



MAY 14TH, 2019 DOWN THE WELLNESS RABBIT HOLE

Steven Jones, founder of the Seafarers Happiness Index, says it's worrying and vexing looking at the speed with which people demand training and standards, something which is clogging the professional arteries of seafarers.

There used to be a joke poster in the mess room of my first ship, well I thought it was a joke: "The floggings will continue until moral improves". Oh, how we rolled our eyes. Anyway, I was minded of this as a surprisingly controversial debate about seafarer wellness has begun to be played out.

The concept of 'wellness' at sea has taken root, and amid calls for mandatory seafarer training, and as a slew of different responses emerge, perhaps we need to better understand what we're really talking about.

The problem with buzzwords, like relying on Buzzfeed for your news, you can be led down pathways you may not expect or even want. So, wellness has become a 'thing'. Ashore the industry surrounding it is worth billions, and as with so many developments the tendrils of well-meaning wellness are starting to be felt at sea.

First off, what on earth is wellness? As you might expect, there are few definitions – which is often the prelude to problems in itself. The World Health Organization states that wellness is “...a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

Complete well-being seems a very, very big ask indeed when it comes to living and working on a metal box on water with a load of strangers. But let's press on. Other definitions and explanations place wellness as a form of active process, a way of a person becoming aware of and making choices toward a healthy and fulfilling life.

Here we perhaps begin to see the real problem sitting at the core of this issue. Seafarers do not have the opportunity to make choices, above a certain level. The realistic demands of life at sea, of working on a ship are not about deciding whether to have an extra slice of banana loaf, or perhaps a spot of Ayurvedic yoga before taking a stroll.

Wellness is a great idea, and we should all be aware of what aspects of our lives make us feel certain ways. However, to impose awareness and responsibility for making the right choices on seafarers is to ignore some major issues, and is potentially damaging, perhaps even dangerous.

The problem, as I see it, is the current wellness debate is seemingly looking at fixing the wrong side of the equation. We need to be ensuring that the aspects of life that lead to a lack of wellness are dealt with, not simply making seafarers better able to deal with the problems.

It seems unfair to make people aware of how bad things are, and to then double down and make the actual sufferers responsible for making things better. Seafarers are beholden to their employers, we need to remember that. Write it down, it will come in handy later.

Of course education is important, so too is awareness. However, to suppose that a seafarer doesn't know that they are working too many hours, or they are feeling tired, or that all the fried food is going to their hips is to denigrate and disparage the people we should be supporting.

Wellness is not a bad thing – but if applied badly, if debated from the wrong perspective or considered from a skewed perspective, then it becomes something else. It changes from being about positives in a seafarers' life and becomes yet another noose around the notion of what it is to be a maritime professional onboard ship today.

Maintaining an optimal level of wellness is a great idea. Wellness matters, and every emotion a seafarer feels relates to the actions they take and the emotions they feel. So we do need to ensure that seafarers are supported and their issues recognised and dealt with. However, we are currently about to open a

Pandora's Box which will bring only problems if we cannot first anticipate what the real issues are, and how solutions can actually and actively be applied.

Many seafarers are stressed, they are frustrated, they are poorly fed, and they feel too tired to work to their potential, let alone exercise. They are lonely, they feel isolated. The social life of a seafarer has been eroded dramatically, shoreleave has become a thing of the past, and many simply emotionally limp through their contracts until they can get home. There is no slack onboard – people are working to their maximum every watch, every day, every week and month. There is your wellness answer right there, to rethink the model of manning.

It would be wrong to argue the notion of wellness is bad. Indeed, it isn't. I wholly support the idea that seafarers should live in as high a state of physical, mental, and social well-being as possible. Bring it on. However, the realist in me fears it is simply not obtainable, and certainly not with the current way the business is set up.

It used to be argued that you can never make a ship 100% secure and maintain its commercial viability, it could also be argued that you can never have a complete state of physical, mental and social wellness on a ship. That is not what life at sea is like. If you'd told me to feel happier when I was at sea, to turn my frown upside down, you would probably not have liked my answer.

So, what do we do? For me the answer was to begin to understand the problem before going down Alice in Wonderland rabbit holes. Drink this, eat me, and all problems will be gone. No, we need to really get to know what it is to be at sea today. We need to ask the questions that allow the industry to see the real picture.

That was the rationale behind the Seafarers Happiness Index, to understand how crew actually felt and of how those who were happy could have lessons to apply, and of where things needed to change. This is an attempt to shape the debate and also to bring real clarity to the arguments.

I wholeheartedly believe that wellness is hugely desirable, massively important and that we should all be fighting hard together to make sure that seafarers are as well as possible. However, there is a real problem with applying the mindsets that work ashore, or to blithely go looking to impose training or standards.

We need to have wellness as the goal, but need to bring all parties together to see who needs to do what, how we can achieve better physical conditions for seafarers, who needs to act to make sure seafarers feel mentally ok, and how we rekindle some form of social life on ships.

So here we are, the need for action is clear, and I am proud of the role that the Seafarers Happiness Index is helping to bring a real sense of the scale and quantum of the problem. Then we can pick a route carefully, by applying pressure on those who can and should bring about change, not by adding additional stress to those who cannot.

The latest report of the Seafarers Happiness Index has just been released – see www.happyatsea.org to get a copy and to share your views on the debate