

## Mental health and wellbeing in offshore teams

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### 1. What do we mean by mental health and mental wellbeing?

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), mental health is *“a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to their community”*.

This definition emphasizes mental health as a positive state rather than simply the absence of mental illnesses or disorders. We all have a mental health, just like we all have physical health.

Mental wellbeing is a broader concept that includes mental health but extends beyond it. It includes an individual's overall mental and emotional state, and considers their ability to manage stress, maintain positive relationships at work and in their private lives, express and manage their emotions, and feel a sense of purpose and fulfillment in life. Mental wellbeing is often associated with feelings of happiness, contentment, and resilience.

Mental health and wellbeing are not binary things but exist on a spectrum. They vary from day to day, and on a longer timescale throughout our lives.

Both mental health and mental wellbeing are crucial for individuals to lead fulfilling lives. This means they are able contribute to their communities, enjoy their family lives and give their best to their professional lives. The WHO's definition reflects a holistic perspective on mental health. Interestingly, it also emphasizes the importance of promoting positive mental states, not just addressing mental illness or disorders. We will talk later in this presentation about the importance of focusing on proactive prevention of mental illness rather than the reactive approach of treatment.

To focus on the workplace element of mental health, it is important to note that staff mental wellbeing has been shown to directly affect productivity, staff retention and physical safety. Of course, it also affects the employer's reputation, as we live in a society where everyone can now share their employment stories with others, including on public platforms like social media.

Beyond the moral drive behind taking care of people's mental health, it is in the employer's interest to take care of staff's mental wellbeing because it does affect the bottom line.

### 2. Mental health as a global public health issue

Statistically, a quarter of us will experience a mental health issue at some point in our lives. A number of agencies have confirmed the widespread nature of mental health issues:

- The 2023 UK-based Workplace Health Report found the number of employees experiencing thoughts of suicide had increased to 9%, and 19% of workers have a current mental health diagnosis.

- The McKinsey Health Institute found around 60% of employees have experienced at least one mental health challenge at some point in their lives.
- The UK Office of National Statistics found rates of depression in Britain doubled from one in 10 in March 2020 to one in five in November 2021.
- The European Network for workplace health promotion confirmed that common mental health problems such as stress, anxiety and depression account for 60 million lost working days each year. The cost to the employer through loss of productivity due to mental health problems is higher than that caused by most other health problems like cardiovascular disease.

These statistics are all pointing to the same thing: the number of people affected by mental health problems is increasing, and they can affect anyone at any point in our lives. But do we know why mental health problems are on the rise? Some studies point to increased social media use, increased loneliness, and isolation. Societal pressures, culture shifts and of course the pandemic and global economic instability also play a part. It is indeed very difficult to give a single answer to this.

### **Do mental health campaigns actually help?**

Most people are familiar with various mental health promotion campaigns like [Movember](#) and [World Mental Health Day](#). The UK government is investing billions into mental health to increase support to millions of people. A couple of studies have looked into the impact of mental health campaigns with encouraging results:

- A study from Canada found campaigns do increase awareness, reduce stigma and discrimination in people exposed to them. It also can address loneliness and isolation by connecting people. The hope is that by doing this, more people might come forward to talk about their mental health issues and get help.
- A men's mental health campaign in England launched in 2017 found an 8% increase in uptake of mental health services by 2018.

### **Why should employers promote mental health in the workplace?**

People are at work for a significant portion of their lives, almost as a “captive audience”, so the workplace is an ideal place to promote campaigns and get people involved. It demonstrates the employer is tuned into national and international events and sees the importance of these topics. Studies have also shown there is an increase in employee engagement following mental health campaigns.

## **3. Mental health and offshore work**

Offshore is a unique environment, where several factors can have a direct influence on mental health. We will attempt to present the main factors that are specific to our industry and that have been shown to have a direct effect on worker's mental health. They can either directly contribute to the development of mental illnesses or rather be exacerbating factors and worsen existing mental health conditions.

- **Isolation**

Isolation is an obvious one, and widely considered the main psychosocial stressor offshore. Workers are physically separated from family, community and the usual informal support networks that allow them to digest the day's stresses and "fill their cup". Workers on offshore installations are often away for extended periods, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Cultural isolation is also an important factor for expat workers. Our industry relies on an international workforce. A recent study conducted by Croatian universities on offshore installations in the Middle East has shown that expat workers suffer from anxiety and depression at greater rates than local workers. This is because expat workers are removed from their culture, food, religious habits and interpersonal communication etiquettes.

- **Lack of privacy / co-dependency of workers and confined work and living spaces**

A few issues have been grouped together here, which all relate to the blurring of lines between the personal and the professional. This can increase the potential for interpersonal conflict because the people who work together during the day are the same who see each other once their shifts are over. This means that any tensions that have built during a shift cannot easily be walked away from after the shift. The physical proximity between workspaces and living spaces creates blurred lines which can make it hard to switch off after a day's work.

For onshore workers, co-workers and friends are two distinct groups of people, obviously sometimes with some degree of overlap. We know that people tend to open up differently to different groups of people and put on "a brave face" at work, only to allow themselves more vulnerability in their private lives – they do not bring their "true selves" to work. The lack of distinct social groups between work and rest makes it harder to access those more vulnerable conversations, as the only people there to have them with are co-workers.

- **Low control over own job**

In the bi-annual survey of all Norwegian shelf offshore workers, employees are asked whether they feel like they have control over their job, whether they can influence decisions which are important to their work and whether they can influence the way they perform their work. The proportion of workers reporting low levels of control and influence over their job has increased between 2020 and 2022. This is consistently linked to higher rates of anxiety in employees across the board.

- **Shift work and cyclical nature of the activity**

It is generally accepted that shift work is linked to increased levels of stress. There is a large body of work which aims to link different shift rotations to different levels of stress in workers. It seems that the shorter rotations (14 days on / 14 days off) result in higher stress levels than longer ones, with 28 on / 28 off being the best one in terms of mental wellbeing.

- **Hazardous work**

Offshore worksites are hazardous places. A focus of almost all jobs offshore is on physical safety and the mitigation of these risks. As a result, offshore workers are fully aware of the risks that surround them.

Working at a hazardous worksite can increase stress, but the awareness and strong focus on all potential dangers around you can lead to increased anxiety.

- **Macho culture**

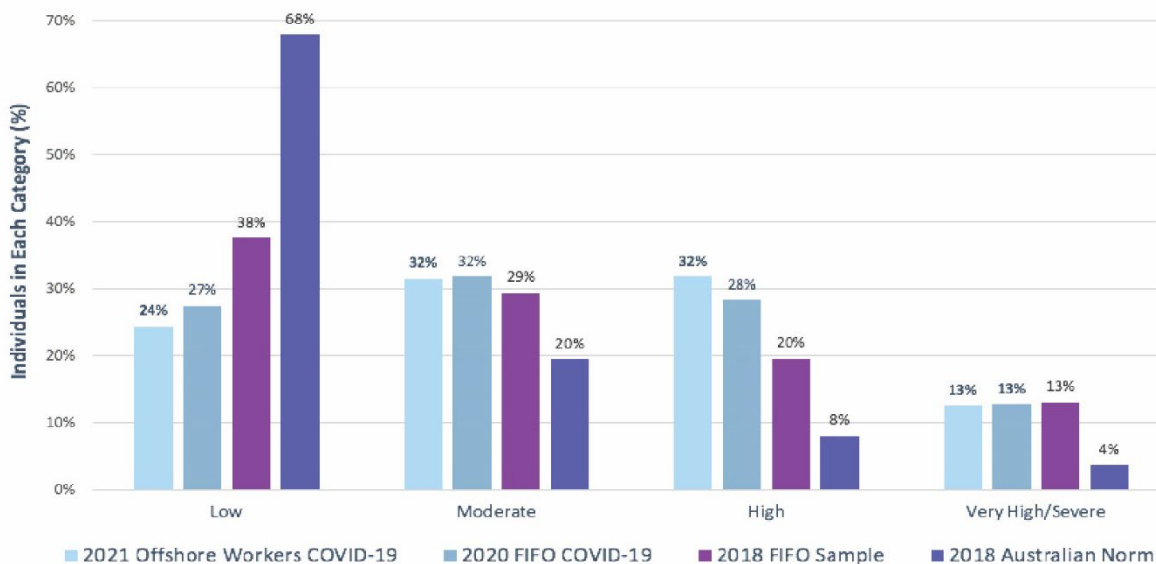
The proportion of female workers offshore varies between countries, between 3% in the UK to around 6 to 8% in some countries. On offshore worksites, like other male-dominated spaces, there is stigma associated with talking about psychological or emotional distress. Workers in male-dominated industries are more likely to believe it is necessary to endure pain and conceal mental health issues so as to display “toughness”, reliability and “prove” their worth. A recent Australian study has established strong links between masculine workplace cultures and increased likelihood of mental health issues.

- **Environmental conditions**

Lack of access to nature and direct exposure to extreme weather events are both linked to higher levels of anxiety.

**What are the consequences of these factors on the mental health of the offshore workforce?**

In 2021, research was undertaken by Curtin University in Western Australia in collaboration with NOPSEMA, Union representatives and the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association. The study showed very clearly that FIFO workers have worse mental health than the general Australian population – and when you add COVID to that equation, it becomes even worse. FIFO workers are three times more likely to be experiencing very high levels of psychological distress than the rest of Australians.



The Norwegian bi-annual survey has shown that both “anxiety” and “psychological problems” amongst offshore workers on the Norwegian shelf increased two-fold between 2018 and 2022. 60% of anxiety issues and 73% of psychological problems reported in 2022 were directly job-related.

The data shows a significant proportion of offshore workers experience mental health issues at work. Combined with an industry culture that does not encourage or value emotional openness, it is

unsurprising to see that offshore workers are 15 times more likely to die by suicide than those working onshore. This is confirmed by data from the [International SOS Foundation](#) which shows that 40% of shift workers experienced suicidal thoughts while on duty.

**Those affected by mental health issues cannot be excluded or treated in isolation from the workforce, they are the workforce.**

#### 4. Prioritising the wellbeing of offshore teams

Now that we have a sense of the scale of the problem, we will attempt to consider what it would look like to prioritise mental wellbeing in our industry. What is needed, in practical terms?

The offshore industry has shown repeatedly that it can work collaboratively and efficiently and drive amazing results regarding the physical safety of its workers. Following Piper Alpha, leaders decided to instigate a huge push to have a shift to a culture of safety. This took concerned, sustained, collective effort.

Notably, it included a top-down approach where industry leaders publicly said “Time out for safety” to show their willingness to spend time (and therefore potentially reduce productivity) in order to address safety issues. 40 years ago, there was stigma associated with whistle blowing for HSE concerns, the culture has now changed to no-blame reporting.

Now that the offshore industry has become a lot safer physically, and that it reliably does not kill people anymore, it is time to make sure we actively look after people’s mental wellbeing. The industry must capitalize on the general shift in attitudes towards mental health, and it needs to establish a “culture of care” to replace the outdated stigma associated with discussing how we feel.

We know that most developed countries now have integrated psychosocial hazards into their workplace health and safety legislation and require employers to provide safe places of work from a mental health perspective, and not just a physical one. So, if the laws are in place already, it is now our collective turn to act. But what else needs to happen, and at what level?

- **At the industry level**

Industry groups are starting to implement initiatives on mental health and wellbeing. For example, the 2023 Offshore Europe event saw the launch of the “Step Change in Safety” wellbeing group. Other similar initiatives in the UK / North Sea sector include: the [IADC Mental Health Charter](#), the [Step Change in Safety Wellbeing checker](#) and the [Health and Safety Executive guidance on managing occupational health risks](#). These provide companies with a structure on how to approach mental health at work, as many companies may not have resources or specialists to create the structure. These resources are ready made, but implantation usually needs to be tailored, otherwise it might not land correctly.

The [IADC charter](#) (see next page) is a great recent example of an industry-wide initiative. It identifies 10 key areas for businesses to focus on.

This list clearly highlights the importance of interpersonal skills, training and education. A lot of our social interactions are developed based on our experience, the environment we grew up in and our socialisation process. We all need to learn the skills required to listen and support, and often these are



not taught formally, rather everyone learns them as they go, with varying degrees of success. People will benefit from learning new skills and being able to practice them in a safe space, which is where training and mentoring comes in. Most people spend a lot of time at work and develop relationships with colleagues. As a result it is likely they can pick up on subtle changes that others might not. However, knowing what to do with that information is where we might struggle.

## The Mental Health and Well-being Charter

We believe the industry can and should:



**1 Initiate a company and industry-wide cultural change.** This will be driven by an industry-wide mental health and well-being task force made up of mental health experts and signatories at senior management level. Each company should have a mental health and well-being lead at board or senior leadership level with defined roles and responsibilities. Companies should produce, implement, and communicate a mental health and well-being at work plan that promotes the well-being of all employees and the support available to them. This should be embedded in employee inductions and handbooks.



**2 Demonstrate transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting.** Key performance benchmarks should include an audit of current mental health practices, absence rates, ongoing mental health and well-being specific training and a review of mental health and well-being check-in touch points. The task force will work with industry to develop a common framework for KPIs and reporting.



**3 Build mental health and well-being awareness among employees.** Companies must ensure all employees understand the basics of mental health and well-being, how to check in on someone, and how to recognise their own feelings. The task force will share information about organisations that provide recommended courses. Active monitoring and refresher training will support knowledge cascading.



**4 Foster effective people management.** Management should have regular one-to-one sessions with direct reports. As a first step, each company should audit and assess its mental health and well-being processes and practices and identify any gaps. The task force will share an audit template with companies. Every company should publish the charter on its website or equivalent public space.



**5 Encourage open conversations about mental health and well-being and provide employees with good working conditions, including a safe psychological space.** People must be able to openly express their vulnerability. The task force will provide guidelines for onshore and offshore senior management (including OIMs and CEOs) with clarity and definition of their responsibilities. Each company should create a multi-touch-point support system for employees. This might include signposting to a confidential 24/7 mental health hotline, a mental health app, mental health first aiders, and a specialist mental health partner that supports the signatory organisation (arranged independently of this charter).



**6 Provide comprehensive training.** It is recommended that training should be mandatory for all employees, including senior executives, mental health first aiders/champions, and everyone so they can recognise symptoms in themselves and others. Mental health and well-being first aiders must be chosen based on their aptitude. They must receive industry-recognised training and certification, reviewed annually, and receive mental health and well-being support.



**7 Give mental health and well-being the same high priority as physical health.** This includes advising employees of company-recommended mental health self-assessment tools. The task force will review how mental health and well-being assessments can be included in onshore and offshore inductions, medicals, and pre-flight checks. Mental health and well-being should be considered among the human factors in pre-job meetings.



**8 Offer customised mental health support and guidance.** Companies should assess all approaches to mental health and well-being, including new technology. Those that demonstrate employee benefits should be collated with existing tools and best practices. Employees should be regularly updated on the internal and external support services available to them.



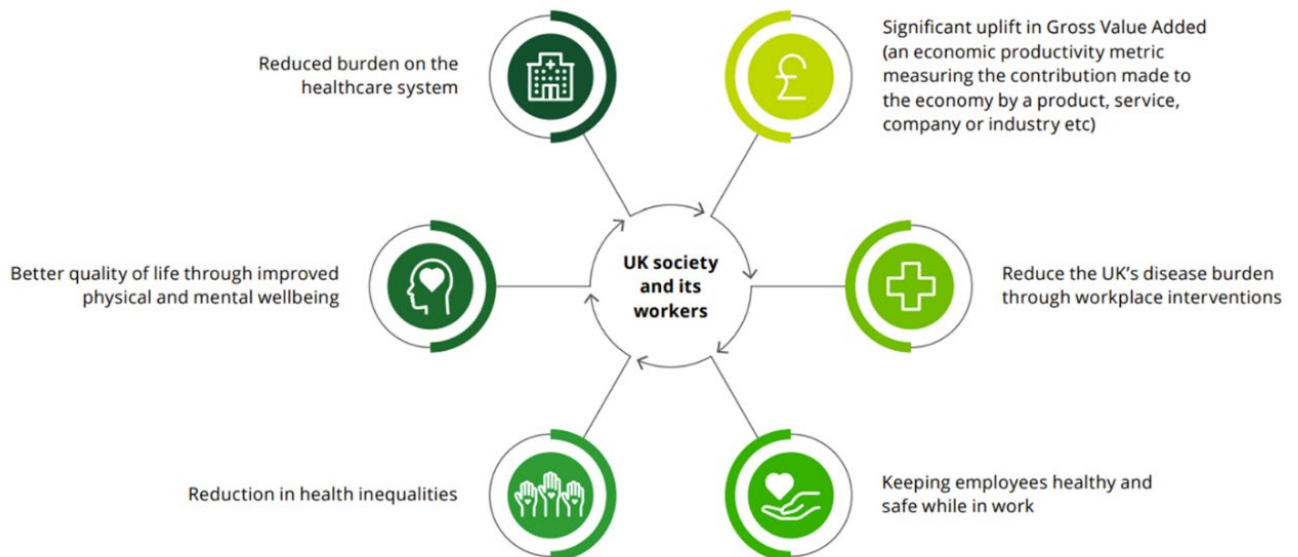
**9 Routinely monitor mental health and well-being.** The mental health and well-being of all employees should be assessed regularly and measured. As part of its work scope, the task force will consider defining the assessment process and may suggest companies consider annually reviewing their progress against the charter's objectives.



**10 Sharing best practices.** Companies will be encouraged to share examples of their best mental health and well-being practices so they can be collated with existing, industry-wide, best practices and adopted more widely across the sector.

The potential benefits of supporting mental health at work have been outlined by in a report by Deloitte in 2022. This image shows the key benefits through improving employee health and wellbeing. It a UK based report but could apply to any country.

Importantly, this image shows that supporting mental health at work increases employee's quality of life and reduces the overall burden on the healthcare system.



Source: Adapted from CBI 'Seize the Moment' report.

- **At the company level (the example of TechnipFMC)**

How can we use this information in a practical way? TechnipFMC have developed a volunteer Mental Health Champions role for any offshore worker who wants to get involved. The purpose of the role is to promote mental health in our workplaces. A Mental Health Champion is a go-to person for a chat, as well as the signpost to internal and external resources.

TechnipFMC decided not to go down the route of mental health first aiders (MHFA). MHFA has its place, but it is medicalised and not the vision TechnipFMC had for mental health on our vessels. Training of the Mental Health Champions (MHC) in their role was critical.

There was no off-the-shelf course available, so TechnipFMC developed one in conjunction with The Keil Centre, a group of organisational psychologists. The training included topics like stigma, discrimination, and the role of the Mental Health Champion. The latter part was crucial as TechnipFMC wanted to ensure that all Champions had a clear understanding of their role, as well as boundaries. The training also covered the skills involved in active listening, how to promote mental health and how to engage with crew on mental health promotion information.

After having scoped the role and requested volunteers, the company set to work with a provider and developed a course which included 3 elements.

- Online learning
- A face-to-face session

- A virtual consolidation session to bring everything together.

A pilot session was run, and feedback gained from pilot session participants allowed the course to be fine-tuned.

In addition to the MHC, TechnipFMC also regularly communicates on various mental health topics via the medic. We have trained Onshore senior leaders on mental health. During the leaders training we provided take away materials including a journal tool from Gary Ferguson, a professional saturation diver. The tool is called the “Combat Journal”, which he independently produced. So you can see this is a long term and embedded approach to promoting mental health in the workplace.

- **Training considerations**

We know that systemic change starts with education. When people train to learn a new job, they start developing a sense of the kind of industry they are becoming a part of, which is to say they get their first taste of “industry culture”. During the training course, they start consciously and unconsciously assimilating the behaviors and attitudes that will be expected of them as workers in this industry.

A significant proportion of us will remember stories from our training course where people talking about their emotional state were ridiculed, shut down or simply ostracized. I am almost certain that some members in the audience might have seen openly bullying and abusive behaviors during their training.

As society’s attitudes towards mental health has shifted in the past twenty years, social interactions have also improved in our training centers. New generations of students come in expecting better communication and better care for their wellbeing.

If we want to meet those expectations and implement lasting change, we must think specifically about what can be done pro-actively during training. ADAS is one of the world-leading hyperbaric certification schemes - we train divers in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, Turkey and Spain. We have decided to start by focusing on two areas to do our part in navigating the shift towards an industry culture of care:

1. Students must have a clear understanding of the behaviors that will, and will not, be tolerated once in industry.
2. Students must be able to access the support they need if they are struggling. Diver training can be stressful. Some of the stressors specific to offshore work that we discussed earlier will also be present during training.

Over the past 2 years, ADAS has taken the following steps to address both areas:

1. ADAS has created a new *assessment tool focusing specifically on interpersonal skills*. This came from a brainstorming session following a harassment incident between students at one of the ADAS schools. The Executive Director visited the school for a debrief and one of the trainers noted that it was hard to manage student behaviors in the absence of clear guidelines from ADAS. While ADAS had always identified interpersonal skills in our competency benchmarks, the trainers did not have adequate tools to promote and assess these skills. Since it was clear that most offshore contractors had developed their own benchmark, it was easy to then work on creating ADAS’s own – and all students are now assessed against those criteria. Failing this



assessment tool means failing the course. This means all new ADAS graduates have the capacity to behave consistently within the industry expectations today.

2. ADAS has created a *Women Divers Mentoring Program* which is available to all women students during and after their training at an ADAS school. This allows them to be connected to a mentor, and all the mentors are women with 10+ years of experience as occupational divers. For members of minority groups (such as women, LGBTQ people or ethnic minorities), integration within the workforce can be difficult and be an additional stressor. Providing support from the start is a way of showing our commitment to care.

Currently, less than 1% of all ADAS offshore divers are women and there is some evidence to suggest that many new women divers do not carry on in industry after they graduate. Peer-to-peer support can provide valuable guidance during the early stages of women's careers, as well as a sense of hope that other women have made it in this industry. It is also worth noting that workplaces with gender parity have greater employee satisfaction, higher staff retention and higher productivity. It is in our collective interest to make sure that we keep aiming to integrate more diversity into the offshore workforce.

Both those initiatives are focused on prevention, but ADAS is also considering mandating that one instructor per school be a Mental Health First Aider to be able to provide better assistance to students who may be struggling.

## 5. Conclusion

We are all familiar with the hierarchy of controls. When it comes to mental health, we have been relying all too often on Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) to mitigate the risks associated with mental health issues. It is important to consider that EAPs are the equivalent of PPE – a last resort, and not the first port of call. The time has come to stop only focusing on treatment. Instead, we need to build systemic solutions around workplaces to identify the hazards and stressors that contribute to the deterioration of our workforce's mental health.

Truth be told, there is no conclusion yet to this paper. The story does not end here, there is so much still to be done. Instead, we will leave you with the following questions that leaders in this industry should ask themselves:

- Do we treat employee mental health and wellbeing as a priority?
- Do we effectively address toxic behaviors?
- Do we create inclusive work environments?
- Do we promote sustainable work?
- Are we holding other leaders accountable?
- Are we effectively tackling stigma?
- Do our resources meet employees' needs?