

Counselling for seafarers is an 'iCALL' away



'We want to create a culture where it is okay to say you are not okay'

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By Michael Juliano

Spending weeks at sea away from friends and family can take a heavy toll on one's happiness and overall mental health, according to experts. That is why Singapore-based Synergy Group last year partnered with Tata Institute of Social Science (TISS) in Mumbai, India, to provide iCALL, an on-shore counselling helpline that is open 24-hours a day, six days a week. "Being a seafarer myself, it would not be fair for me not to act on this problem," said Rajesh Unni, Synergy Group chief executive and former tanker master. "We needed to create a sort of call center where we have counselors waiting to speak who are trained and who can help ease some of the stresses that people have onboard." The impact of loneliness can be very understated. "One in every four seafarers suffers from depression, compared with 6% of the general population, according to an October 2019 Seafarer Health Mental Study conducted by ITF Seafarers and Yale University. The research revealed that 17% of crew members suffer anxiety and 20% experience suicidal thoughts. iCALL is a not-for-profit service available to any seafarer that provides phone, chat and email access to 14 TISS counsellors who each hold a master's degree in clinical and

counseling psychology. The call center, which offers help in 10 different languages, is primarily funded by India's Mariwala Health Initiative. "We should all continue to see more recognition that the betterment and positive mental health of seafarers should be placed at the heart of everything we do," Unni said. "It's not about the money. If we can save one seafarer from doing something we do not want to see or hear, then it's worth the effort. "If we can't create a culture where it's okay to say you're not okay, then we have a problem."

You can contact iCALL on (+91) 022-2552-1111 (Mon-Sat 8AM to 10PM India time). It is also accessible via email on icall@tiss.edu or via chat on the [nULTA app](#).