



BREAKING POINT

AS CREW LIFE COMES WITH ITS EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES, DIALING IN TO YOUR CREW'S MENTAL HEALTH AND KNOWING THE EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF DEPRESSION ARE CRUCIAL IN PREVENTING A PSYCHOLOGICAL BREAKDOWN.

BY KELLY SANFORD

WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN a very close-knit crew, but when [a member of our crew] took her life, we never saw any indication that anything was wrong,” says Capt. Eric Edscorn of M/Y *Cherosa*. “She was always the cheerleader and was always supportive of the rest of the crew. I worked with her the morning it happened and she was just her bubbly, happy self. Everyone on my crew has asked themselves a hundred times ‘What did we miss?’ but looking back, there is nothing we could point to and say ‘How did we miss that?’”

Though rare, each year there are incidents when crew reach their breaking point and put their lives or others at risk. One frustrated chef once threw a stewardess overboard while the boat was underway, another crewmember held other members of the crew at gunpoint. Sadly, there are several tragic examples of both attempted and successful suicides.

Anyone who has been crew for more than a season is well aware that all the glamour and exotic opportunities that attract new crew to the industry often are swiftly supplanted by the overwhelming boat obligations. Essentially, there is no job aboard a yacht that appears particularly difficult on paper – taking care of the yacht’s interior and exterior requires diligence more than technical training. The jobs that do require technical skills – like ship’s officers, engineers and chefs – generally are held by people who truly enjoy their work. It could be argued that any job aboard a yacht is, in fact, a dream job.

Yet many find that with the dream comes the harsh reality of the constant mental and emotional challenges that punctuate life on a yacht. Crew often work very long, erratic days with extensive periods of deprivation from a loving support system of family or close friends. Making matters worse, there is no escape from workplace troubles, co-workers or demanding guests at the end of the work day. It’s enough to drive anyone to the brink.

Warning Signs

There is a big difference between a crewmember who simply is having a bad day and one who is emotionally compromised. “Captains and crew should educate themselves on the subtle warning signs of depression, because prevention is always going to be the best course of action,” says Dr. Michelle Sukenik, a psychotherapist.

Early warning signs of depression can include escalating drug and alcohol use, social withdrawal, dramatic mood changes, excessive anxiety, changes in sleeping patterns, memory loss and forgetfulness. Other subtle signs include sudden changes in weight and talk of feeling hopeless or trapped. Ignored, these symptoms quickly can escalate to more alarming signs like sudden reckless behavior, talking about or writing about death or suicide, seeking access to

means for suicide like, guns or pills, or showing uncontrolled rage and talking about revenge. At this point, the mental wellbeing of your crewmember is not a nuisance issue, it has become a serious safety issue.

Regrettably, the early warning signs of depression may sound familiar, making it easy to believe that most yachties live their lives on the emotional edge: drinking, erratic sleep, anxiety, mood changes and changes in weight all are quite commonplace during a busy season and therefore leave a high risk potential for the subtle early warning signs to go unnoticed.

“I think a list of warning signs is a good starting place in principle,” says Capt. Edscorn, “but I don’t believe there is a uniform checklist to detect depression. When you work on a boat, over time you get good at burying your emotions. I think we all tend to focus on our job and suppress our personal feelings. The suicide was my worst experience as a captain and as much as I try to move forward and put the incident behind me, I can appreciate that by talking about it, I might be able to give the next captain the tools to prevent it from happening again. If I can do that, then it’s worth the discussion. What I would say to every captain out there is that if you suspect fragility, address it right away. You need to be dialed in but even then, it can happen without warning. If you’re close with your crew, they’re going to be more apt to reach out, but I don’t think you can count on it.”

How to Help

“When you’re talking about an industry where there is a lot of competition for jobs and a lot of turnover, you’re going to find that there are going to be crew who won’t be comfortable coming to the captain with an emotional problem,” Dr. Sukenik explains. “They’re going to worry that it may be used against them or cost them their job. If they don’t have any outlet or relief, the consequences can be terrible.”

In an effort to give his crew the resources to help themselves if they prefer not to reach out to him directly, Capt. Edscorn explains, “We have as part of our crew health insurance policy an EAP (Employee Assistance Program), which is totally confidential with a twenty-four hour hotline available to the crew at any time or for any reason. If the job is getting to them, or if they’re having personal issues, the crew can call and talk to somebody. I make sure that the crew knows the hotline is there for them and that they know using it is totally confidential. I don’t care what the reason, even if they are just mad at me, I want them to feel like they can call someone if they are feeling stressed.”

If a crewmember is showing even slight indications of depression, they should not go ignored. “For a lot of people, sometimes it’s enough for them to hear that they are a valued member of the crew and that you care about them... if you’re seeing signs, explain to that person that you have

noticed some changes in their behavior or appearance that has you concerned about them,” Sukenik says. “Listen to them, try to empathize and offer support. You would be surprised how often the simple act of telling a person that they are of value to you and that you care about them is enough to turn them around.

“The style with which the captain or fellow crewmember approaches the matter is crucial. The gesture needs to be non-confrontational and the person of concern should not be treated like they are in trouble or led to believe that their behavior is being used against them,” says Dr. Sukenik. The pervasive instability of a yachting career cultivates job insecurity even among the most seasoned and stable crew. When addressing a brewing emotional issue, every effort needs to be made to reinforce a sense of security for the person of concern. Being crew can be isolating and lonely – a smart captain will provide his or her crew with tools to manage stress, anxiety or depression.

Prevention

Human resources expert Susan Heathfield’s advice for captains unsure how to tap into their crew’s mental state is to encourage a healthy work/life balance. In the absence of a personal life during a busy season, she suggests that crew traditions are a great way to keep your crew connected. The simple act of having meals together or a scheduled coffee break and a brainstorming/teambuilding session will give the captain the needed face time to get a good indication of the crew’s collective state.

“I learned a long time ago that I am not so much the ship’s captain as I am the ship’s dad and that I cannot just isolate myself from the crew,” says Capt. Herb Magney. “My ability to run the boat depends a lot on my crew and whether they are happy. Everyone knows how even a moderately unhappy crewmember can affect the whole program. One way I try to keep a tab on how my crew are feeling about themselves, the rest of the crew and their job is by asking them to do occasional written self-evaluations. It not only helps me check on where their priorities are in terms of their job, but it helps me get inside their head a little bit to see if they are happy.

“If a member of my crew is truly unhappy, the best I can expect – and it’s not a good option – is that I lose that member of the crew either because they quit or because I ask them to go. If I ignore it, or miss it, the worst-case scenario is that they reach a breaking point and do something to hurt themselves or someone else. That is just one of many reasons why a captain can’t just put up walls between himself and the crew,” Capt. Magney says.

To prevent crew from suppressing their emotions to such a point, it’s important not to stigmatize the crew’s emotional wellbeing as a nuisance issue or a burden on the rest of the crew. Sukenik applauds the EAP hotline aboard *Cherosa* and suggests that every crew manual contain a

section dedicated to the possibility of a personal crisis. “It is imperative to provide crew with resources from the start of their employment if you are serious about preventing a breakdown in the crew’s mental health and the possibility of a tragic outcome,” she says.

“If it is possible, allow crew to take mental health days,” says Dr. Sukenik. “I know that on a boat this is not always possible, but when it is, if a crewmember just needs a day to decompress, it should be encouraged. Sometimes the smallest corrections can work wonders. It seems to me that including a short course on mental health issues and tools for how to handle these issues also might be helpful.”

Medical Support

But what should a captain do if faced with a crewmember in immediate crisis? “Ideally, that person would be given immediate professional medical and psychological evaluations to diagnose the issue,” Dr. Sukenik says. “Sometimes, social and emotional symptoms are an indication of an underlying medical issue. But if you are on a boat, appropriate medical and psychological resources may not be readily available.”

Sukenik is adamant that if a captain suspects that a crewmember needs mental health services, those services be made available to them either by flying them home, coordinating an online therapy session or by calling an emergency hotline or EMS if necessary.

Many yachts have orchestrated 24/7 medical support services, which are also able to help intervene during an immediate psychological emergency. It’s important not to overlook this resource if there is an urgent situation. Although typically not providers of psychological counseling, they are able to advise medical treatments to diffuse psychotic symptoms until the person can get professional help.

“Since managing mental disease cases are not different from general standard medical issues in a remote environment, our main model is to help control the situation,” says Dr. Paulo M. Alves, MD, MSc, VP of Maritime and Aviation Health at MedAire. “We are not in the business of providing final treatment, but our emergency-care physicians at MedLink are trained to stabilize the acute phase of the mental health situation with the available resources on board. We also have access to specialists in case an expert



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opinion is required on ongoing cases.”

Dr. Robb Leigh, chief medical officer at MedAire, explains, “Recently, we managed a psychosis case where a crewmember at sea was experiencing hallucinations. We were able to prescribe medication, which got him to calm down, cooperate and rest. We also recommended that this individual call his family as agitated patients tend to calm down when they hear familiar voices.”

Sukenik agrees with Leigh and, in anticipation of any medical or psychological emergency, both suggest that the captain have a list of two or three people who can be contacted in the event of an emergency. “If you are suspicious that a crewmember may be slipping into depression, the captain can discreetly call a loved one and have them check up on the person who is showing worrisome symptoms,” Sukenik says. The captain ideally should also have the name of each crewmember’s primary physician so if emergency treatment is needed, a medical history is available to the intervening physicians.

Of all the potential emergencies that can blindsides the crew, a psychological break is especially frightening and dangerous. When late-stage intervention becomes necessary, it is imperative to act appropriately and to reach out for professional assistance in diffusing the crisis. However, training yourself to recognize the early signs of depression and knowing some fundamental steps in *preventing* an emotional crisis are the very best tools for crew who will all – sooner or later – travel close to the brink. **DW**