time also helps to simply clear your mind and put your worries to one side.



### TALK TO OTHERS OR SEND A MESSAGE

Sharing problems may not come easily, but it does help relieve stress and may help you feel less isolated and alone. It's important that the person you talk to is someone that you trust and who you feel can understand. Consider talking to a crewmate; they may have been through something similar and they understand life at sea. You can also reach out to friends and family, a welfare worker in port or get in touch with SeafarerHelp.



### ACCEPTANCE

Whilst it can be difficult, accepting the reality of the situation that you are in is an important step to coping with it. Negative thoughts about a situation like "I hate it, it's not fair, it shouldn't have happened, everything is a disaster" add to your sense of suffering. For instance, you are going through yet another safety drill for what feels like the 100th time. You start thinking about all the other things you need to do, which makes you feel stressed, frustrated or angry. Instead of telling yourself, "I have so much stuff to do; this is a waste of my time!" remind yourself: "There's nothing I can do. I have to be here. It is what it is. Breathe." Accepting the situation does not mean agreeing with it; just acknowledging the reality of it. Usually, calm acceptance leads to a sense of relief, and freedom to find ways to cope with the situation whilst it is ongoing.



### SELF SOOTHING

Look for ways to comfort yourself. Sometimes when we are going through difficult times, we add to it by criticising ourselves and telling ourselves to get over it; but we would never say these things to a friend or a loved one. Instead, try to find things that help you to feel better in the moment, be kind and compassionate towards yourself. A good way is to think about things that bring you comfort or that you enjoy. Perhaps listening to music you like, watching a movie, having a warm shower, reminding yourself that you are ok and these difficult times will pass.



### DISTRACTION

Take your mind off your worries by keeping busy and finding something else to do. This can help a lot when either you can't solve the problem or the problem will take time to resolve. Do something physical like some sport or exercise, make something, tidy or clean your cabin, find someone to do something with, play a computer game, go for a walk around the ship, help someone with something, read or watch a movie. Do whatever works for you.

# FATIGUE AND SLEEP PROBLEMS

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Fatigue can be defined as severe tiredness caused by prolonged physical or mental exertion, or lack of sleep.

Whatever your role on board, it's most likely you have to work in shifts, in the engine room or on the bridge, for example. There may be times when hours are long and rest periods need to change unexpectedly, such as during periods of bad weather. Constant time changes, shift patterns and periods of intense activity can all contribute both to fatigue and to stress. Stress itself can also add to levels of fatigue.

An in-depth study into seafarers' stress and fatigue levels – **Project MARTHA** – has found that seafarers often perceive their levels of stress and fatigue to be higher towards the end of a voyage than at the beginning. This is particularly true for the Master. The study also indicates that seafarers' quality of sleep deteriorates over the course of their voyage. Various bodies across the industry have repeatedly identified long-term fatigue in seafarers as a factor which may contribute to health issues such as cardiovascular and metabolic disorders. It can also put seafarers at an increased risk of accidents because fatigue seriously reduces our mental and physical capabilities. Simple mistakes that can endanger everyone on board become much more likely. You can find the Project Martha report at [www.warsashacademy.co.uk/about/resources/martha-final-report.pdf](http://www.warsashacademy.co.uk/about/resources/martha-final-report.pdf)

## MANAGING FATIGUE

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Managing fatigue on board relies on factors such as effective rota management and crewing numbers which may be largely outside of many seafarers' control, but there are ways that everyone on board can consider reducing their own risk of fatigue.

Stress can contribute greatly to fatigue levels so keep practising the exercises and breathing techniques in the previous section.

Over time, lack of sufficient sleep builds up and the only real way to combat fatigue is good quality sleep. Prioritise your sleep health and take steps to get the sleep that you need to keep rested and function well. Recognise the signs of fatigue in yourself and colleagues – slowed reaction time, cloudy thinking, struggling to stay awake, increased clumsiness, irritability, impaired memory. If you are worried about yourself or others, ask a senior officer for help.



Photo: Gabilanpillai Pallani Samy

It's also a good idea to ensure you're familiar with hours of work and rest regulations, especially if events beyond your control disturb your routine. The Maritime Labour Convention (MLC 2006) states that:

### The limits on hours of work or rest shall be as follows:\*

- (a) maximum hours of work shall not exceed:
  - (i) 14 hours in any 24-hour period; and
  - (ii) 72 hours in any seven-day period; or
- (b) minimum hours of rest shall not be less than:
  - (i) ten hours in any 24-hour period; and
  - (ii) 77 hours in any seven-day period.

These regulations are in place to help ensure you are able to get enough rest during a voyage and so it is important that these standards – at a very minimum – are observed throughout your time on board. An important requirement of these regulations is the need for accurate record keeping which forms part of Port State Control inspections. Whichever system you use to do this on board, it is vital that the hours you record are correct. If there is a problem that is regularly preventing you from getting the rest you need, or if you feel under pressure to record false working hours, you should raise this with your supervising officer. In the event that you do not feel able to raise this with someone within your company, you can get in touch with SeafarerHelp (contact details on back page) to discuss your options. Alternatively, you could submit a confidential report about your situation on board to the Confidential Hazardous Incident Reporting Programme (CHIRP). For more information, visit CHIRP's website: [www.chirpmaritime.org](http://www.chirpmaritime.org)

The MARTHA Project has reported that a Fatigue Risk Management System (FRMS), shown to benefit other transport industries, can help to reduce the risk of fatigue for seafarers. You can read more about FRMS at: [bit.ly/2uE78aL](http://bit.ly/2uE78aL). If you think this could benefit your company, why not mention it to a senior officer or management ashore?



\*ILO Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, Regulation 2.3

# GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR SLEEP

Although you might not be in control of your shift patterns, there are some simple and straightforward techniques to help you get the best from your sleep. The most important thing is to allow your body to learn a rhythm of sleep and wakefulness. Developing good habits around sleep can help you tolerate the times when your sleep is disturbed by shifts or unavoidable disruptions.

## PREPARE YOUR CABIN FOR SLEEP

Our bodies are naturally aligned to wakefulness during the daylight hours and sleep during the hours of darkness. Using light and dark can help you to get a better sleep even if your shift patterns mean that you have to be alert during the normal night hours. When you want to be awake and alert use bright lighting – daylight bulbs if they are available or open the curtains and let the sunlight in, during hours of daylight. Use blackout blinds or curtains in the period before and during sleep and dim the lighting in your cabin. If your cabin still isn't dark enough, try to prepare ahead and bring an eye mask with you on your next voyage.

Do what you can to make sure your cabin is a relatively cool and comfortable temperature, is quiet and your bed is comfortable. There may need to be a ship policy of keeping quiet around the cabins for people who are trying to sleep during the day. If noise is a problem, you can try using ear plugs or putting on soothing music, white noise or sounds of nature.



- Exercise is excellent for a good night's rest. Take exercise during the day, but not late in the evening.



- Take time to relax and wind down from the activities of the day.



- If you are worrying about problems at home or at sea, try writing them down and putting them out of your mind before bed. Make time to address these problems during the day, otherwise they will pop into your mind when you least want them to.



- Do not eat heavy or spicy foods in the few hours before going to bed.



- Have your last tea, coffee or energy drink several hours before you want to sleep.



- Set an alarm at a regular time each day (if your shifts do not vary). Get up when your alarm goes off, regardless of the amount of sleep you have had during the night. This will help teach your body to develop a consistent rhythm.



- If you do not work shifts, avoid taking naps during the daytime.



## In the period just before sleep, establish a pre-bedtime routine. This teaches your body when it is time to wake and time to sleep.



- Put away your computer, phone or any electrical devices with backlit screens when you go to bed and try not to use them in the period before you want to go to sleep. The light on these devices trigger your brain to wake up and become alert. Put devices on to silent, flight mode or the do not disturb setting so that noise and light notifications do not draw your attention or disturb your sleep.



- If possible, use your bed only for sleep. If you routinely lie in bed playing on your phone, eating, drinking, smoking, watching TV or even working, it is hard for your body to associate bed and sleep. Try to keep your waking activities separate from your bed.



- A warm shower before bed can regulate your core temperature and make it easier to drop off to sleep.



- Only go to bed when you are tired and ready for sleep.



- Try other quiet activities just before sleeping, like mindfulness, breathing exercises, listening to relaxing music or reading a book. Prayer can also be relaxing for people of faith.



- Relaxation exercises like the one on pages 6 and 7 can be very effective in helping your mind to switch off, distracting you from everyday worries and helping your body to get into the right state for sleep. Many people find that when they lie down to go to sleep is the best time to practice relaxation, because then you can just drop off afterwards and it has the added bonus of a better, more restful sleep.

## FATIGUE RELATED TO SHIFT WORK: TIPS FOR USING NAPS



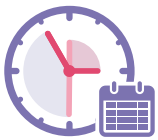
- You may have the opportunity to take naps during breaks before or after your full/long sleep which may help you feel more alert or rested. Most people need between 7 and 9 hours of sleep. You may need to take this in one longer and one shorter nap.



- A nap of up to 2 hours can be an effective way of preparing for a night shift. Allow yourself at least 30 minutes or more after waking to overcome 'sleep inertia', the groggy feeling you have on waking.



- If you have a fixed night shift, treat the shift as your normal working day and adjust your meals and sleep times around it.



- If you have control over the shift rotation pattern, try to rotate your shifts with the clock, advancing the time you need to go on shift.



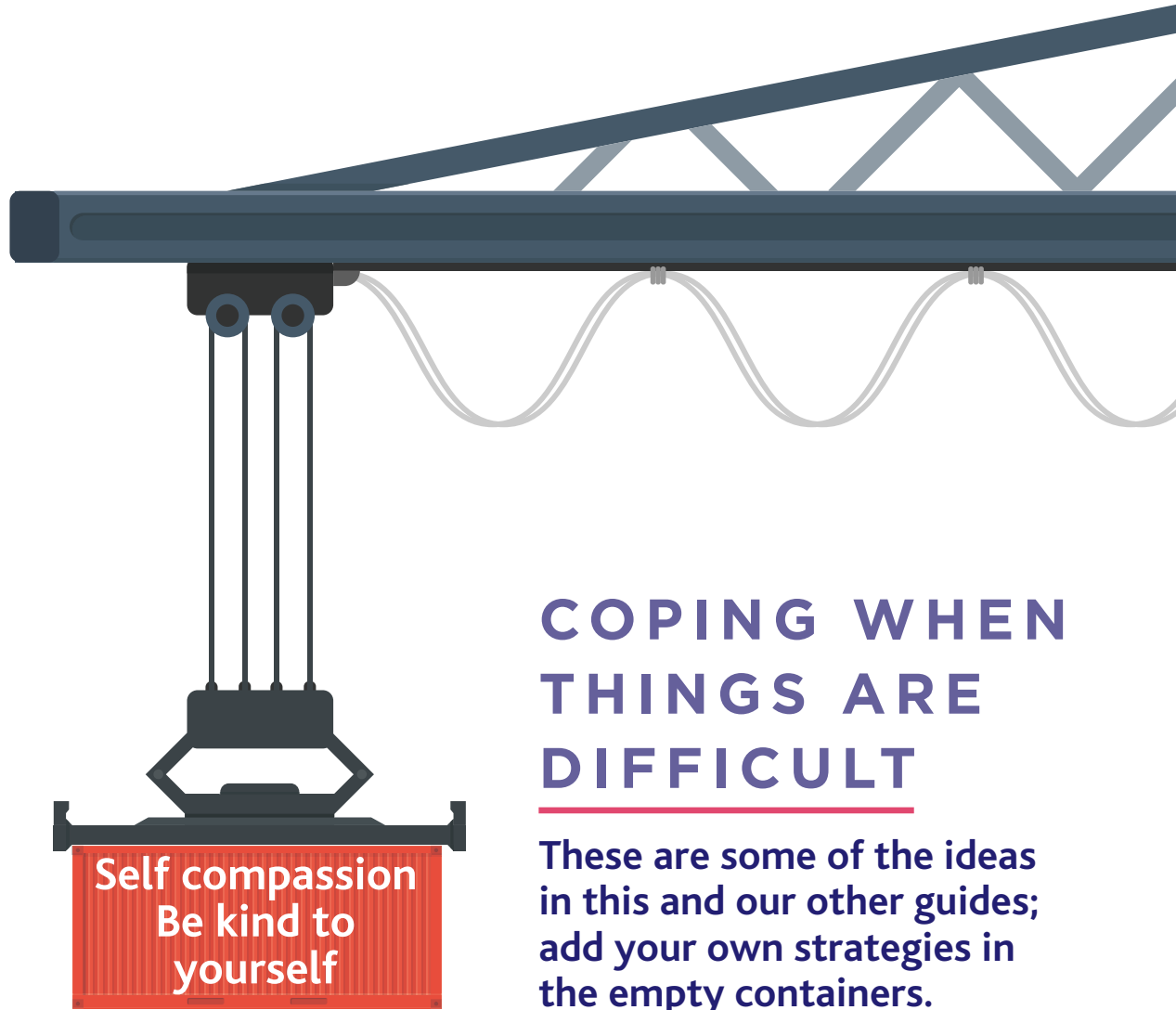
- Brief naps can also be effective – limit the nap to less than 30 minutes; even 10-20 minutes can make a positive difference. Naps of 40 minutes and longer may have the opposite effect, making you feel groggier and less clear headed, particularly when you immediately wake up.



- 'Caffeine naps' have been shown to be an effective short term strategy for keeping alert. Drink a coffee just before having a 20 minute nap and set your alarm to wake up in 20 minutes – on waking, the caffeine will be acting on your system and recent research suggests that you may be more alert than having either the nap or the caffeine alone.

*Please note: this advice is for shift workers only.*





**Self compassion**  
Be kind to yourself

## COPING WHEN THINGS ARE DIFFICULT

These are some of the ideas in this and our other guides; add your own strategies in the empty containers.

Get support		Acceptance	Relaxation
Positive self talk	Do more of what makes you happy	Exercise	Notice the good things
	Count your blessings		Prayer
Self soothing	Spend time with your friends	Breathe	
Write down your worries		Mindfulness	Distract yourself



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- Multilingual
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