A seafarer’s work as a whole, says Michelle Thomas of the Seafarers’ International Research Centre, is frequently not “once-in-a-career” events, but包含 traumatic or emotionally stressful situations. These can range from witnessing a violent or dangerous situation such as rape, to managing a potentially life-threatening situation such as a fire or pirate attack. These incidents are frequently not “once-in-a-career” events, but are experienced by seafarers on board their ships during their entire career as a seafarer.

For example, one seafarer spoke to me of the tensions he experienced during the breakdown of his marriage. He said: “I just couldn’t get it out of my mind, you know. I couldn’t get home. I wanted to stay on a ship and just forget about it. I knew I could not get home. I wanted to go back and sank. They were rescued, but with no ship, and having been transferred to another vessel at sea, they had no right to stay.”

The owner paid for their repatriation, but refused to pay them their wages, so they had to go back to their home country and get a new job. The Mission to Seafarers, Apostleship of the Sea and other charities supported them.

In addition to experiencing traumatic events in the workplace, seafarers, like any other individuals, may have to deal with stressful incidents that occur at home. For example, one seafarer spoke of two suicides and two work-related deaths occurring on board his ship in one tour of duty alone.

For seafarers, the hazards and dangers of life at sea are an everyday reality. This is something that is reflected in the routine, matter-of-fact manner that these stories are told. However, the fact that these events are often accepted as part of a seafaring career does not mean that they are not experienced as emotionally stressful. Indeed, I have spoken to a number of seafarers who were clearly quite affected by the events they experienced. For example, one seafarer talked about the nightmares and sleepless nights he suffered after leading a response to a potentially fatal fire in an engine room. He explained: “As mate, I was the person in charge of the firefighting. And you had to get people to go down to that engine room. And I was the one who pushed them... I kept getting this feeling that I... I might have killed someone.”

In addition to exposure to traumatic events in the workplace, seafarers, like any other individuals, may have to deal with stressful incidents that occur at home. However, such difficult life-events as divorce, or the death or sickness of a family member, can be particularly hard to cope with while at sea. One seafarer spoke to me of the tensions he experienced during the break up of his marriage. He said: “I was deepsea and I couldn’t sleep. Sometimes it was terrible. I just couldn’t get it out of my mind, you know. I could not get home. I wanted just to get on a ship and just forget about home, but I couldn’t – it was there.”

The problems of being away from home with only what The Mission to Seafarers’ Dubai chaplain, Stephen Miller, was able to give them.

The significance of traumatic events has been recognised by some companies which now take steps to develop welfare support structures for their employees, including access to free and confidential counselling services. Companies support can also be given by providing improved access to affordable ship-shore communication, which can go some way towards addressing the physical distance between seafarers and their families and friends ashore. Equally important is company support to allow the seafarer to disembark in the event of an emergency at home, or to provide opportunities to extend leave periods in order to do what such events should occur.

Occupational stress is widely recognised as a major health concern in many industries, and the living and working conditions of seafarers perhaps make stress particularly significant, as seafarers are separated from their homes and families and often exposed to traumatic workplace events. This is an issue which should be addressed by the industry as a whole and which could contribute to the health and safety of individual seafarers but would require the development of an integrated approach to the retention of a committed and professional workforce.